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On Chinese sweatshops

Heidi Schlumpf | Jan. 12, 2012 NCR Today

Just days after public radio's "This American Life [1]" aired an episode about Chinese sweatshops, 150 workers at an electronics factory in Wuhan threatened to commit suicide by jumping off the factory roof because of poor working conditions.

The UK's *Telegraph* [2]reported:

> Foxconn, which manufactures gadgets for the likes of Apple, Sony, Nintendo and HP, among many others, has had a grim history of suicides at its factories. A suicide cluster in 2010 saw 18 workers throw themselves from the tops of the company's buildings, with 14 deaths.

Foxconn's reaction: to install nets around the building.

It's hard to claim ignorance about the conditions under which so much of our stuff is made these days, but Mike Daisey, a self-described "worshiper in the cult of Mac," had to see it for himself. So he went to Shenzhen in southern China and talked to workers outside of a Foxconn plant and visited other factories under the guise of being an American businessman.

Daisey points out that while many today pine for the romanticized era of handmade goods, more things are made by hand today than at any time in human history. With labor costs near zero, it's cheaper for Chinese factories to have workers do painstaking work than to automate.

He's not a journalist, but a performer and storyteller. The radio show is a reworked excerpt from his one-man show "The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs [3]," now playing in New York. The "This American Life" folks fact-checked his report and include the reaction from Apple and other activists.

The free--and very compelling--audio is available here [4].

It would be nice to feel smug since I don't own any Apple products, but I write this on a Dell that was most likely manufactured at the same or a similar plant. Most of these factories aren't too far from my (adopted) daughter's birthplace, but I would care about this even without that personal connection.

Why is our stuff more important than the lives of those not lucky enough to have been born here?

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Links:
[1] http://www.thisamericanlife.org/
[2] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/9006988/Mass-suicide-protest-at-Apple-manufacturer-Foxconn-factory.html

[3] http://www.publictheater.org/component/option,com_shows/task,view/Itemid,141/id,1043
[4] http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives