



## Female Factory Worker's Desperate Life Leads to Suicide in Dongguan Factory

Tuesday, June 14, 2011

Nan Fang Daily  
Translated by China Labor Watch

Very few people are aware of how the exploitation of Chinese female factory workers and luxury handbags, like Gucci, are related. Almost no one would believe that a female Chinese worker, Shuiyin Peng, who once helped put together luxury leather handbags, killed herself because of the harsh working conditions she labored under everyday.

Shuiyin Peng was charged with coloring in and oil-polishing the leather material that would be used to make Gucci handbags. Like many of her coworkers, she was not aware that these Gucci handbags fetched a higher price than her annual salary at the factory.

On May 14, 2011, Shuiyin Peng jumped from the 5th floor of her dormitory at the Xinghao Handbag factory, located in Tangxia township, Dongguan, China. At the time of her death, she was found to be carrying four one yuan notes, an out of service copy version cell phone, and a key to her tiny 170 RMB per month apartment. The Xinghao factory manufactures handbags and other products for such luxury brands as Coach, Gucci, and Diesel.

No one was witness to Shuiyin Peng's death, although a worker in a nearby factory heard a large bang sound when her body hit the ground. The last image of Peng was captured on a surveillance camera 5 minutes before she committed suicide. It shows her wearing a purple shirt and grey cropped pants.

Many of the workers employed at Chinese factories manufacturing products for international brands are female. Most first-generation workers, like Shuiyin Peng, experience a decline in their standard of living and overall health, due to the high labor intensity and otherwise adverse environment of these factories.

### The abandoned

A number of days before her suicide, Shuiyin Peng had begun to isolate herself from the outside world. She stopped using her 200 RMB cell phone and would only talk with her family when she could use a public pay phone, in order to save money. Her relationship with other coworkers and friends at the factory began to falter as well and she stopped eating her meals in the factory cafeteria. Suffering from a bad case of halitosis, Peng believed that isolating herself was the only way to avoid her coworkers' ridicule. As a 44-year-old woman, she stood out from all the fresh, young faces on the factory floor.

The last impression Shuiyin Peng left many of her coworkers was of a lonely and despondent woman. As usual, Peng did not talk to anyone that morning. Many of her coworkers had avoided talking to her throughout the year. Her halitosis was so severe that many of her coworkers had avoided talking with her for most of the year, unable to bear the strong odors emanating from her mouth. Junzhou Liu, a fellow coworker, recalled that at 8:00am on the morning of Peng's death, she was sent along with the oil-polishing workshop staff to help in the cutting workshop. After being assigned a specific task, Peng secluded herself in the corner and began to work. Liu remarked that Peng looked very distracted that morning. While she usually, "worked as hard as a cow," she kept on staring out of the window, looking at nothing in particular.

On May 14th, at 12:08pm, Shuiyin Peng was found dead beside Xinghao factory's 2B dormitory. She lay on the ground with her face looking upwards. Her blood flowed into the sewer grate half a meter away.

According to the preliminary investigation conducted by local police, her death was ruled as suicide.

Peng's husband, daughter, and four siblings traveled to the factory to mourn her loss and collect her body. They all reminisced about how Peng would call home once a week and how she had contacted each one of them nightly by public phone between May 7th and 12th.

Her third youngest sister Yuling recalled a phone conversation she had with Peng, in which she sounded very anxious. Peng repeatedly told her that, "she could not get along with her colleagues," and that, "they laughed at me and suspect that I am infected with Hepatitis B."

Peng went on to talk about her age, expressing her belief that she was too old and afraid that the factory would fire her because of it. As an older woman, Peng felt she would stand no chance in the hiring markets of Dongguan when going up against all of the young

female workers in the city. According to statistics collected by the Chinese government, the total population of first-generation peasant workers is 60.46 million, or about 41.6% of the total peasant worker population. Bad health, limited opportunities, and little or no insurance are all commonly shared characteristics of the peasant worker population.

Peng most frequently would talk with her family about the trouble her severe halitosis gave her. She could only talk with her colleagues when covering her mouth, because of her heightened anxiety about the smell of her breath. Since March, 2010, she had been ingesting different herbs she bought in the local market at morning and night designed to solve her severe halitosis.

When these herbs proved to be ineffective in treating her halitosis, Peng was devastated. Combined with a rumor that she had contracted Hepatitis B, she soon lived in complete isolation from any friends or coworkers. Her colleagues avoided her for the most part. On one occasion, Peng got into a fight with a coworker at the local market, ruining all of the fresh produce she had just bought.

“Why can I not be a good human?” Peng cried and asked her sister Yuling on the phone on the evening of 12th May. “Why didn't I realize that Peng was asking for help?” Yuling regretted.

Peng's fourth youngest brother, Zezhi Peng, believed that the discrimination, indifference, and ignorance of Peng's coworkers were the biggest reasons for her suicide. The executive of the Xinghao Handbag factory refused interview requests and only released one statement to Peng's family, saying that Peng's suicide was not the factory's fault. Oil-polishing line team leader Bo Yang claimed that Peng would work all day without talking to anyone. He surmised that her suicide was caused by her own heightened sensitivity and low self-esteem.

Captured above by surveillance camera wearing a stripped purple T-shirt, Peng is shown leaving the factory after swiping her factory card at 12:03pm on May 14th 2011. This is the last image of Peng before her death.

### Destitute Life

Peng's daughter believed her mother's decision to, “go to work was a mistake she had to make.”

Shuiyin Peng was born in Huowan Village, Huanggang, Hubei Province. In 1991, she married Jinwen Zhan. In that same year, Peng acquired a debt of more than 9000 RMB and house constructed of wooden branches from her father. With little money to pay her father's debt, Peng started working for an embroidery factory in Houjie County, Dongguan. At the time, her monthly salary was 500 RMB. In 2003, she left the embroidery factory for a job at a handbag factory in Chashan, where she earned a salary of 1000 RMB per month. Her husband worked as a guard for a paper box factory nearby, where he earned 800 RMB per month. After four years, they had accumulated a combined total of more than 10,000 RMB, enough to pay off their debt and build a new house. Six years after that, Peng entered the Xinghao Handbag factory in Tangxia, earning 2000 RMB per month. In the same year, her daughter began to attend classes at a secondary technical school to learn 'high class' electronic commerce logistics.

Peng's happy days stopped in 2010 during the Spring Festival, when her husband was hit by a van and left severely disabled. He was now no longer able to work as a guard or perform any tasks that required heavy physical labor. Additionally, the family was now saddled with a new 20,000 RMB debt incurred from Jinwen Zhang's injury.

As the only one able to work, all financial pressure was placed on Peng to support her family and pay off their debt. Even though she faced much discrimination and agony at her factory, she knew how important earning a salary was. Refusing to allow her mother to provide for all of the family's financial burdens, Peng's daughter, Man Zhan, dropped out of school and began working in a factory in Dongguan as well. Although disappointed in her daughter's decision, Peng finally consented to her daughter's choice. They rented an apartment in Dongguan and began living together. Man Zhan can still recall her mother coming home every night at 11:00pm, taking her halitosis medicine, and sighing in desperation. Several times, Man Zhan was awoken in the middle of the night to the sound of her mother crying. She would ask her Peng what was bothering her, but her mother would never answer her. In silence, they would sit together in the dark, before falling asleep once again.

### The medicine as a resistance

For more than one year, Peng and her daughter would leave their 10m2 apartment at 8:00am in the morning and not return from work until late at night. They paid 170 RMB per month for the apartment. Because only a 1.2m long bed could fit in their apartment, both Peng and her daughter were forced to contort their bodies into uncomfortable shapes in order to sleep. Their one table was constructed from a plastic bucket covered by a floor tile. Two cheap suitcases served as their closet and cabinet. In such depravity, Peng was still able to maintain some dignity. She spent 700 RMB on a cell phone for her daughter, because she did not want others to look down on her for lacking one. Peng would mainly eat only vegetable dishes, but every weekend she would buy some meat to cook her daughter's favorite meal, fried meat with celery. By last year, they had combined to save 6000 RMB. Out of that total sum, 5000 RMB was taken to pay down their debt.

The more difficult life became for Peng, the more sensitive she became of her own image and self-respect. In February 2010, Peng's brother, Zhengli Peng, asked to stay with Peng and her daughter in their apartment for a couple days. Compared to his own apartment, Shuiyin Peng's place was quite spacious. Peng refused her brother's request immediately.

Peng once phoned her 5th sister, Dongmei, to lament about her decision to take the leftovers on people's plates from a local restaurant when no one was looking. She felt very ashamed of her actions and cried as she asked her sister, “how can I do such a thing?”

Peng gradually grew more despondent and emotionally sensitive. Her coworker, Junzhou Liu, remembers that Peng was very energetic

and willing to communicate with others when first starting to work at the factory. It was only after others began to laugh at her and ridicule her over her bad case of halitosis that she started isolating herself.

The medicine that Peng would consume to treat her halitosis smelled up her apartment so strongly that her daughter would often urge her to stop taking it. At these times, Peng would admit that she also could not bear the smell of the medicine, but could not abide others to look down on her because of her medical condition.

In February, 2011, Man Zhan began working for another factory and moved out of her mother's apartment. Peng now lived alone and gradually communicated less and less with the outside world. She continued to consume herbal medicine for her halitosis, believing it was key to solving her condition and allowing her to regain a solid sense of self-confidence.

### Female workers and luxuries

In her last two years at the Xinghao Handbag factory, Shuiyin Peng worked in the oil-polishing workshop, polishing down rough leather material to be later used in manufacturing Gucci handbags. Making top grade bags required the leather to be polished several times. Meticulously skill and patience was essential to perform all the polishing tasks, including putting oil on the leather, polishing the leather, and then repeating.

Peng was never aware of how expensive the bags she made were. A person who once worked for Xinghao declared that the Hong Kong based factory was manufacturing laptop bags for Apple and Sony, as well as handbags for Coach, Gucci, Diesel and other internationally renowned luxury handbag brands.

These handbags are priced in stores at several thousand dollars, yet Shuiyin Peng's monthly salary is only 2000 RMB. On such a salary, she can only afford the most meager living condition, dreaming of returning home as soon as possible.

The production of luxury goods for international export has been an openly practiced secret in China for many years. In 2010, The Economic Observer, in addition to other media outlets, made public that Prada, ColeHaan, Camper, and other high class brands had outsourced their product manufacturing to Chinese factories. However, because of the negative connotations products receive that are labeled, "Made in China", these brand companies would omit this information on their products. Some brands even refused to admit that they had outsourced any manufacturing to China.

Equally as important is the lack of understand people have of the intimate relationship between these luxury good and the exploitation of female Chinese workers. Few people would believe that Shuiyin Peng was driven to commit suicide, because of the harsh conditions under which she worked. After her death, the Xinghao handbag factory released a statement denying that the factory had any part to play in Peng's death, refusing to pay, "Foxconn's sky high compensation packages."

May 21, 2011 was Peng's traditional 'Seventh Day'. At 9:30am, Peng's family again came to the site of her suicide to mourn her loss. They carried a hip-high iron bed as a mourning alter, placed seven dishes on top of it, lit incense and candles, and burned 'ghost money'.

Throughout their mourning ceremony, seven factory guards kept watch over Peng's family, occasionally using walkie-talkies to report on the situation with other factory officials. Peng's family members filtered out slowly after the mourning ceremony came to a close. After they had left, the guards trashed the mourning alter, extinguishing the candles and incense, and throwing all of the 'ghost money' down the sewer.