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**Two cheers for sweatshops**

false[Kristof, Nicholas D](http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.snhu.edu/indexinglinkhandler/sng/au/Kristof,+Nicholas+D/$N?accountid=3783); [WuDunn, Sheryl](http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.snhu.edu/indexinglinkhandler/sng/au/WuDunn,+Sheryl/$N?accountid=3783). [**New York Times Magazine**](http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.snhu.edu/pubidlinkhandler/sng/pubtitle/New+York+Times+Magazine/$N/45547/DocView/215491551/fulltext/815070232C3844F1PQ/1?accountid=3783)**; New York** (Sep 24, 2000): 6.70.

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Nicholas D. Kristoff and Sheryl WuDunn examine the difference in mind-set between East and West about sweatshops. Kristoff and WuDunn explain that when they moved to Asia and began reporting there 14 years ago, they were outraged at sweatshops but gradually came to the conclusion that the campaign against sweatshops is harming the people it is intended to help.

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**Headnote**

They're dirty and dangerous.

They're also a major reason Asia is back on track.

It was breakfast time, and the food stand in the village in northeastern Thailand was crowded. Maesubin Sisoipha, the middle-aged woman cooking the food, was friendly, her portions large and the price right. For the equivalent of about 5 cents, she offered a huge green mango leaf filled with rice, fish paste and fried beetles. It was a hearty breakfast, if one didn't mind the odd antenna left sticking in one's teeth.

One of the half-dozen men and women sitting on a bench eating was a sinewy, bare-chested laborer in his late 30's named Mongkol Latlakorn. It was a -hot, lazy day, and so we started chatting idly about the food and, eventually, our families. Mongkol mentioned that his daughter, Darin, was 15, and his voice softened as he spoke of her. She was beautiful and smart, and her father's hopes rested on her.

"Is she in school?" we asked.

"Oh, no," Mongkol said, his eyes sparkling with amusement. "She's working in a factory in Bangkok. She's making clothing for export to America." He explained that she was paid $2 a day for a nine-hour shift, six days a week.

"It's dangerous work," Mongkol added. "Twice the needles went right through her hands. But the managers bandaged up her hands, and both times she got better again and went back to work."

"How terrible," we murmured sympathetically

Mongkol looked up, puzzled. "It's good pay," he said. "I hope she can keep that job. There's all this talk about factories closing now, and she said there are rumors that her factory might close. I hope that doesn't happen. I don't know what she would do then."

He was not, of course, indifferent to his daughter's suffering; he simply had a different perspective from ours - not only when it came to food but also when it came to what constituted desirable work.

Nothing captures the difference in mind-set between East and West more than attitudes toward sweatshops. Nike and other American companies have been hammered in the Western press over the last decade for producing shoes, toys and other products in grim little factories with dismal conditions. Protests against sweatshops and the dark forces of globalization that they seem to represent have become common at meetings of the World Bank and the World Trade Organization and; this month, at a World Economic Forum in Australia, livening up the scene for Olympic athletes arriving for the competition. Yet sweatshops that seem brutal from the vantage point of an American sitting in his living room can appear tantalizing to a Thai laborer getting by on beetles.

Fourteen years ago, we moved to Asia and began reporting there. Like most Westerners, we arrived in the region outraged at sweatshops. In time, though, we came to accept the view supported by most Asians: that the campaign against sweatshops risks harming the very people it is intended to help. For beneath their grime, sweatshops are a clear sign of the industrial revolution that is beginning to reshape Asia.

This is not to praise sweatshops. Some managers are brutal in the way they house workers in firetraps, expose children to dangerous chemicals, deny bathroom breaks, demand sexual favors, force people to work double shifts or dismiss anyone who tries to organize a union. Agitation for improved safety conditions can be helpful, just as it was in 19th-century Europe. But Asian workers would be aghast at the idea of American consumers boycotting certain toys or clothing in protest. The simplest way to help the poorest Asians would be to buy more from sweatshops, not less.

ON OUR FIRST EXTENDED TRIP TO CHINA, IN 1987, WE TRAVELED TO the Pearl River delta in the south of the country. There we visited several factories, including one in the boomtown of Dongguan, where about 100 female workers sat at workbenches stitching together bits of leather to make purses for a Hong Kong company. We chatted with several women as their fingers flew over their work and asked about their hours.

"I start at about 6:30, after breakfast, and go until about 7 p.m.," explained one shy teenage girl. "We break for lunch, and I take half an hour off then."

"You do this six days a week?"

"Oh, no. Every day."

"Seven days a week?"

"Yes." She laughed at our surprise. "But then I take a week or two off at Chinese New Year to go back to my village."

The others we talked to all seemed to regard it as a plus that the factory allowed them to work long hours. Indeed, some had sought out this factory precisely because it offered them the chance to earn more.

"It's actually pretty annoying how hard they want to work," said the factory manager, a Hong Kong man. "It means we have to worry about security and have a supervisor around almost constantly."

It sounded pretty dreadful, and it was. We and other journalists wrote about the problems of child labor and oppressive conditions in both China and South Korea. But, looking back, our worries were excessive. Those sweatshops tended to generate the wealth to solve the problems they created. If Americans had reacted to the horror stories in the 1980's by curbing imports of those sweatshop products, then neither southern China nor South Korea would have registered as much progress as they have today.

The truth is, those grim factories in Dongguan and the rest of southern China contributed to a remarkable explosion of wealth. In the years since our first conversations there, we've returned many times to Dongguan and the surrounding towns and seen the transformation. Wages have risen from about $50 a month to $250 a month or more today. Factory conditions have improved as businesses have scrambled to attract and keep the best laborers. A private housing market has emerged, and video arcades and computer schools have opened to cater to workers with rising incomes. A hint of a middle class has appeared - as has China's closest thing to a Western-style independent newspaper, Southern Weekend.

Partly because of these tens of thousands of sweatshops, China's economy has become one of the hottest in the world. Indeed, if China's 30 provinces were counted as individual countries, then the 20 fastest growing countries in the world between 1978 and 1995 would all have been Chinese. When Britain launched the Industrial Revolution in the late 18th century, it took 58 years. For per capita output to double. In China, per capita output has been doubling every 10 years.

In fact, the most vibrant parts of Asia are nearly all in what might be called the Sweatshop Belt, from China and South Korea to Malaysia, Indonesia and even Bangladesh and India. Today these sweatshop countries control about one-quarter of the global economy As the industrial revolution spreads through China and India, there are good reasons to think that Asia will continue to pick up speed. Some World Bank forecasts show Asia's share of global gross domestic product rising to 55 to 60 percent by about 2025 - roughly the West's share at its peak half a century ago. The sweatshops have helped lay the groundwork for a historic economic realignment that is putting Asia back on its feet. Countries are rebounding from the economic crisis of 1997-98 and the sweatshops -seen by Westerners as evidence of moribund economies - actually reflect an industrial revolution that is raising living standards in the East.

OF COURSE, IT MAY SOUND SILLY TO SAY THAT SWEATSHOPS offer a route to prosperity, when wages in the poorest countries are sometimes less than $1 a day. Still, for an impoverished Indonesian or Bangladeshi woman with a handful of kids who would otherwise drop out of school and risk dying of mundane diseases like diarrhea, $1 or $2 a day can be a life-transforming wage.

This was made abundantly clear in Cambodia, when we met a 40-year-old woman named Nhem Yen, who told us why she moved to an area with particularly lethal malaria. "We needed to eat," she said. "And here there is wood, so we thought we could cut it and sell it."

But then Nhem Yen's daughter and son-in-law both died of malaria, leaving her with two grandchildren and five children of her own. With just one mosquito net, she had to choose which children would sleep protected and which would sleep exposed.

In Cambodia, a large mosquito net costs $5. If there had been a sweatshop in the area, however harsh or dangerous, Nhem Yen would have leapt at the chance to work in it, to earn enough to buy a net big enough to cover all her children.

For all the misery they can engender, sweatshops at least offer a precarious escape from the poverty that is the developing world's greatest problem. Over the past 50 years, countries like India resisted foreign exploitation, while countries that started at a similar economic level - like Taiwan and South Korea- accepted sweatshops as the price of development. Today there can be no doubt about which approach worked better. Taiwan and South Korea are modern countries with low rates of infant mortality and high levels of education; in contrast, every year 3.1 million Indian children die before the age of 5, mostly from diseases of poverty like diarrhea.

The effect of American pressure on sweatshops is complicated. While it clearly improves conditions at factories that produce branded merchandise for companies like Nike, it also raises labor costs across the board. That encourages less well established companies to mechanize and to reduce the number of employees needed. The upshot is to help people who currently have jobs in Nike plants but to risk jobs for others: The only thing a country like Cambodia has to offer is terribly cheap wages; if companies are scolded for paying those wages, they will shift their manufacturing to marginally richer areas like Malaysia or Mexico.

Sweatshop monitors do have a useful role. They can compel factories to improve safety. They can also call attention to the impact of sweatshops on the environment. The greatest downside of industrialization is not exploitation of workers but toxic air and water. In Asia each year, three million people die from the effects of pollution. The factories springing up throughout the region are far more likely to kill people through the chemicals they expel than through terrible working conditions.

By focusing on these issues, by working closely with organizations and news media in foreign countries, sweatshops can be improved. But refusing to buy sweatshop products risks making Americans feel good while harming those we are trying to help. As a Chinese proverb goes, "First comes the bitterness, then there is sweetness and wealth and honor for 10,000 years."

**AuthorAffiliation**

Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, who received a Pulitzer Prize for their coverage of China, are the authors of "Thunder From the East: Portrait of a Rising Asia" (Knopf), from which this article is adapted.

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**In many Chinese factories, loss of fingers and low pay: [1 Edition]**

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"It's quite noisy, and you stand up all day, 12 hours, and there's no air-conditioning," he said. "We get paid by the piece we make but they never told us how much. Sometimes I got $110, sometimes I got $150 a month."

"The factories have improved immeasurably over the past few years," says Alan Hassenfeld, chairman of the toy maker Hasbro and co-chairman of Care, the ethical-manufacturing program of the International Council of Toy Industries. "But let me be honest: There are some bad factories. We have bribery and corruption occurring, but we are doing our best."

"This is a problem that has been difficult to solve," said Liu Kaiming, the director of the Institute on Contemporary Observation, which aids migrant workers in nearby Shenzhen. "China has too many factories. The workers' bargaining position is weak and the government's regulation is slack."

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Nearly a decade after some of the most powerful companies in the world - often under considerable criticism and consumer pressure - began an effort to eliminate sweatshop labor conditions in Asia, worker abuse is still commonplace in many of the Chinese factories that supply Western companies, according to labor rights groups.

The groups say that some Chinese companies routinely shortchange their employees on wages, withhold health benefits and expose their workers to dangerous machinery and harmful chemicals, like lead, cadmium and mercury.

"If these things are so dangerous for the consumer, then how about the workers?" said Anita Chan, a labor rights advocate who teaches at the Australian National University. "We may be dealing with these things for a short time, but they deal with them every day."

And so while American and European consumers worry about exposing their children to Chinese-made toys coated in lead, Chinese workers, often as young as 16, face far more serious hazards. Here in the Pearl River Delta region near Hong Kong, for example, factory workers lose or break about 40,000 fingers on the job every year, according to a study published a few years ago by the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences.

In an effort to keep big corporations honest, labor groups regularly smuggle photographs, videos, pay stubs, shipping records and other evidence out of factories that they say violate local law and international worker standards.

In 2007, factories that supplied more than a dozen corporations, including Wal-Mart, Disney and Dell, were accused of unfair labor practices, including using child labor, forcing employees to work 16- hour days on fast-moving assembly lines and paying workers less than minimum wage. (Minimum wage in this part of China is about half a U.S. dollar an hour.)

In recent weeks, several reports detailing labor abuse has been released, at a time when China is still coping with last year's wave of made-in-China product safety recalls, and as it tries to change workplace rules with a new labor law that took effect on Jan. 1.

No company has come under as harsh a spotlight as Wal-Mart, the world's biggest retailer, which sourced about $9 billion in goods from China in 2006, everything from hammers and toys to high- definition televisions.

In December, two nongovernmental organizations, or NGOs, documented what they said were abuse and labor violations at 15 factories that produced or supplied goods for Wal-Mart - including the use of child labor at Huanya Gifts, a factory here in Guangzhou that makes Christmas tree ornaments.

Wal-Mart officials say they are investigating the allegations, which were in a report issued three weeks ago by the National Labor Committee, an NGO based in New York.

Guangzhou labor bureau officials say they recently fined Huanya for wage violations, but officials say they found no evidence of child labor.

A spokesman for Huanya, which employs 8,000 workers, denied that the company broke any labor laws.

But two workers interviewed outside Huanya's huge complex in late December said they were forced to work long hours to meet production quotas in harsh conditions.

"I work on the plastic molding machine from 6 in the morning to 6 at night," said Xu Wenquan, a 16-year-old whose hands were covered with blisters. Asked what had happened to his hands, he replied, the machines are "quite hot, so I've burned my hands."

His brother, Xu Wenjie, 18, said the two young men left their small village in impoverished Guizhou Province four months ago and traveled more than 800 kilometers, or 500 miles, to find work at Huanya.

The brothers said they worked 12 hours a day, six days a week, for $120 to $200 a month, far less than they are required to be paid by law.

When government inspectors visit the factory, the young brothers are given the day off, they said.

A former Huanya employee who was reached by telephone gave a similar account of working conditions, saying many workers suffered from skin rashes after working with gold powders and that others were forced to sign papers "volunteering" to work overtime.

"It's quite noisy, and you stand up all day, 12 hours, and there's no air-conditioning," he said. "We get paid by the piece we make but they never told us how much. Sometimes I got $110, sometimes I got $150 a month."

In its 58-page report, the National Labor Committee scolded Wal- Mart for not doing more to protect workers. The group charged that last July, Huanya recruited about 500 16-year-old high school students to work seven days a week, often 15 hours a day, during peak production months for holiday merchandise.

Several students interviewed at the Guangzhou Technical School, less than two miles from Huanya, confirmed that classmates ages 16 to 18 had spent the summer working at the factory.

Some high school students later went on strike to protest the harsh conditions, the report said. The students also told labor officials that at least seven children, as young as 12 years old, were working in the factory.

"At Wal-Mart, Christmas ornaments are cheap, and so are the lives of the young workers in China who make them," the National Labor Committee report said.

Jonathan Dong, a Wal-Mart spokesman in Beijing, said the company would soon release details of its own investigation into working conditions at Huanya.

Disney and Dell have also been criticized by labor rights groups.

Officials of Disney and Dell declined to comment on specific allegations, but both companies said they carefully monitored factories in China and took action when they found problems or unfair labor practices.

"The Walt Disney Company and its affiliates take claims of unfair labor practices very seriously and investigates any such allegations thoroughly," the company said in a statement. "We have a strong commitment to the safety and well-being of workers, and fair and just labor standards."

Many multinational corporations were harshly criticized in the 1990s for using suppliers that maintained sweatshop conditions. Iconic brand names, like Nike, Mattel and Gap, responded by forming corporate social responsibility operations and working with contractors to create a system of factory audits and inspections. Those changes have won praise in some quarters for improving worker conditions.

But despite spending millions of dollars and hiring thousands of auditors, some companies admit many of the programs are flawed.

"The factories have improved immeasurably over the past few years," says Alan Hassenfeld, chairman of the toy maker Hasbro and co-chairman of Care, the ethical-manufacturing program of the International Council of Toy Industries. "But let me be honest: There are some bad factories. We have bribery and corruption occurring, but we are doing our best."

Some factories are warned about audits beforehand, and some factory owners or managers bribe auditors. Inexperienced inspectors may also be a problem.

Some major Western auditing firms working in China even hire college students from the United States to work during the summer as inspectors, an indication that they are not willing to invest in more expensive or sophisticated auditing programs, critics say.

Chinese suppliers regularly outsource to other suppliers, who may in turn outsource to yet another operation, creating a supply chain that is hard to follow - let alone inspect.

"The convoluted supply chain is probably one of the most underestimated and unrecognized risks in China," says Dane Chamorro, general manager who covers China at Control Risks, a risk- consulting firm. "You really have to have experienced people on the ground who know what they're doing and know the language."

Many labor experts say part of the problem is cost: Western companies are constantly pressing their Chinese suppliers for lower prices while also insisting that factory owners spend more to upgrade operations, treat workers properly and improve product quality.

At the same time, rising food, energy and raw material costs in China - as well as a shortage of labor in the biggest southern manufacturing zones - are hampering factory owners' ability to make a profit.

The situation may get worse before it improves. The labor law that took effect on Jan. 1 makes it more difficult to dismiss workers and creates a whole new set of laws that experts say will almost certainly increase labor costs. Yet it may become more difficult for human rights groups to investigate abuses. Concerned about the growing array of threats to profitability, as well as embarrassing exposes, factories are heightening security, harassing labor rights groups and calling the police when journalists show up at their gates.

At the center of the problem is a labor system that relies on young migrant workers, who often leave small rural villages for two- or three-year stints at factories, where they hope to earn enough to return home to start families.

As long as life in the cities promises more money than in rural areas, they will brave the harsh conditions in factories in this and other Chinese cities. And as long as China outlaws independent unions and proves unable to enforce its own labor rules, there is little hope for change.

"This is a problem that has been difficult to solve," said Liu Kaiming, the director of the Institute on Contemporary Observation, which aids migrant workers in nearby Shenzhen. "China has too many factories. The workers' bargaining position is weak and the government's regulation is slack."

There is little that any Western company can do about those issues, no matter how seriously they take corporate social responsibility - other than leaving China.

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