

After Suicides, Scrutiny of China's Grim Factories

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SHENZHEN, China

The body of a 19-year-old worker named Ma Xiangqian was found in front of his high-rise dormitory at 4:30 a.m. Police investigators concluded that he had leapt from a high floor, and they ruled it a suicide.

His family, including his 22-year-old sister who worked at the same company, Foxconn Technology, said he hated the job he had held only since November — an 11-hour overnight shift, seven nights a week, forging plastic and metal into electronics parts amid fumes and dust. Or at least that was Mr. Ma's job until, after a run-in with his supervisor, he was demoted in December to cleaning toilets.

Mr. Ma's pay stub shows that he worked 286 hours in the month before he died, including 112 hours of overtime, about three times the legal limit. For all of that, even with extra pay for overtime, he earned the equivalent of \$1 an hour.

"The factory was always abusing my brother," the sister, Ma Liqun, said tearfully last week.

Since Mr. Ma's death, there have been 12 other suicides or suicide attempts — eight men and four women — on two Foxconn campuses in Shenzhen, where employees live and work. The factories here, with about 400,000 employees, make products for global companies like Apple, Dell and Hewlett-Packard.

Most of the other suicide cases fit a similar profile: ages 18 to 24, relatively new to the factory, and falling from a campus building.

The rash of suicides has intensified scrutiny of the working and living conditions at Foxconn, the world's biggest contract electronics supplier. Responding to the clamor, Foxconn has raised salaries steeply twice in the last five days. The company announced the latest increase on Sunday, saying that after a three-month trial period, the basic salaries of many of its workers in China could reach nearly \$300 a month, more than double what they were a few weeks ago.

Sociologists and other academics see the deaths as extreme signals of a more pervasive trend: a generation of workers rejecting the regimented hardships their predecessors endured as the cheap labor army behind China's economic miracle.

Rather than take their own lives, many more workers at Foxconn — tens of thousands more — have simply quit. In recent interviews here, employees said the typical Foxconn hire lasted just a few months at the factory before leaving, demoralized.

They complain about military-style drills, verbal abuse by superiors and "self-criticisms"; they are forced to read aloud, as well as occasionally being pressured to work as many 13 consecutive days to complete a big customer order — even when it means sleeping on the factory floor.

Although the legal limit in China is 36 hours of overtime a month, several workers interviewed here said they regularly exceeded that by wide margins.

"They leave so soon because they can't adjust to factory life," said Wang Xueliu, a production

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team leader who has worked at Foxconn for six years. He, too, plans to leave soon, to join a new business with his brother making candles for export.

Many other manufacturers in China also struggle with high turnover.

Throughout southern China, the country's industrial heartland, there is an acute labor shortage, as the legions of rural migrants who formerly journeyed thousands of miles from the interior provinces are now choosing other options. Many seek positions in the service sector, or jobs closer to home.

"There's no doubt about it: they don't want to work on the assembly line," Jing Jun, a sociologist at Tsinghua University in Beijing, says of the young migrant workers moving into southern China. "They have a different expectation. And once people's attitudes about being in a factory change, other things will change."

Foxconn said it was trying to improve its employees' working and living conditions. Still, Louis Woo, a high-ranking Foxconn executive, acknowledged that much needed to be done to improve the workplace and the management culture.

"Maybe this spate of suicides will also serve us as a wake-up call," he said in an interview last week. "We realize we must do a better job."

Sociologists say China's new generation of migrant workers — many of them born in the 1990s — are better educated and more conscious of their rights. And their ambivalence about factory life coincides with a demographic shift that has resulted in a decline in the number of young people entering the work force.

Economists say the changes are already eroding some of China's competitive advantages in the global economy by raising wages, the cost of production and, soon, the prices of a wide range of consumer goods that China exports.

"The factory model has run into some serious limitations," says Huang Yasheng, a professor of management at M.I.T. and the author of "Capitalism With Chinese Characteristics";

"Now, they have to find a new model and move to a more innovative economy," Professor Huang said. "The problem, though, is that those kinds of companies don't create a lot of opportunities for young, migrant workers."

Ma Xiangqian, who killed himself on Jan. 23, may have been an extreme case with his own emotional frailties. But he may also stand as a symbol of what his generation of workers are rebelling against.

Described by his father as quiet and determined to help alleviate his family's poverty, Mr. Ma followed a path similar to the one that millions of other migrant workers, including his three older sisters, had taken before him, traveling more than 800 miles from a poor farming village in Henan Province — a village now nearly devoid of young working-age people — to seek employment in Shenzhen, China's electronics manufacturing capital.

Foxconn, founded by the Taiwanese industrialist Terry Gou, is a \$60 billion manufacturer with a reputation for military-style efficiency that includes mapping out assembly line workers' movements in great detail and monitoring tasks with a stopwatch.

The company is also known for the scale of its operations.

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Last week, its site here, covering about a square mile, was teeming with uniformed migrant workers, filing into work at gray, low-slung factory complexes, or entering utilitarian high-rise dormitories.

At Foxconn, Mr. Ma shared a dormitory room with nine other workers, ate in the campus cafeteria and worked night shifts, 7 p.m. to 8 a.m. His sister said he did little but work and sleep, had no friends on campus and did not even know the names of most of his roommates.

For Mr. Ma, though, the problem was apparently not just the pace and length of work.

“At the end of December, my brother called my parents and said he had a bad relationship with his production team manager,” said his sister, adding her brother said the manager often cursed at him.

His family said the demotion to scrubbing toilets in December further demoralized him about life at the factory complex — where a shortage of warm water in the dorm often meant cold showers, and where even simple pleasures like snacks were forbidden.

Apple, Dell and Hewlett-Packard have already said they are looking into conditions at Foxconn — although Apple’s chief executive, Steven P. Jobs, said last week that he was troubled by the suicides but that Foxconn was “not a sweatshop.”

Foxconn has also defended its operation, saying it treats workers with respect. But it also says that it intends to address management weakness and the ills of some of its workers, by adding counselors, hot lines and consulting monks.

But labor rights groups, including China Labor Watch, a human rights group based in New York, say they have documented what they call the dehumanizing treatment of workers at Foxconn. Mr. Ma’s sister quit shortly after her brother’s death.

She is staying with her parents, who have temporarily moved from their province to a dilapidated, one-room apartment here in Shenzhen to try to resolve the issues surrounding their son’s death.

Some of the families of the other suicide victims have reportedly received settlements of as much as \$15,000 — a factor that some sociologists say may have led to copycat suicides in some cases by workers hoping to help their families.

Ma Xiangqian’s family had negotiated with the company over compensation, but Foxconn declined to discuss the specifics of the case.

“He was my only son,” said Ma Xiangqian’s father, Ma Zishan, a struggling farmer of landscape plants and trees grown for use in the bustling cities. “Only sons are very important in the countryside. What am I going to do?”