

# Exploring social sustainability aspects concerning the well-being of workers in Chinese factories

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## **Abstract**

Welfare monitoring in Chinese factories has focused on physical working conditions, with workers' overall well-being largely unexplored. The many codes attempting to define basic standards may not reflect workers' priorities. We used digital diaries to deepen our understanding of migrant workers at a factory in Guangzhou. They suggest factors important to workers – effective relationships and opportunities for learning and development – are very different from the physical welfare concerns raised in the media. We reflect on how our work might be used, to deepen the understanding of social sustainability challenges in global supply chains, and to transform managerial approaches.

**Keywords:** Supply-chain risk management, Social sustainability, Diary research, Psychological capital.

## **Introduction**

Senior executives are increasingly concerned with reputation risk as customers and policy-makers question the impact of Western buying practices on populations employed by far-flung suppliers. Rapid growth and industrialisation in China are driving a debate about workers' well-being. Since 1990, it has become viable for emerging economies such as China's to integrate into global commodity chains and production networks by supplying multi-national and transnational corporations (Yang and He 2016). China has become known as 'the world's factory' as it supplies much of the textile, electronics, and consumer goods industries (Yang and He 2016). Rapid growth and industrialisation has led to increased urbanisation and a burgeoning middle class (Grayson and Nelson 2013). Not only the world's largest exporter, it is now also the second largest importer, with the world's largest growing consumer market.

However, despite a statistical drop in the frequency of labour abuses and human rights offences in the past year, examples of overworked factory employees in Chinese

production facilities are still hitting the global radar (Hassler et al. 2017). The distance of these factories from their retailers in the west, and the difficulty of transparently reporting on factory management standards, put the reputation of those retailers among stakeholders at risk (Silvestre et al. 2015). To manage this risk, businesses conduct social audits through third parties, but these do not provide an understanding of the needs and dissatisfactions of workers (Egels-Zandén et al. 2015, Freise and Seuring 2015). Audits, the most common form of self-regulation among global businesses manufacturing in the developing world, do not supply a clear picture, as evidenced by the disaster at Rana Plaza, which had been audited by BSCI<sup>1</sup> weeks prior to the buildings' tragic collapse (Campaign 2013). We therefore set out to build on a 2005 study (Luthans et al. 2005) that examined the relationship between psychological capital (PsyCap) and performance outcomes in Chinese factories.

We created a novel, longitudinal approach to consider employees' satisfaction with their work conditions in a more comprehensive way. Using digital diaries, we tracked workers' concerns and satisfaction levels over time using a self-report evaluative system. This technique allowed us to collect qualitative data and to identify relationships between events in the factory, for example between supervisors and production workers, or relationships between workers on the production line and satisfaction levels among the workers, providing a fascinating insight into both their working lives and the importance they place on relationships with co-workers and supervisors. We were able to analyse this data through the PsyCap lens, to build a more nuanced way for researchers to understand the well-being of Chinese factory workers.

An important contribution of the research is the finding that the actual picture is more complex than the concerned western narrative suggests. On average, workers' personal and professional concerns are more relational, and less about their physical state. We predict that, as the size of the Chinese factory workforce stabilises, companies will need to be more thoughtful and active about investing in worker engagement and understanding the true needs of the people who work in their factories.

### **The Situation for Chinese Workers**

In the past decade, China has surpassed the United States in terms of purchasing power. It has been the world's largest exporter since 2009. Factory work is seen as part of China's movement toward globalised modernity. Globalisation and factory development have created a new Chinese urban working class of more than 200 million migrants (Ngai 2010, Grayson and Nelson 2013). Many of these people migrated to improve their situation, citing the potential to take classes and learn skills to increase their employability as motivation for working in factories (Jacka 2014). Ngai (2005) quotes a 'dagongmei' or female migrant worker, saying, "You people nowadays no longer like tilling the fields. I didn't either".

While this sounds positive, there are real concerns about the conditions these factory workers face. A lack of regulations has in the past allowed for factory-based tragedies such as fires, workplace injuries, and illness due to insufficient health care (Ngai 2005). A fierce struggle for upward advancement, e.g., to be line leaders, results from management practices promoting divisiveness and individualism rather than solidarity within a primarily collectivistic culture (Ngai 2005, Jacka 2014, Earley 1994). Hard work is justified by ambition, the desire to travel or move and earnings, and mitigated by support networks. But divide-and-rule tactics, including hidden bartering systems

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<sup>1</sup> The **Business Social Compliance Initiative (BSCI)** is a leading supply chain management system that supports companies to drive social compliance and improvements within the factories and farms in their global supply chains.

(Siu 2017) undermine much of the potential social capital of a collectivistic workplace (Earley 1994).

Divisions within the workplace are paralleled outside it. Migrant factory workers face some social exclusion arising from language and dialect, speaking skills and personal identification with their place of origin (Jacka 2014). Separated from family, they can feel lonely and displaced. However, the urban economy has begun to recognise and welcome migrant consumerism (Kim 2015, Grayson and Nelson 2013). The increase to the average wage of a migrant worker has created disposable income and young single migrants without children tend not to save or send money home, rather spending their wages. Urban developments include plans to make basic public services available to almost all city-dwellers by 2020 (Kim 2015) benefitting migrant factory workers further.

Welfare concerns raised in the Chinese and Western media also appear in the academic literature. Articles detailing long hours, low wages, management abuses, inhumane conditions and workplace injuries (Jacka 2014) appeal to urban liberals' concern for social justice, applying moral pressure to advance workers' rights (Jacka 2014, Chan 2013). The victimisation of migrant workers, a frequent theme in Chinese tabloids, has entered the Western narrative for similar reasons. While this narrative has inspired research among Western management theorists, it does not provide useful data to inform remote decision-making. Portraying the worker as victim may also perpetuate stereotypes stigmatising the rural population.

So is the Chinese migrant factory worker really victimised? While it is important for brands and retailers to find out what is happening in their supply chains, there are problems in gathering this information. First, there is no standardised code of employee well-being to form a baseline for observations, audits or surveys (Locke 2013, Vogel 2010, O'Rourke 2003). Second, to truly understand workers' well-being we need to enquire about personal matters – such as feelings of safety – which are difficult to observe or rank, and about which it may be difficult for workers to be honest, given the imbalance of power between observer and observed (Chan 2013, Locke et al. 2007). Alternatives like ethnography or covert observation may uncover this information but are difficult and time-consuming. Third, survey and observation methods tend to take their measurements at a single point in time, whereas well-being is an ongoing process. Longitudinal data would provide a better understanding of factory conditions (Peterson et al. 2011).

While the research methods used by businesses to understand the well-being of factory workers have tended to focus on physical conditions (such as the temperature in the workplace), we decided to focus on 'how people are', and therefore used the PsyCap model as our primary theoretical lens. PsyCap theory considers "an individual's positive psychological state of development" (Luthans et al. 2007), as characterised by high levels of the four elements of 'HERO': Hope, (Self-)Efficacy, Resilience and Optimism. We took a qualitative approach to this, as we wanted to identify the factors that matter to workers, rather than simply those which are easy to measure using audits or surveys. We therefore set out to investigate: *What are the factors concerning the well-being of workers in Chinese factories?*

## Method

To understand the daily lives of Chinese factory workers we chose diary research because longitudinal data, captured close to real time using flexible and accessible methods, could give us more insight into the daily reality of workers' well-being. Our use of social media mobile technology allowed factory workers to leave voice messages daily. This reduced recall bias as the workers could leave diaries at any point in their day (Alaszewski 2006). We sought to replicate real diaries, like those documenting the medical histories of patients, "private worlds of politicians and the fictional lives of characters like Adrian Mole and Bridget Jones" (Taylor and Taylor 2003, Patterson 2005) to gain a far deeper understanding of what working in a factory is really like.

In this report, we present an analysis of 1,499 diary entries made by a group of 33 factory workers from one Guangzhou factory over a 120-day period. The participants were a self-selecting sample, and each was interviewed face-to-face at the factory to validate the sample. Data from past surveys had included responses from 'fake workers' and management, or multiple responses from single workers, so we needed to check that the sample actually represented the factory population. The data was collected using the social media platform WeChat, one of the largest stand-alone mobile apps with more than 980 million monthly active users. It is censored and monitored in China. We chose it because of its ubiquity and some key features: it allows communities to be created, information to be posted and voice messages to be left, and has a built-in instant translation tool, so that an English-speaker can chat to someone in Chinese and vice versa. It supports various instant messaging methods, including text and voice messages. Voice recording was selected for ease of use and to avoid discriminating against illiterate workers.

We asked respondents to report in each day in a voice message, sharing 'what had made them happy or unhappy today' or anything they wanted to share about their well-being or day. The diarists were surprised by this open question, and initially struggled to understand what they were being asked to do. After an initial 20-day pilot in which a very large volume of the diary entries were about romantic interests, we suggested a series of subject categories for them (including work-related and personal topics), plus four 'sentiment' categories so that we could record accurately how they were feeling about their lives. The topic categories were derived from an earlier large-scale survey conducted by the first author (and not yet published). Workers were asked to keep their diaries even during holidays and days off, both for continuity and in the hope this would become a 'normal' daily ritual, leading to more insightful, open and useful content.

The entries were downloaded from WeChat daily and saved to Excel. We translated the messages into English for analysis using a three-step process: using the WeChat translator to produce an initial text to be checked using Google Translate, then audited by a native speaker. To preserve anonymity, each worker was given an alias comprising a number and animal name, allowing them to chat on the forum and leave diaries without confidentiality concerns. Only the first author has the key to these aliases.

This was primarily a qualitative study. However, as it produced large data volumes, we conducted some initial quantitative analysis to identify trends and areas for further exploration. The two main analyses we present here are based on a time-series analysis of the data, and an analysis of the relationships between topics and sentiments, conducted using a correlation matrix which we tested for significance. These two analyses give us some preliminary insights into the workers' feelings about particular topics and the dynamics of these feelings over time.

## Findings

Workers used their mobile phones to submit daily diary updates as voice recordings via the social media app. They spoke about many aspects of their lives. Work was the main subject but they also commented on general events or topics they wanted to discuss. One worker, for example, had tried to dabble on the stock market with his wages and lost everything. Another was devastated by not being able to get into the military, having failed the eye test. We classified the topics in seven broad categories:

*Table 1: Examples and total entries in each subject category.*

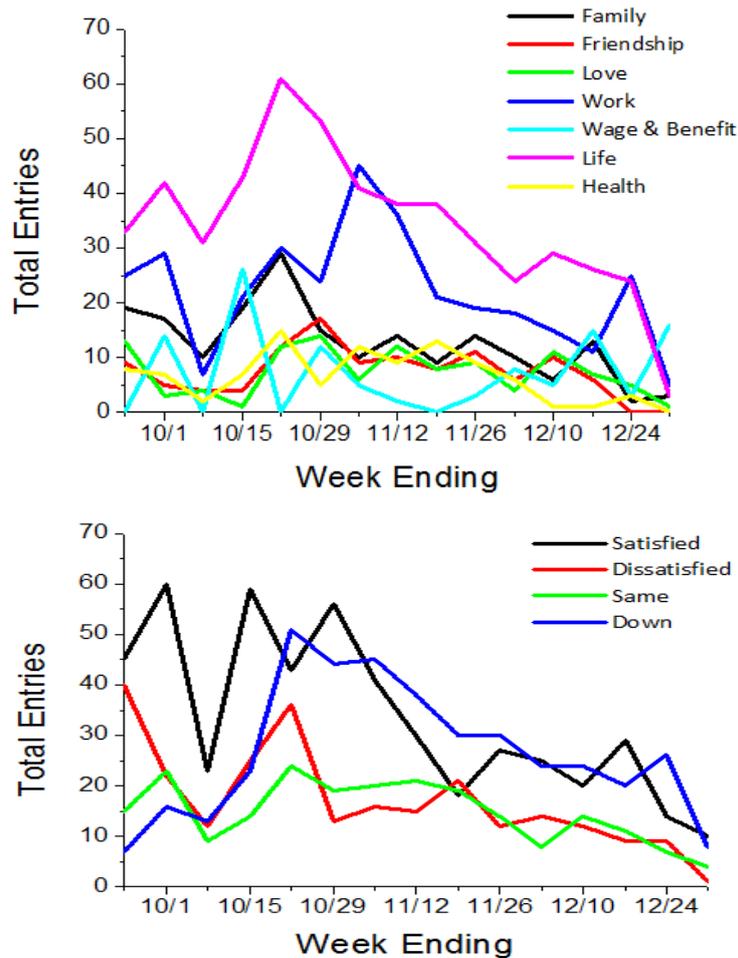
Subject	Example	Total Entries	% of total
Family	“I was exhausted from work. But when I heard my son calling me dad, I was immediately re-energised.” (Worker 25, 21 September). Entries in this category tend to focus on family connections.	190	13
Friendship	“Good buddy's birthday, so happy.” (Worker 7, 3 December). Entries in this category tend to focus on recreation and casual relationships.	111	8
Love	“The girl I like is with another person.” (Worker 12, 20 September). Entries tend to focus on romantic relationships.	110	8
Work	“I hustled to finish production.” (Worker 19, 22 September). Entries focus on several issues in the workplace, including working hours, down machines, interactions with management, productivity, etc.	331	23
Wage & Benefit	“Today is a happy day, I really did not expect to have my wage paid today in advance, extremely happy!” (Worker 23, 25 October). Entries focus on wages and benefits.	109	7
Life	“My stock loss a few days ago almost made me kill myself. Fortunately, I have earned my money back.” (Worker 22, 29 October). Entries in this category focus on several aspects of daily life that do not fall into one of the other categories.	517	35
Health	“Caught a cold.” (Worker 22, 10 October). Entries in this category typically revolve around illness.	98	7
<b>TOTAL</b>		1,499	

We asked each diarist to cite a sentiment for each entry. They did this in 94% of entries.

*Table 2: Examples and total entries in each sentiment category.*

Sentiment	Example	Total entries	% of total
Satisfied	“I go to work every day, my girlfriend will say in the morning, did you eat breakfast? It's nice to have her in my life, thank you!” (Worker 8, 11 December).	500	36
Dissatisfied	“At the end of the weekend, every day, every day, everyone's hands are sore and painful. The director urges the high-cutting workers across the street to hurry.” (Worker 6, 23 December).	257	19
Same Old	“My eyes feel dry and my vision is degrading. I think I need to get a pair of glasses.” (Worker 7, 21 September).	222	26
A Little Down	“I feel bored. I'm lingering on the edges, wasting time, but still feeling good about myself.” (Worker 18, 19 October).	399	19

We analysed the number of entries on these topics, and the sentiment classification over time. From the time-series analysis (Figure 1), we see that there is a general level of discussion about health and relationships. Our diarists were persistently interested in these subjects. However, there are more spikes in the number of diary entries about their work, wages and benefits. We also noticed that in one week (16-22 October 2017) there was a sharp increase in the number of entries, particularly about work. We therefore undertook a deeper sentiment analysis for this week.



*Figure 1: Subject and sentiment over time*

The ‘life’ category is so large and varied that it is difficult to draw clear conclusions about overall satisfaction without more detailed analysis. However, we can make observations about how other non-work factors influence sentiment. The ‘family’ category is paradoxical: while for some workers it was a positive category (because they were happy to have reconnected with distant family members), for most it was a source of dissatisfaction – the second highest correlation among pairs of subject category and sentiment. Workers indicated loneliness, and a longing to reconnect with family. Other relationships (friendship, love) were also the topics of frequent entries, but are much less directly connected with a particular sentiment. However, the large number of entries on these topics suggests that relationships are very important to the factory workers. They talk regularly about relationships and life events, with emotions ranging from longing to exuberance. By contrast, ‘Health’ appears to be a hygiene factor. Diary entries under “Health” do not show a statistically significant correlation with

“Satisfied”, leading us to conclude that people only made diary entries about their health when something was wrong.

Entries under “Work” showed a strong correlation with “Same Old” and “A Little Down” sentiments. Workers tended to write melancholy entries when discussing their jobs. Although seldom bordering on despair, they rarely looked on work favourably.

*Table 3: Examples of work related diary entries*

Sentiment	Example
Satisfied	“Today, I handed in my resignation book and waited for the last shipment at the end of the year, to go home!” (5 December, Satisfied) In this entry, the worker seems only to be “Satisfied” because they have resigned.
Dissatisfied	“So [angry]! The machine had a problem. The maintenance guy is arrogant and aggressive. [Stupid]!” (30 October, Dissatisfied) “The group leader assigned me to do another colleague's job.” (28 September, Dissatisfied)
A Little Down	“A counterproductive day, busy but not much work got done (shame). Keep on going tomorrow!” (26 September, A Little Down) “Today is Christmas, unfortunately we have to work overtime. In the last week of 2017, we are getting closer to 2018... The new year is coming. Looking back, the happiest thing is to spend time with the children. The children grow up, but we are getting older... “My resignation has been approved. I left for my new job in January 31. I am very grateful to all of you for your care. Thank you! A small number of employees in the workshop have resigned. I do not know whether the management or leadership is thinking about the loss of personnel, or have learned the real reason why employees have resigned... Many facts are hidden.” (25 December, A Little Down) “Today is Monday, busy mode starts again (crying face).” (23 October, A Little Down)

We analysed the diaries further to try to identify the root causes of this dissatisfaction. Research participants mentioned that they need training, and want to provide feedback. This desire for training came through clearly in the entries on 13 October, when 24 out of 27 workers indicated they were “Satisfied”, mentioning a training session they had enjoyed. Workers often see inefficiencies in the factory or areas where production could be streamlined but management does not allow them to give feedback. They also feel undervalued: one mentioned that in the past, the factory used to give them birthday cards, and there was a reward system for speed and quality of work, and that many of them felt sad and demotivated that this was no longer happening. He said: “We feel that this is a sign that we are not valued and that our presence in the factory is less valuable than the machinery.” Reworking finished goods was the biggest demotivator and clear signs of reduced self-efficacy came through. Workers reported that “every day we rework what we made the day before, we just can’t get it right or meet the standards needed.” Other entries included:

“Today there was too much reworking”.

“I was really [annoyed] at work today. One machine was broken and was being repaired the whole morning but it didn't get fixed. In the afternoon, no repairman was working on it and I had to personally go ask them again. Every machine maintenance dude acted like a prince. Nobody moved and they even blamed and [verbally] abused me. I was so angry.”

Perhaps surprisingly, the “Wage & Benefit” category was the only category that did not correlate with any other subject categories, or with any sentiments. Thus it can be regarded as an independent category. Workers wrote no entries about “Wage & Benefit” during the weeks ending on 24 September, 8 October, 22 October and 19 November. This early evidence suggests workers are more concerned about their relationships and development opportunities at work than about the fundamental working conditions.

## **Discussion**

Chinese society has historically emphasised social interests, collective action and shared responsibility. Ngai (2005) quotes a factory worker saying: “Every day I would be worn out, all my energy gone. But I felt satisfied there. I had dozens of relatives and friends, we chatted a lot and helped each other”. Our study reinforces this focus among factory workers on their need for positive relationships in the workplace and with family and friends. This illustrates Adler’s (2017) finding that while workers are primarily concerned about verbal and physical abuse - including sexual harassment - and air quality, managers think they care most about workplace temperature and potential accidents and injuries. In our diary study, workers discussing work expressed concerns primarily about lack of training and verbal abuse. There was no mention of temperature.

Chinese workers recognise their skills as a resource that factories need for production, and seek training and development to increase them. Hypothetically, workers with high self-efficacy could work more effectively. Self-efficacy is a part of the PsyCap framework, and our findings suggest that some effective practices in factories – particularly the provision of training – enhance self-efficacy, which means the factory worker believes s/he can accomplish using his or her skills under certain circumstances (Snyder and Lopez 2007). Self-efficacy is viewed as a task-specific version of self-esteem (Lunenburg 2011). The basic principle is that individuals are more likely to engage in areas in which they have high self-efficacy and less likely to engage where they do not (Van der Bijl and Shortridge-Baggett, 2002). Task-related self-efficacy increases effort and persistence in challenging tasks, increasing the likelihood that they will be completed (Barling and Beattie 1983). Improved training and professional development aimed at creating PsyCap would increase both productivity and workers' self-confidence when facing and solving problems (Badran and Youssef-Morgan 2015, Earley 1994). According to the PsyCap model, struggling with stressful situations and attempts to address problems can increase well-being as much as a more 'positive' approach, strengthening workers' psychological resources as they progress through fixing what is wrong to building on what is right (Luthans 2008).

According to Redmond (2010), self-efficacy can be influenced by verbal persuasion pertaining to an individual’s performance or ability to perform. Redmond reports that general positive reinforcement from managers leads employees to make more effort, giving them more chance of success. In the diaries, workers indicated feeling very unhappy as their managers berated them on the production line, blamed them for errors and forced them to rework goods. Many examples were cited of workers being told the work they did was wrong or unacceptable. Workers also felt helpless, hopeless and undervalued, as little to no training was provided, so they did not know how to improve their situation. Although verbal persuasion is a weaker source of self-efficacy beliefs than performance outcomes, it is widely used because of its ease and ready availability (Redmond 2010).

To our knowledge, ours is the first study to have used diary methods in a factory setting. Our contribution is that we have identified a gap in the way in which worker well-being is audited. The current focus on ‘hygiene’ factors misses an important factor

– psychological capital – that is not only valued by the workers themselves, but which scholars suggest is important to developing efficient performance.

This is a relatively small-scale, preliminary study. We undertook to determine which factors Chinese workers find important to their well-being. We believe our main finding – that workers value positive relationships and personal development – can be further developed in two ways. First, we see opportunities for using the PsyCap framework to assess well-being in factories. Second, we propose action-learning programmes in factories to see what interventions can most effectively improve well-being and productivity.

## Conclusion

It is becoming increasingly important for Chinese businesses to refocus from technological development and financial capital onto human resources (Luthans et al. 2008). China's continued growth and competitive advantage hinges on worker training and an updated understanding of human resource management (Luthans et al. 2008). Competition has increased among workplaces to offer resources, including better pay, to retain the younger generation of workers, even as they feel more empowered to switch jobs (Zhu 2011). Wages have almost tripled since the early 1990s (Siu 2017). Furthermore, the ability to share workplace experiences via social media and mobile communication allows worker populations to warn each other about abuses (Siu 2017).

The mobility of the contemporary Chinese worker, coupled with a willingness to switch jobs interchangeably (Ngai 2010), poses challenges for the employer/employee contract and requires businesses to invest in workers to retain them: “Simply competing on the basis of low-cost labour is no longer sufficient in a China that is now in the mainstream of the global economy with increasing wages and competition for talent” (Luthans et al. 2008).

We believe that by increasing the focus on psychological well-being, Chinese factory managers can compete more effectively. Finding evidence for this assertion provides a good basis for future research. This research illustrates ways worker well-being in Chinese factories can be enhanced by positive PsyCap, especially self-efficacy, which can be improved by training and personal development, expression through diaries, and interaction with corporate communication.

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