

Research Assessment Exercise 2020
Impact Case Study

University: The University of Hong Kong (HKU)

Unit of Assessment (UoA): 27 - Sociology and Anthropology

Title of case study: Improving the practices of iSlave producers and the working conditions of student-labourers in Apple supplier factories in China

(1) Summary of the impact

Since arriving at HKU in March 2017, Prof. Pun Ngai has extended her longstanding research on labour rights (3.7) into the widespread but previously unresearched phenomenon of the use of 20 million vocational students as workers in China (3.2). The impact of her research findings includes: influencing labour rights investigations and campaigns launched by local and international NGOs; raising international awareness that shifted opinion and prompted remedial action; and bringing about changes to labour policy in China. Significantly, more than 50,000 student interns employed by Apple suppliers in China have benefitted following this innovative research from the Department of Sociology.

(2) Underpinning research

Prof. Pun led the Collaborative Research Fund (CRF) Project on “Learning to Labor: Social Media and Migrant Labor Protection in China” (2016-2019), the first large-scale research on a new generation of migrant workers. Unlike traditional migrant labour, these workers are student interns aged between 16 and 20 from vocational schools under the auspices of the Chinese state who serve the demands of the market (3.1). After Prof Pun joined HKU, she set up the research team in the Sociology Department to create a “senseware” digital platform providing knowledge on labour and gender protection.

1. New forms of labour use in China identified

The CRF project discloses that, under the Made in China 2025 blueprint, the expansion of vocational education is aimed at training the labour force and providing millions of well-trained primary technical staff and skilled workers to meet the urgent needs of manufacturing and the service sector in the post-financial crisis period (3.3). The children of migrants in many cities do not have an urban hukou (household registration), and are often barred from receiving compulsory education in public schools and taking public examinations in the cities. Hence, they have much less opportunity to receive tertiary education. The appeal of urban life, along with the ease of entrance to vocational schools, specifically channels migrant youth into vocational education (3.4).

2. The working conditions of student interns inside Apple’s supplier factories revealed

The CRF project provided the first-ever evidence of the number of students from vocational training schools being sent to work as cheap labour in manufacturing factories in industrial towns in China, and of the working conditions inside those factories (3.2). Field research in four regions of China showed that student interns from vocational training schools make up 10-15% of the near one million workers in Foxconn factories and other suppliers producing iPhones on assembly lines. Night shifts and overtime work are commonly required of student interns (3.2). Most of the students interviewed reported that they had to work ten hours per day, causing problems with their physical and mental health. This study put the use of student laborers and their working conditions firmly on the public agenda (3.5).

3. *Innovative research methods: constructing “senseware” digital platform* Pun’s studies on migrant labour and student interns go beyond labour studies or communication studies by moving the sphere of scrutiny into schools, workplaces and social media in order to make sense of the formation of a new working class (3.6). Moving beyond traditional models of trade unionism and labour NGOs, this CRF project contributes to a new paradigm of conceptualising vocational schools as sites of learning, communicating and organizing, and preparing students to be proper working-class subjects. Specifically, Pun’s study built a “senseware” digital platform producing labour and gender knowledge and linking a number of social media channels. The knowledge generated in this program is disseminated not only in academic and public policy circles, but also among NGOs, activists, and student-workers through training sessions, online engagement, and participatory action research (3.6).

(3) References to the research

- 3.1 Bryant P.H. Hui, Pun Ngai, Jack Linchuan Qiu, Anita Koo (2019) "Having Less but Giving More: Work Experience and Prosocial Behavior of Chinese Working-Class Youth", *Youth and Society*. DOI:10.1177/0044118X19840239
- 3.2 Pun Ngai, Rutvica Andrijasevic, Devi Sacchetto (2019) "Transgressing North-South divide: Foxconn Production Regimes in China and the Czech Republic," *Critical Sociology*. First Published online February 15, 2019. DOI:10.1177/0896920518823881
- 3.3 Benny Lu, Anita Koo and Pun Ngai (2019) “Attempting to transgress neoliberal value: constructing a micro-foundation of social values of working-class youth in vocational schools in China”, *The Sociological Review*. DOI: 10.1177/0038026119845552
- 3.4 Pun Ngai and Anita Koo (2018) “Double contradiction of schooling: class reproduction and working-class agency at vocational schools in China”, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*. 40(1): 50-64, DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2018.1507818
- 3.5 Smith, Chris and Pun, Ngai (2018), “Class and Precarity: An Unhappy Coupling in China’s Working Class Formation”, *Work, Employment and Society*. 32 (3): 599-615. DOI:10.1177/0950017018762276
- 3.6 Pun Ngai, Tommy Tse, and Kenneth Ng, (2019) "Challenging digital capitalism: SACOM's campaigns against Apple and Foxconn as monopoly capital", *Information, Communication & Society*. 22 (9): 1253-1268. DOI:10.1080/1369118X.2017.1414290
- 3.7 Pun Ngai (2019) “The new Chinese working class in struggle”, *Dialectical Anthropology*, published online DOI:10.1007/s10624-019-09559-0

All the above publications were produced after Prof. Pun joined HKU in March 2017, and supported fully or partially by the Collaborative Research Fund (CRF) Project on “Learning to Labour: Social Media and Migrant Labour Protection in China” (2016-2019).

(4) Details of the impact

The accumulated evidence of Pun’s studies has led to three major areas of impact.

A) Influence on investigations and campaigns by local and international NGOs

Directly inspired by the research, SACOM (Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misbehaviour), the HK-based NGO, has run a series of high-profile campaigns calling for the improvement of working conditions in Apple’s supplier factories and actively demanding an end to their practice of forcing school students to work on the production lines [5-1].

The biggest event has been the *iSlave 10* Campaign launched at the 10th anniversary of iPhone products in 2017. Prof. Pun participated in strategic meetings organized by SACOM, providing solid research inputs, strategizing the campaign agenda and facilitating its

collaboration with international NGOs to demand that Apple stop violating its own policy in China [5-2, 5-3]. The International Action Week was organized by NGOs from ten regions, including Bread for All (Switzerland), Sudwind (Austria), Solidarities (France) and War on Want (UK). These NGOs explicitly acknowledged the contribution of Pun's research to their campaigns. As the Chairperson of SACOM states, "Without Professor Pun's research findings, SACOM would not be able to identify student worker problems as a key issue of Apple's supply chain monitoring. Her researches have powerfully explored the transformation of labour use in Apple's manufacturers... Pun's study therefore provided a clear direction for SACOM's international campaigns" [5-1].

The Chief Coordinator of Bread for All also acknowledges Pun's studies: "In regards to your recent research on student interns in Apple supplier factories in China, we confirm that your research and SACOM's report on it have been instrumental for our work here in Switzerland/Europe. Your work helps us to sensitize and influence public and private consumers and industry stakeholders alike" [5-5].

The campaigns inspired by the research have consistently focused international media attention on Apple's student-intern violations [5-5]. The Guardian in 2013 quoted Prof. Pun's research: "Zhang's interview was one of 63 with student interns collected over two years... The children's stories make upsetting reading" [5-6]. The Initium produced a special feature based on Pun's interview in 2017 [5-7]. In 2018, Financial Times, CNN, BBC, Bloomberg, France24, SCMP and others also reported extensively on the issue, and the use of student laborers in iPhone supplier factories has been placed firmly on the public agenda.

B) Influence on Apple's reactions and policy change

Most significantly, Pun's unique model of research-campaign-change has influenced Apple's policy on student workers' protection. A section on "Student Worker Protection" was included in its Suppliers Responsibility Report 2017 [5-9], and Apple has also made student workers' rights an important aspect of its auditing. In November 2017, four months after the launch of the *iSlave 10* campaign, Apple admitted that "During the course of a recent audit, we discovered instances of student interns working overtime at a supplier facility in China. We've confirmed the students worked voluntarily, were compensated and provided benefits, but they should not have been allowed to work overtime" [5-8].

Apple's "Supplier Responsibility Progress Report 2018" states, "Requirements were also raised in 2017 to limit the number of student interns at a supplier facility to no more than 10 percent of their total workforce" [5-9]. This is the first time Apple has specifically introduced a percentage cap for the number of student workers in its suppliers, which is considered an important policy change. Pun's research has also found a reduction in the number of student interns used in some of Apple's supplier factories, such as Foxconn Shenzhen and Biel Crystal [5-10].

C) Extension of Impact from the electronics industry to the garment sector

Pun's research has been applied in a different sector through training workers to know their rights. In 2018, the C&A Foundation took the initiative to provide a grant of HK \$900,000 to the Sociology Department to support a gender empowerment project [5-11]. The digital 'senseware' developed in the CRF project has now been extended to cover gender awareness in the garment sector. Two sets of learning curricula on labour rights and gender awareness and educational videos have been produced. Three thousand students from four vocational training students received training in 2018 and 2019. A total of 50,000 workers will directly benefit from the learning curricula when the project is completed in 2020 [5-11].

To conclude, Prof. Pun was designated as one of **50 outstanding women from around the world 2018** by Bread for All and the Swiss Lenten Fund to celebrate 50 years of joint campaigning to defend human rights and a just and fairer world [5-4].

(5) Sources to corroborate the impact

[5-1] Supporting Letter by SACOM (November 1, 2018)

[5-2] iSlave 10 Campaign (<http://sacom.hk/category/campaigns/electronics/>)

[5-3] iSlave at 10: Four Videos on the Slavery Conditions to Manufacture iPhones (<http://mobilesocialcongress.cat/en/islave-at-10-four-videos-on-the-slavery-conditions-to-manufacture-iphones/>)

[5-4] Two Supporting Letters by Bread for All (Switzerland), an international civic organization (dated April 24, 2018, and July 17, 2018).

[5-5] Over the years, the campaigns have received extensive reporting. The most current campaign in 2018 is provided as an example:

UK Media:

Financial Times, October 28, 2018 – Apple investigates illegal student labour at Watch assembly plant (<https://www.ft.com/content/c45fd72c-d6b7-11e8-a854-33d6f82e62f8>)

The Guardian, October 30, 2018 – ‘We are like robots’: Apple investigates Chinese factory using forced student labour (<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/oct/30/we-are-like-robots-apple-investigates-chinese-factory-using-forced-student-labour>)

US Media:

CNN, October 29, 2018 – Apple investigates report that Chinese students were forced to make its watches (<https://edition.cnn.com/2018/10/29/tech/apple-supply-chain-china/index.html>)

New York Post, October 29, 2018 – Apple accused of using illegal student labor for Apple Watches (<https://nypost.com/2018/10/29/apple-accused-of-using-illegal-student-labor-for-apple-watches/>)

Asia Media:

Taipei Times, October 31, 2018 – Quanta under fire over student labor (<http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/biz/archives/2018/10/31/2003703340>)

SCMP, October 30, 2018 – Chinese Apple Watch supplier under fire for ‘forcing students to work like robots’ (https://amp.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/2170799/chinese-apple-watch-supplier-under-fire-forcing-students-work?__twitter_impression=true)

[5-6] The Guardian, October 14, 2013 - Forced student labour is central to the Chinese economic miracle

(<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/oct/14/forced-student-labour-china-apple>)

[5-7] The Initium Feature, September 16, 2017 - 專訪社會學家潘毅：離不開蘋果的我們，

可以為富士康工人做什麼？

(<https://theinitium.com/article/20170915-opinion-Foxconn/>)

[5-8] The Guardian, November 21, 2017 - Apple under fire over reports students worked illegal overtime to build iPhone X

(<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/nov/21/apple-students-illegal-overtime-reports-iphone-x-foxconn-interns>)

[5-9] Apple Supplier Responsibility 2017 and 2018 Progress Report

https://www.apple.com/supplier-responsibility/pdf/Apple_SR_2017_Progress_Report.pdf

https://www.apple.com/supplier-responsibility/pdf/Apple_SR_2018_Progress_Report.pdf

[5-10] SACOM Report: Blood and Sweat Behind the Screen of iPhones – Another Investigative Report on Apple’s Largest Display Screen Supplier

[5-11] Grant Letter by C&A Foundation and the agreement with HKU (April 23, 2018)