

# Death and my iPad

## A Global Assemblage of Chinese Workers and Global Consumers

### ESSAY

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#### KEYWORDS

*Global interconnectivities, ethics, Chinese workers, global consumers*

“**T**he woman who nearly died making your iPad” is the heading of a newspaper article by Aditya Chakraborty (2013).<sup>1</sup> When I first read the piece my reaction was: “What! My iPad! What is he saying? That a woman died making this iPad that I hold in my hands? The iPad that is so convenient, the iPad that I use every single day! Is there blood on my iPad?” With the dramatic and thought provoking heading, Chakraborty seeks to forge a link between Tian Yu, a young Chinese woman worker and me, the Danish consumer of an Apple company product. In other words, he aims to create an awareness of the interconnectivity between workers in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and consumers in other parts of the world. For me, the tactic worked and I felt disgusted not only at the company that exploits its workers, the state that allows the exploitation, but also at myself; the consumer. My conscience and sense of responsibility towards my fellow human beings was hit even harder when I watched the documentary film “E-Geminal: dans l’enfer des usines Chinoise” (Poiret 2012) on the plight of the workers who produce Apple products at the Taiwan owned Foxconn factories in the PRC. I bought my iPad in 2013. At that time I was fully aware that working conditions at the Foxconn factory, where my iPad may very well have been produced, had driven several despairing workers to jump to their death in an attempt to attract attention to their critical situation. This knowledge did not, however, prevent me from buying the product.

Tian Yu, the woman who nearly died, was one of the workers who jumped from the roof of a factory building in 2010. She did not die. She was left with fractures to her spine and hips and paralyzed from the waist down at the age of 17 (Chakraborty 2013). The documentary film on the pro-

duction of Apple products includes an interview with Tian Yu, as well as the stories of other workers. These include, among others, a 22 year-old young man who succeeded in committing suicide, a young man whose health has been destroyed by chemicals involved in a production process, student nurses sent to the factory to do internships that have nothing whatsoever to do with their training. They say that if they don’t do the work they will not pass their exams. For me their stories set off a flow of mixed emotions: frustration, sorrow, anger and, not least, helplessness in the face of the power of huge multinational companies.

In France, the realities of the Foxconn workers have been presented to consumers to confront them with the plight of the workers. In the documentary film, Apple and Foxconn are seen as the violators, the workers as the victims, and consumers are depicted as the third party, in a manner similar to the witness role defined in what is called “the basic triangle of violence” (Riches 1986). The witness may either view the violence in question as legitimate or illegitimate and may be a passive spectator or an active intervener. The point is that regardless of the choice, the third party witness is in any case implicated in the violence. A sarcastic view on witness choices made every single day by millions of people has been called ‘Oh Dearism’ by British cultural pundit Adam Curtis. This ‘socially-transmitted disease’ has been described as follows:

Its primary symptom is the hand-wringing posture we take after seeing or learning about some particularly abhorrent or disgusting aspect of the human condition or what is going on in the world. At the end of the spectacle we shake our heads and say “Oh dear” or “Ain’t it awful?” but continue on with life as usual. This inevitably leads to

resignation – giving up on possibility on a personal level – and turns us into what can be described as a spectator society. (Selman 2012).

In this essay, I speak to the topic of this issue of *Women, Gender & Research* on China-Nordic perspectives on global assemblages by juxtaposing my research on women and gender in the People's Republic of China with knowledge of the woman who nearly died making my iPad. I reflect upon the positions and values, from which I as a researcher based in one of the tiny, affluent, and to a high degree equal Nordic countries have studied women and gender in China for nearly 25 years. I also share some thoughts on how my research can proceed in a situation of encounters and entanglements between China and the Nordic that may be understood as global assemblages (Ong and Collier 2005), inseparable intra-action (Barad 2007), or friction in global interconnectivity (Tsing 2005). I have reached a stage, a time, an insight, a perspective at and from which it is no longer satisfactory or feasible to study women and gender in China as a phenomenon that is separate from the Nordic and European geopolitical part of the world, where I am located. In other words, I discuss implications of taking seriously in my research practice the global as defined by Aihwa Ong as “a contemporary form that problematizes what it means to be human today” (interview in Kenway and Fahey 2009:87).

#### A RED MICRO-LEVEL RESEARCH THREAD – PEOPLE NOT POLICIES, NAMING AND REFRAMING

I start with a red thread that runs through my research history from my first research project undertaken for my doctoral studies, and to the current shift I am taking from studying China to studying assemblages of or inseparabilities between workers in China

and global consumers. My research builds upon an Anglophone women's studies tradition of studying women and gender equality in the People's Republic of China. I write ‘women and gender equality’ rather than ‘women, men and gender equality’ or simply ‘gender equality’, because this women's studies tradition in its origin focused primarily on women as the subordinate and discriminated party in gender relations.

In my first research project, I was concerned with bringing forth the perspectives of urban one-child mothers, as women were the main targets of the implementation of the drastic PRC population control policy. Nonetheless, their experiences were invisible in the number focused demographic studies of the policy. I sought knowledge of how women dealt with the restrictions on their reproductive choices. In my book *Accepting Population Control* (Milwertz 1997), I argued that even women who would prefer more than one child for themselves and their families were willing to accept the population control policy limit of one child. They explained this as being due to their experience of lack of resources in their everyday lives and their understanding of the need to limit population growth by setting aside individual desires for the common good. I do not support the drastic measure of a one child limit or the often brutal implementation of the policy. Nonetheless, I ended the book by reflecting on how the privileged section of the global community might learn from the PRC with regard to restricting the so-called free choice of individuals in view of the immense challenges our consumption habits are imposing on the sustainability of our future survival. Interestingly, a commencement speech held at a US college earlier this year strongly encouraged the graduating students to think in terms of a collective we, rather than an individualistic I, in order to rescue the world. I return to the speech later in this essay.

Later the object of my research became

urban PRC non-governmental organizing to address gender related issues. This research, carried out together with philosopher and sociologist Wang Fengxian, from the Beijing Academy of Social Sciences, led to a focus on relations between the NGOs and the Euro-American development aid organizations that were involved in supporting organizing from below on gender and development issues. We argue that the foreign entities are not separate from, but on the contrary constitutive of and inseparably part of what are usually defined as ‘Chinese’ NGOs (Milwertz and Wang 2012, Wang and Mi 2014). This realization of the inseparability of entities that are conventionally thought of as separate, formed one path towards the project I am now embarking on.

The red thread that runs through my research practice includes two main elements. One is an inductive approach to studying the micro level of how people live with and/or attempt to change macro-level policies and conditions. The other is an interest in understanding how people name and label their experiences. How they have or find or perhaps do not have or find language to name their experiences. Some one-child mothers in my early study, for instance, had experiences of being violated by contraceptive use control practices. Some evaded control measures, but they had no language of individual human rights with which to label their experience. Moreover, their conversation with me was perhaps their first opportunity to voice their frustration.

The focus on how people experience and cope with or act to change their own or others’ lives and how these processes may lead to new knowledge and terminology falls quite nicely within the scope of the global assemblages, which frame this issue of *Women, Gender & Research*. Collier and Ong (2005: 4) focus on ethical reflection and intervention when they define global assemblages as

...domains in which the forms and values of individual and collective existence are problematized or at stake, in the sense that they are subject to technological, political, and ethical reflection and interventions.

Global assemblages focus on intersections of ethics, politics and knowledge that define and configure living situations. These intersections become most visible where life becomes problematic and the basic question of “how should one live?” is posed. The conceptual orientation of global assemblages is also relevant to my research, in so far as it joins an increasing awareness that phenomena that have hitherto mainly been defined as solidly rooted in separate territorial localities can better be understood, when seen as inseparably intra-active beyond the scope of conventional boundaries. As historians Herren, Ruesch and Sibille (2012:v) note, the point is to recognize developments that cross borders of nation states and societies, and see them as characterized by the globe rather than by certain territories. Being characterized by the globe implies something quite different from the meeting of separate entities. The entity itself is constituted by the encounter.

#### PRIVILEGE AND POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS – POSSIBILITIES FOR THINKING AND ACTING ETHICALLY

This leads me to the research project I am currently in the early stages of formulating together with my colleague Professor Bu Wei, who works at the Institute of Journalism and Communication at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. The project focus on the interconnectivity of Chinese workers and global consumers, and builds on our previous joint research on activism against domestic violence in Beijing, as well as Bu Wei’s action-research on peasant worker organizing and my work on how Euro-American development aid donors are inseparably inside what are usually

defined as ‘Chinese’ NGOs. The starting point for our project is that in order to understand why the great transformation of global economic and environmental practices, that is so crucially needed, is at the same time so difficult to bring about, we need studies of the macro level of political actors who are determining the future (or lack of future) of humanity through international agreements on CO2 emissions and the like. The ‘we’ I refer to is no less than we the peoples of the world who hope there will be a world in the future for our children and grandchildren with access to basic necessities such as water, food and shelter. However, and this is where our project comes in, we also need knowledge of the micro level of the people who form the very foundation of the globally interconnected systems and economies that are threatening the possibility of a future. They (and we, for we are part of the groups we study) are the producers and consumers of masses of products.

The focus of our project is on worker and consumer awareness and knowledge of the global assemblages, interconnectivity and inseparability that are defining aspects of their lives. We are concerned with knowledge, meanings and practices. How these sustain and/or challenge an unsustainable economic and environmental order. Specifically, we will engage in an ethnographic study of the interconnectivity of workers in China and consumers based either in China or in the Nordic countries. Through the process of studying the experiences, knowledge and reflections of workers and consumers on their interconnectivity and the ways they act in this situation of globality, the project aims to understand ethical aspects of global inseparabilities and the implications of these for future action for global survival. To quote Aihwa Ong again, the notion of global assemblage examines “how global and situated elements interact within and beyond the nation state to shape conditions of contem-

porary living.” (Kenway and Fahey 2009: 87). Here I would exchange Ong’s use of the word ‘interact’ with Karen Barad’s notion of intra-action. Apart from this, the focus of global assemblage on the meanings of being human today is precisely what we are interested in. In an elaboration of the scope of the notions of global assemblage, Collier and Lakoff (2005:22) define this focus more specifically as an interest in “examining processes of reflection and action in situations in which “living” has been rendered problematic.” Psychologist Nadja Prætorius (2013) argues that a neo-liberal market ideology and the public management style of controlling employees in Denmark undermines the ability of human beings to think and act ethically and responsibly towards themselves and their fellow human beings. Prætorius points to how responsibility for acting ethically is increasingly placed on the individual while at the same time the conditions for ethical conduct are undermined, so that ethical conduct is simply no longer possible within certain working contexts. Might a similar situation be the case with regard to consumers?

Questions we ask in our study will include: What awareness and ethical considerations do workers in the PRC and consumers in the PRC as well as in Denmark/the Nordic countries have of the interconnectivity that exists between them via the products they produce and consume? How do consumers think or not think about their responsibility towards the producers of the products they purchase? Is it at all possible for privileged Danish and Chinese consumers to think and act ethically and responsibly with regard to PRC workers? Can responsibility for the well-being, and perhaps even survival, of workers be left solely in the hands of companies and/or governments? How is awareness of consumer privilege and exploitation of workers reflected or not reflected in consumer behavior? (How) is it considered legitimate

and meaningful to purchase goods that have been produced at the cost of the human dignity of the producer? How do consumers give meaning to their practices, regardless of whether or not there is a discrepancy between their ideals and practices? What kinds of ideals of ethical living do consumers have? Do they practice their ideals? And/or how do they deal with ideals that they do not/cannot live up to? Finally, what effect does the project process of discussion and reflection on knowledge and practices have in terms of changing awareness and behavior? We are interested in what workers and consumers do, how they understand their practices and, importantly also, given the feelings of guilt, despair and the 'Oh dearism' reaction that we expect at least some to have, what they wish they could do, how they wish change might take place.

Now I return to the disturbing story of my iPad. I bought my iPad together with a colleague who is a citizen of the People's Republic of China. We purchased one iPad for each of us in a fancy Apple shop in central Copenhagen to celebrate that we had secured funding for a research project. The workers who produced our iPads are her fellow citizens and my fellow human beings. This leads to the question of how the distance between consumer and worker impacts on reflections on these relationships and a comparative element of our project. We will be particularly aware of similarities and differences between consumers in the Nordic countries and the PRC that are linked to the histories and current state of the different cultures and socio-economic orders. We would expect the characteristics of the solidarity and collectivity that have underlain the Nordic welfare state ideologies and the socialist ideology of the PRC to play into similarities and differences in consumer experiences, attitudes, practices and ideals with regard to the plight of workers.

## CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS – A QUEST FOR KNOWLEDGE AND CHANGE

A basic tenet of the form of feminist research that my research collaborator Bu Wei and I subscribe to, is that it challenges taken for granted assumptions, and the language that accompanies such assumptions, and that it offers alternatives to improve human lives. We aim to study a global issue with a view to producing knowledge that will contribute to understanding the workings of global interconnectivity and will also generate ideas for better practices.

In a superbly amusing, but also extremely serious, commencement speech held at Reed College,<sup>2</sup> Igor Vamos (2014) of the Yes Men, spoke of possibilities for radical collective change in fossil fuel usage as necessary to ensure a future for humanity.<sup>3</sup> Vamos mentioned that the argument that the economy would collapse was used to validate slavery in the United States centuries ago just as it is now being used to continue the use of fossil fuels. He also noted that outlawing slavery in the USA did not end the practice and that there are more slaves in the world today than ever in history. Is it simplistic to think of workers in factories in the PRC as today's slaves? Their lives have changed materially and they are able to build new concrete houses in their villages, buy cars and purchase other industrial products that were previously outside their reach. In January 2014, I celebrated the Chinese New Year in a mountain village in Hebei province with my god son and his family. He was somewhat embarrassed that his parent's house was the last of the old houses left in the village. All other old houses had been torn down and new concrete structures had been built in their stead. Practically all the young villagers were home for the celebration, otherwise only the eldest and the youngest inhabit the village and many terraced fields are crumbling as the soil is left uncultivated. My god son gained his PhD degree from one of the most prestigious

PRC universities and he has joined an urban elite working and living in Shanghai. His cousin and village neighbour, as well as many other fellow villagers, work at factory production lines. Is the price the worker pays for these changes justifiable? And are we, the affluent consumers, wherever in the world we live – Beijing, Shanghai, Oslo or Helsinki – and make our purchases, also slaves? Am I, the owner of an iPad (and an iPhone!), just as much a slave as the producer, albeit a more materially and physically comfortable slave? Are these questions ridiculous, or might they perhaps seem so because they touch so fundamentally on feelings of lack of self-determination and freedom?

Social science and humanities research in Denmark and elsewhere is increasingly being asked to make measurable contributions to ensure the survival and prosperity of the global (economic) system. We aim to make a minute contribution to a transformative and sustainable globality. We do not support a notion of planetary uniformity, but we would like to see a world in which women and men do not die making iPads and the consumer can rest assured that there is no blood and human suffering stuck to the products she purchases in shiny, clean, exclusive shops in Beijing, Copenhagen or elsewhere. This may be naïve. We believe such ‘naivety’ is necessary in a world where some truth claims are more valid than others. As Michael S. Kimmel (2014:10) notes in a fine reader on privilege, guilt may be appropriate, but guilt also has the potential to politicize and that may be one reason it is resisted.

Bu Wei and I have, both together and separately, studied the work of NGO activists in the PRC. The stamina and courage of some of these amazing people encourages us in our privileged pursuit of knowledge in the halls of academia. Moreover, their work directs attention to the importance of recognizing that struggles against inequality are collective. The individual

may resign to Oh Dearism. Collective social movement action may lead to structural change. We seek to produce knowledge that might play a role in preventing Chinese workers from jumping to their death in desperation. We seek to know if there might be possibilities for enacting practices that are different from and more meaningful than the nets hung around factory buildings by employers as a preventive measure to employees’ suicide attempts.

## NOTES

1. Speaking of newspapers, I would like to thank my daily newspaper *Information* for many inspirational articles on global economic and environmental challenges, and how they are being dealt with.
2. Reed College is located in Portland, Oregon in the United States of America.
3. Igor Vamos is also known as Mike Bonnanno of the activist organization The Yes Men that impersonates corporation officials, and makes fake announcements about socially responsible action.

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