What Cameras Inside Foxconn Found

I wrote about the Apple/China/Foxconn controversy in this space a couple of weeks ago, but there have been some developments, some progress and some new revelations.

The story so far: Last month, The New York Times published a front-page article highlighting working conditions at a factory in China owned by Foxconn Technology, where Apple’s products are built. The problems included fatal accidents and employees injured while using a toxic chemical that can cause nerve damage. (Although Apple is the poster child for Foxconn, just about all of our electronics are made in the same Chinese factories, as the Times article noted. Foxconn also builds products for Sony, Panasonic, Samsung, Sharp, Asus, Hewlett-Packard, Dell, Intel, I.B.M., Lenovo, Microsoft, Motorola, Netgear, Nintendo, Nokia and Vizio. The Xbox, the PlayStation and the Amazon Kindle are made here.) The article set off a firestorm of protest, petitions and demonstrations.

Apple responded by vowing to take Chinese worker safety and welfare even more seriously, and it hired the Fair Labor Association to survey 35,000 Foxconn employees about their working conditions. The results of the audit will be made public next month.

For its part, Foxconn responded by raising factory workers’ salaries as much as 25 percent.

Anyway, for me, two new sources of light were trained on the Foxconn situation: a TV broadcast and an e-mail. ABC’s “Nightline” was invited to visit Apple’s production lines at Foxconn. Its correspondent, Bill Weir, was allowed to interview any worker, on camera or off, in the factory or outside.

On Tuesday night, ABC broadcast its report. You can watch it online.

To me, the salient paragraph in his script was this:

We looked hard for the kind of underage and maimed workers we’ve read so much about, but we mostly found people who face their days through soul-crushing boredom and deep fatigue. Some complained of being overworked, others complained of being underworked and almost all said they were underpaid. And when I asked, “What would you change?,” we heard the kind of complaints you might hear in any factory anywhere.
It didn’t look like a sweatshop, frankly. The assembly-line work was certainly mind-numbingly repetitive — one woman files the burrs off the iPad’s Apple-logo hole 6,000 times a day — but that’s the nature of assembly-line work. Meanwhile, this factory was clean and modern.

More tellingly, the broadcast showed 3,000 young Chinese workers lining up at the gates for Foxconn’s Monday morning recruiting session.

Now, these workers know about the 2010 Foxconn suicides. They know that the starting salary is $2 an hour (plus benefits, and no payroll taxes). They know they’ll have 12-hour shifts, with two hourlong breaks. They know that workers sleep in a tiny dorm (six or eight to a room) for $17 a month.

And yet here they are, lining up to work! Apparently, even those conditions, so abhorrent to us, are actually better than these workers’ alternatives: backbreaking rural farm work that doesn’t prepare them to move up the work force food chain.

Many observers are shocked at the child labor reported at Foxconn. Not only do these Chinese factories employ a lot of young people — the legal working age is 16 — but from what we saw on the ABC broadcast, all of these employees are young.

That’s also what a former Apple executive told me this week: that Foxconn is not a career. You don’t see 30- and 40-year-old heads of households on the assembly lines. The young Chinese see it as “something like a first summer job,” he told me — a way to make some bucks for a few months before heading home, or to get some work experience before moving up.

The second enlightening twist, for me, was a note sent to me from a young man, born in China and now attending an American university.

> My aunt worked several years in what Americans call “sweat shops.” It was hard work. Long hours, “small” wage, “poor” working conditions. Do you know what my aunt did before she worked in one of these factories? She was a prostitute.

Circumstances of birth are unfortunately random, and she was born in a very rural region. Most jobs were agricultural and family owned, and most of the jobs were held by men. Women and young girls, because of lack of educational and economic opportunities, had to find other “employment.”

The idea of working in a “sweat shop” compared to that old lifestyle is an improvement, in my opinion. I know that my aunt would rather be “exploited” by an evil capitalist boss for a couple of dollars than have her body be exploited by several men for pennies.

That is why I am upset by many Americans’ thinking. We do not have the same opportunities as the West. Our governmental infrastructure is different. The country is different.

Yes, factory is hard labor. Could it be better? Yes, but only when you compare such to
American jobs.

If Americans truly care about Asian welfare, they would know that shutting down “sweat shops” would force many of us to return to rural regions and return to truly despicable “jobs.” And I fear that forcing factories to pay higher wages would mean they hire FEWER workers, not more.

Anyway, now my aunt has been living in New York for one year after saving up money for a plane ticket and visa, and she is wonderfully happy to have escaped Asia and reunited with our family. None of this would be possible if it wasn’t for that “sweat shop.”

Of course, not all Chinese feel that way. The Times had its article translated into Chinese and published on a Chinese news site. Many comments from Chinese citizens posted to that article were critical of the dangerous working conditions at Foxconn factories. Some said that Apple was ultimately responsible and should be held accountable, the position that labor rights groups take.

Plenty of Westerners remain unconvinced, too, even by ABC’s report and Apple’s investigation. “Nightline,” for example, is a production of ABC News, which is owned by the Walt Disney Company; its chief executive serves on the Apple board, and the Steve Jobs Trust is Disney’s largest shareholder. (To its credit, ABC mentioned that potential conflict of interest in the broadcast.)

Similarly, Apple is paying the Fair Labor Association six figures to conduct the audit. If the company being exonerated is also writing the checks, you have to be suspicious.

And as the ABC broadcast also pointed out, Foxconn knew in advance that the Fair Labor Association’s inspectors were coming, and it had plenty of opportunity to put on a good show for them (and for ABC’s cameras).

But the program also included interviews with the workers’ impoverished families in rural villages, who spoke of the improvements Foxconn’s presence had brought to their lives. And it’s hard to forget those 3,000 people lining up for Foxconn jobs every Monday.

In other words, the lessons of this controversy have more to do with China than with Apple. This is only marginally a technology story — I imagine we could find low-wage, tiring jobs at every factory in China, making everything that China makes. Every toy, every houseware, every garment. You could do a year’s worth of exposés.

Still, we should be happy that in this corner of the Chinese landscape, things are getting better. On ABC’s show, a Fair Labor Association inspector, Ines Kaempfer, called the last month a “Nike moment” for Apple. In the 1990s, Nike’s sweatshops weren’t the worst in the business, but they’re the ones that got the negative publicity. In response, it cleaned up its act, and thereby lifted the bar for the entire industry.
Clearly, the recent spotlight on conditions at Foxconn has performed a similar service for the electronics industry. Better wages are good. More careful monitoring is good. Transparency — like letting TV cameras into your assembly lines — is good.