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Abstract

This study used an international perspective to analyze how newspapers in the United States and China framed a specific global sweatshop issue: a continuous spate of suicides at the Foxconn Technology Group, a major supplier to Apple, Dell, and Hewlett-Packard. Through a quantitative and qualitative analysis of 92 newspaper articles appearing in US and Chinese newspapers, this study found Chinese newspapers framed the suicides mainly as the psychological problems of a young generation rather than a sweatshop issue. Newspapers in the US used a traditional human rights abuser frame to portray the suicides. Foxconn was the main social actor cited in most news coverage. Both the US and Chinese newspapers framed the case as a China-specific problem, ignoring global social justice and world economy aspects. This study contributes more broadly to framing research by developing an approach that is distinctly used for cross-cultural framing studies about a global issue.

Keywords

Cross-cultural comparison, Foxconn, framing, social justice, sweatshop

Introduction

In the mid-1990s, an anti-sweatshop movement began gaining coverage in the western mainstream media (Greenberg and Knight, 2004; Ross, 1997, 2008). Since then, consumers in North America and Europe have gradually linked the commodities of

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western transnational corporations (TNCs) to poor labor conditions in countries such as India and China. Under such conditions, workers primarily in third world nations assemble products and parts for global consumption while facing dismal pay, unfair treatment, and unsafe working environments – a phenomenon collectively referred to as the global sweatshop.

Worldwide labor unions and other activist groups have helped expose the global sweatshop issue but with little noticeable change. Much of the focus on the sweatshop issue has shifted from garment and toy industries to the global electronic industry, which has become, as Brown (2009) coined it, the ‘new Nike.’ Sweatshop labor practices, particularly those with physical components, continue to impact human rights issues as well as sustainable forms of social and economic development.

On a macro, global-based level, a broad array of social actors – i.e., TNCs, contract factories, activists, governments, and international organizations – all attempt to set the public agenda toward their ends. As a critical vehicle for construction and contest, news media are of utmost significance in this process. Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to critically examine the ways in which the news media in the United States and China respectively frame the global sweatshop issue, particularly in the case of the Foxconn suicides – a recent wave of worker suicides at a large electronics company based in China.

This study is important for at least two reasons. First, the findings contribute to the literature by analyzing the media discourse surrounding the Foxconn suicides and the directly related sweatshop issue – a crucial international topic that envelops human rights, global justice, and the world economy. The current discourse disseminating from the news media regarding the sweatshop issue is especially worth paying attention to because of the following two facts. In light of digital and technological advances, public relations campaigns stemming from newer TNCs that create and build electronic products (i.e., cell phones, laptops, etc.) are more polished than those campaigns from garment or toy TNCs (Brown, 2009). Second, a recent number of TNC worker suicides and several instances of labor unrest in China – the ‘world factory’ that has produced many sweatshops – as well as the country’s changing economic and social structure have placed even more scrutiny on the global sweatshop model (Richburg, 2010; Sung, 2007). These economic and social transformations provide new framing resources, as well as novel angles, for the news media to approach the historic issue of sweatshops.

Second, the research presented in this study is uniquely important because it explores the news media both in the US and China, the two most prominent countries at two ends of the global production and supply chain that generate and perhaps add to the continuation of the sweatshop problem. Specifically, the US TNCs control the initial and final stages of the production processes (i.e., product design and consumption) whereas Chinese factories play a major role in manufacturing the products. Thus, the current study can greatly enrich the understanding of the global sweatshop problem from an international perspective, which is limited in existing literature.¹

In addition, with a cross-cultural framing approach, this study develops a framing research method that is particularly used to compare multiple stakeholder nations’ media framing of a global issue from various levels of analysis. In doing so, this study integrates the component of comparative study with existing framing research, both theoretically and methodologically.

As a case study, this article probes the issue of recent suicides in China-based Foxconn Technology, a major supplier to Apple, Dell, and Hewlett-Packard. Two Foxconn campuses in China witnessed a total of 14 worker suicides between 16 July 2009 and 22 August 2010. These deaths drew global media attention, triggering a new round of heated debates about the sweatshop issue. Combining both quantitative and qualitative framing analysis, this study investigated the two countries' media frames regarding the highly publicized Foxconn suicides, paying particular attention to six overarching frames that emerged in major metropolitan newspapers in the US and China, and then exploring prominent social actors who might perpetuate these frames. Four major newspapers in the US and China (*The New York Times*, *China Daily*, *People's Daily* and *Southern Weekend*) were analyzed. The findings are explored here and their implications are discussed.

Background

Early on the morning of 16 July 2009, a young Chinese worker in the Guangdong province leapt to his death from the 12th floor of his apartment building. The man, 25-year-old Sun Danyong, had been implicated three days earlier in the disappearance of an iPhone prototype from a Foxconn Technology Group building where he worked. Thirteen more Foxconn workers committed suicide in various manners over the next 13 months.

Worldwide attention thus concentrated on Foxconn – a Taiwanese-owned international operation that assembles iPhones, iPods and iPads for Apple, and produces electronic components for Hewlett-Packard, Dell, Sony, Nokia, and Nintendo. Activists and scholars – particularly those from the US and China – have linked the suicides with the global sweatshop issue. From their point of view, the deceased represent a group of Chinese migrant workers who travel from rural areas to coastal cities to work in TNCs' contract factories for a better life. Nevertheless, most workers end up suffering minimal salaries and harsh working environments. Among multiple activist voices, Chinese labor activists protested at Foxconn's Hong Kong headquarters, and the United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) sent a letter to Steve Jobs, co-founder and chief executive officer of Apple, urging Apple to address the Foxconn suicides (USAS, 2010). In response, Foxconn representatives and Steve Jobs stated Foxconn is 'not a sweatshop' because 'Foxconn's suicide rate is well below the China average' (*ChinaNews*, 2010; Viticci, 2010). Further, Foxconn made a series of efforts to address the rash of suicides, offering employees multiple pay raises, psychological assistance, no-suicide contracts, worker rallies, and by placing safety nets around buildings where Foxconn employees live and work (Culpan, 2010; McEntegart, 2010). The company also reported it would move at least some of its Chinese operations inland to rural areas where labor could be more than two-thirds cheaper than what it already was (Lubman, 2010).

A brief exploration of the Foxconn suicides case presented by the mass media demonstrates a multifaceted interpretation of the suicides. In fact, news outlets all over the world continued to offer numerous news reports and discussions of the case from various perspectives at the time of this study. As a systematic academic research, this study

examined the frames and social actors involved in the news media coverage of the suicides and the connected global sweatshop issue in US and China newspapers.

Literature review

Framing theory

This study employed media framing theories to explore the news coverage of the current sweatshop issue through a novel and current phenomenon affecting at least two countries. Framing theory can be traced back to the seminal work of sociologist Erving Goffman (1974), who first described frames as ‘schemata(s) of interpretation’ that allow individuals ‘to locate, perceive, identify, and label issues, events, and topics’ (1974: 21). Since then, media scholars have applied the framing concept to mass media research, developing and employing a wealth of definitions and approaches. This study conceptualized framing as a cultural phenomenon, which represents an ‘organizing principle that is socially shared and persistent over time, that works symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world’ (Reese, 2001: 11). For example, Nisbet (2010) suggested there likely exist some common and recurring frames across public affairs that can be directly applicable to understanding a specific issue or major event, such as the issue of the global sweatshop. Frames that frequently appear across policy debates include social progress, economic development/consequences, morality/ethics, and public accountability (Nisbet, 2010).

Regarding methodological approaches to framing, two of the most cited studies are based on framing functions and framing packages. Entman (1993) defined framing according to its four functions: problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation. Some empirical studies have employed these four functions to scrutinize media content (Zhou and Moy, 2007). Gamson and Modigliani’s (1989) ‘media package’ approach – based on key words, common language, and framing devices – has also been widely applied (Tankard, 2001). Van Gorp (2010) combined these two theorizations and constructed a ‘frame package’ approach that uses both reasoning devices (functions) and framing devices. This study also adopted an approach that integrated Entman (1993) and Gamson and Modigliani (1989) theorizations, which are discussed in the Method section.

Sweatshop, framing, and social actors

In terms of coverage of global sweatshop practices in the American press, a prominent frame has centered on the consumer versus the producer. In their framing analysis of sweatshops in major US newspapers from 1995 to 2000, Greenberg and Knight (2004) found that news media tended to construct the sweatshop issue from the perspective of North American or European consumers. In their findings, newspapers were inclined to portray sweatshop issues with consumers’ awareness to use ‘sweat-free’ products rather than emphasizing the lives and conditions of the sweatshop workers. They further criticized the consumer versus producer frame as one that weakened the political aspect of the sweatshop problem. As they suggested, the alternative would be

a capital versus labor frame that implies the neoliberalism² ideology behind the global sweatshop chain.

Moreover, news media frames are the outcome of shared meanings negotiated by journalists and other different social actors (Gamson, 1992; Snow, 2008). In general, social actors are those people who are involved in certain issues and who usually define and redefine the frames according to their different positions (Snow, 2008). Specifically, social actors in the present study refer to people who are related to the sweatshop issue. Greenberg and Knight (2004) addressed this in their study about the framing of the sweatshop issue in the American press. They identified 'activists,' 'corporate,' 'universities,' 'international organizations,' 'government,' 'workers,' 'consumers,' and 'other.' They found that although corporate voices were represented prominently, activists were the most cited social actors in US news media coverage (Greenberg and Knight, 2004; Opel, 2003). Opel (2003) indicated the news media favor anti-sweatshop protests because protests were described as being narrower as well as safer to take part in than their 1960s predecessors. The roles of other social actors, including the US government, host governments, or international government agencies, as well as workers themselves remained limited in US news media coverage of the issue. Based on news articles that covered the specific Foxconn suicides case under analysis, the authors further sorted out 14 categories of social actors: (1) Chinese workers, (2) Chinese workers' relatives, (3) Foxconn and other Chinese companies, (4) Chinese government, (5) Chinese experts, (6) Chinese activists, (7) Chinese consumers, (8) Transnational corporations such as Apple, (9) the US government, (10) the US experts, (11) the US activists, (12) the US consumers, (13) international governing agencies such as World Trade Organization, and (14) others.

Notably, this study focused on the frames regarding the sweatshop issue, and the different voices of social actors in the media discourse, respectively. Therefore, social actors and frames were not necessarily related in the investigation of this study.

Among the limited available research, few examined the global issue of sweatshops from the perspectives of countries other than the US. Little is known about how news media in developing countries, where sweatshops are primarily located, frame the issue and who the influential social actors are. This study investigated media coverage of the sweatshop issue in the US and China, two countries that play significant, albeit different, roles in the worldwide sweatshop production chain.

Cross-cultural comparison and framing China

Considering the Foxconn suicides happened within the borders of China, the framing of the sweatshop issue can be seen more broadly as framing China. Previous comparative framing studies between the US and China covered issues or themes in the Chinese context such as HIV/AIDS, the Internet, and SARS (Luther and Zhou, 2005; Wu, 2006; Zhou, 2008). These studies provide insight into how the news media in these two countries framed the same topics about China from different angles. In fact, there are typically two different realities constructed about China and presented by the news media in China and those from western countries such as the US. Within the party (Communist Party of China)-state media system, Chinese mainstream media have long been criticized for

supporting a one-party government and using a pro-government frame (Wu, 2006; Zhao, 2000). Alternatively, the 'China frame' in major US news coverage is usually regarded as driven by anti-communism ideology, and is presented by, for example, a human rights abuser frame (Akhavan-Majid and Ramaprasad, 2000; Peng, 2004; Wu, 2006).

Few studies, however, have examined how the US and Chinese news media frame global issues that concern both countries' political or economic interests – a major goal of this study. Drawing on previous framing resources, this study identified current news frames about the sweatshop issue from a comparative perspective, as well as explored prominent social actors that appeared in the modern media discourses of the two countries. The following are the specific research questions this study examined:

- R1a: Which social actors are salient in the US press coverage of the Foxconn suicides case?
- R1b: Which social actors are salient in Chinese press coverage of the Foxconn suicides case?
- R2a: Which frames does the US press use in its coverage of the Foxconn suicides case?
- R2b: Which frames does the Chinese press use in its coverage of the Foxconn suicides case?
- R3a: How do the US and Chinese press differ in framing the Foxconn suicides case?
- R3b: How do the three Chinese newspapers differ in framing the Foxconn suicides case?

Method

Data collection

This study examined news stories and commentaries about the Foxconn suicides case and the attached framing of the sweatshop issue in one elite US newspaper, *The New York Times*, and three Chinese newspapers, *China Daily*, *People's Daily*, and *Southern Weekend* from 19 July 2009 – the day when the first suicide happened – to 19 September 2010 – one month after the last of the 14 suicides. *The New York Times* was chosen not only because of its leading agenda-setting role in the US mainstream media (Dearing and Rogers, 1996), but also because it is the only US newspaper that offered ample coverage of the Foxconn suicides case.³

Examining the Chinese newspapers, *People's Daily* represents the official voice of the Chinese government. Additionally, the newspaper sets the tone for other Chinese news media, signaling issues that matter most to the country (Huang and Chen, 2009; Peng, 2008). Unlike other mainstream newspapers in China, *Southern Weekend* is noted for its critical reporting on sensitive issues such as corruption and China's AIDS crisis (Zhang and Fleming, 2005). Thus, the analysis also included *Southern Weekend* assuming it should provide a more critical perspective of the Foxconn suicide case. *China Daily* was selected because it is a governmental official newspaper written in English, which is primarily read by English speakers in both China and various overseas markets. *China Daily* therefore provides insight into how China framed the Foxconn suicides case

targeting the outside world, a perspective especially worth exploring for a cross-cultural framing study.

Two key words, 'Foxconn' and 'suicide,' were used to search the online databases of the three Chinese newspapers. The search engine Lexis/Nexis was used to look for the news articles in *The New York Times*. Excluding news briefs and duplicate articles, a total of 92 articles about the Foxconn suicides case were collected – 23 news items from *The New York Times*, 45 from *China Daily*, 11 from *People's Daily*, and 13 from *Southern Weekend*. Since this study conducted a census of the data, no test of statistical significance is needed. All the differences as shown in the results are real.

Coding scheme

Social actors. To answer the research questions with respect to the salient social actors in the media coverage of the Foxconn case, 14 categories were provided for coding social actors cited in the four newspapers' articles. The categories were (1) Chinese workers, (2) Chinese workers' relatives, (3) Foxconn and other Chinese companies, (4) Chinese government, (5) Chinese experts, (6) Chinese activists, (7) Chinese consumers, (8) Transnational corporations such as Apple, (9) the US government, (10) the US experts, (11) the US activists, (12) the US consumers, (13) international governing agencies such as World Trade Organization, and (14) others. Additionally, coders judged whether each cited social actor stated a 'fact,' or expressed a 'point of view.'⁴ This classification is important because the preliminary reading of the materials suggested that 'point of view' demonstrated more framing power than 'fact' in this Foxconn suicides coverage. For example, many Foxconn workers were quoted in the news stories, but they were often presented to address the facts (i.e., background information, the name of the deceased, etc.) rather than articulate their personal views. Due to this difference, if the social actor was quoted as providing factual information, the social actor's information was coded as a 'fact.' By contrast, if the social actor communicated opinions and arguments, the provided information was coded as a 'point of view' or 'POV.' In this way, the distinction implies the weight of each social actor in the news article.

Main frames and sub-frames. Drawing from previous framing approaches, including framing functions (Entman, 1993), media packages (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989), and frame packages (Van Gorp, 2010), this study developed a frame matrix as a code-book with main frames as well as several sub-frames which were defined by their framing functions.⁵

As the first step, a deductive approach based on the literature review was employed to identify the existing frames in the media coverage of the topics including sweatshop, China, and general public affairs. Second, researchers read all news articles and inductively sorted out additional frames that applied to this specific case. Thus, six main frames were identified based on different contexts: (1) Non-sweatshop (individual context), (2) Human rights abuser (China context), (3) Economic consequence/development (China context), (4) Consumption vs. production (the US context), (5) Labor vs. capital (global context), and (6) Economic consequence/development (global context).

Within each of these six main frames, sub-frames were further identified and defined by the three framing functions: 'define problems,' 'diagnose cases,' and 'suggest remedies.' This study distinguished between main frames and lower level sub-frames because sub-frames with distinct functions help to explain the different aspects of a main frame. Therefore, while the main frame may provide a broad picture of the media's approach to coverage, the sub-frames may further illuminate different perspectives the audience may be exposed to.

For example, under the non-sweatshop frame, a 'define problem' sub-frame was 'The Foxconn case is not a sweatshop problem but an individual's psychological problem.' Also, the two sub-frames – 'psychological problems of Chinese young generation resulted in the suicides' and 'Foxconn's management problem resulted in the suicides' – served to diagnose causes of the issue. Further, 'Foxconn should take measures to deal with workers' mental issues' suggested remedies (see Appendix for more sub-frames under the six main frames).

Since sub-frames are more easily identified, they served as indicators for the six main frames in the process of coding. Whenever a coder identified a sub-frame – e.g., 'Foxconn should take measures to deal with workers' mental issues,' the sub-frame became a signal to remind the coder that the article used a main frame that possessed the particular sub-frame – e.g., the non-sweatshop frame. Conversely, if a coder identified a main frame, it meant that he/she meanwhile necessarily identified at least one sub-frame within that main frame in a certain article.

For each article, coders were first required to decide on a maximum of two most dominant main frames out of the six as listed above. Notably, one article might include two contradictory frames by, for example, citing social actors who held different opinions. Under the identified main frame(s), coders were then required to judge whether each sub-frame was mentioned in the article or not using the binary code assigned for each sub-frame. That is to say, if a coder decides one main frame in one article, he/she may identify one sub-frame to as many as all the sub-frames under that main frame in the article.

Coders and inter-coder reliability. The newspaper articles were coded by the four authors of this article, who are graduate students familiar with framing theories and approaches. All authors/coders were involved in the process of developing the codebook for this framing analysis. It is noteworthy that the authors/coders represent diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds (i.e., two of them are from stakeholder countries in the Foxconn case). Such diversity among authors/coders may have helped to exclude potentially bias – national or cultural – and may have provided a more objective view in coding the international issue of the Foxconn suicides.

Two authors/coders who are fluently versed in Chinese coded the Chinese-language newspapers (*People's Daily* and *Southern Weekend*). The other two coded *The New York Times*. All authors/coders coded the English-language *China Daily*. Cohen's kappa (Cohen, 1960) was used to estimate inter-coder reliability, which is a conservative measure that does not give credit for chance agreements. A kappa value of .80 represents high inter-coder reliability (Landis and Koch, 1977). Using a random sample of 20% of all coded articles, the Cohen's kappa scores for all variables in both the English and Chinese samples were at least .80.

Table 1. Top cited social actors on Foxconn suicides case coverage in *The New York Times* and the three Chinese newspapers (in percent).

Social actors	New York Times (N = 23)		Chinese newspapers (N = 69)	
	Point of view	Fact	Point of view	Fact
Foxconn/other Chinese companies	60.9% (1 ^a)	65.1% (1)	37.7% (1)	29.0% (1)
Chinese experts	43.4% (2)	8.7%	34.8% (2)	4.3%
Chinese workers	30.3%	26.0% (2)	27.4% (3)	8.6% (3)
Chinese government	17.4%	21.7% (3)	26.1%	15.9% (2)
TNCs	34.8% (3)	4.3%	2.9%	0.0%

^a The rank of the most often cited social actors.

Findings

Social actors in the US and Chinese press coverage

Among the 23 articles about Foxconn suicides in *The New York Times*, 21 were news reports and the other two were commentaries. As illustrated in Table 1, the most quoted social actors were Foxconn and other Chinese companies, whether stating a fact (65.1%), or proposing a point of view (60.9%). Opinions from Chinese experts (43.4%) and TNCs (34.8%) also dominated the *Times* stories as the second and third most cited social actors. Varying from previous US news coverage of sweatshop problems where workers' voices were absent, *Times* reporters quoted Chinese workers quite often when they covered the Foxconn case. In particular, workers were cited as second most among social actors to provide factual information (26.0%).

There were a total of 69 stories covering the Foxconn suicides in the three Chinese newspapers, with 44 news reports and 24 commentaries.⁶ Notably, the study's main purpose was to compare how the US and Chinese news media framed the sweatshop issue. Thus, the researchers aggregated the three different Chinese publications to represent the Chinese press in the comparative analysis. So as not to fully alienate the possibilities in differences of coverage presented by each of the three Chinese newspapers, the researchers coded the source of the article and compared the framing differences within the three.

Similar to the US news coverage, Foxconn and other Chinese companies figured most prominently in the Chinese media discourse both in terms of conveying opinions (37.7%) and facts (29.0%). Also similar to the *Times* coverage, Chinese experts represented one of the most active voices in articulating points of views on the Foxconn suicides in the Chinese newspapers (34.8%). Additionally, Chinese reporters also regarded Chinese workers as important social actors for personal opinions (27.4%). In the Chinese newspapers, Chinese government officials were treated as the second most influential social actors in providing factual information (15.9%).

In general, most of the social actors in all four newspapers were people in China. The only salient non-Chinese voices were from corporate representatives of TNCs such as Apple spokespersons, who only appeared in the *Times*' coverage. Other non-Chinese

Table 2. Foxconn suicides case frames in the US and Chinese press (in percent).

Frame	Newspapers				
	<i>New York Times</i> (N = 23)	Chinese newspapers (N = 69)	<i>China Daily</i> (N = 45)	<i>People's Daily</i> (N = 11)	<i>Southern Weekly</i> (N = 13)
Non-sweatshop (individual context)	21.7% (3 ^a)	40.6% (1)	40.0% (2)	63.6% (1)	23.1%
Human rights abuser (China context)	78.3% (1)	39.1% (2)	51.1% (1)	0.0%	30.8% (3)
Economic consequences (China context)	47.8% (2)	34.8% (3)	31.1% (3)	45.5% (2)	38.5% (1)
Consumption vs. production (the US context)	13.0%	1.4%	2.2%	0.0%	0.0%
Labor vs. capital (global context)	8.7%	11.6%	6.7%	0.0%	38.5% (1)
Economic consequences (global context)	0.0%	10.1%	11.1%	18.2% (3)	0.0%

^a The rank of the most often used news frame.

Note: Each article has one or two frames, so in any given row, the column may exceed a total of 100%.

social actors such as American activists and experts were very limited in both countries' media coverage.

Frames in the Chinese and US coverage

General results. The three most salient main frames in the *Times*' coverage of the Foxconn suicides case, as illustrated in Table 2, were 'human rights abuser' (78.3%), 'economic consequence in the context of China' (47.8%), and 'non-sweatshop' (21.7%). The most prominent frame in previous US media coverage of sweatshops, 'consumption vs. production' (Greenberg and Knight, 2004), was mentioned in just five out of 23 *Times* articles (13.0%). In fact, the majority of the *Times*' stories framed the Foxconn suicides case as a China-specific problem. The two global-scale frames, 'labor vs. capital' and 'economic consequences in the global context,' were almost indiscernible.

In terms of the frames in the three Chinese newspapers, 'non-sweatshop' (40.6%) and 'human rights abuser' (39.1%) were the most prevalent. Also, more than one-third of the Chinese newspapers (34.8%) discussed the issue as China's economic problem. Contrasting the coverage in the *Times*, there were some stories in the Chinese newspaper that examined the Foxconn suicides case from an international perspective. Eight articles (11.6%) adopted a 'labor vs. capital' frame and seven news items (10.1%) adopted a global economic consequence frame.

The following sections thoroughly discuss each main frame and its respective salient sub-frames, and explore how the US and Chinese newspapers differed in using these main frames and sub-frames.⁷

Non-sweatshop frame. The non-sweatshop frame was considerably more prominent in Chinese newspapers (40.6%) than in *The New York Times* (21.7%). Among the three Chinese newspapers, *People's Daily* used this frame most heavily (63.6%). Under such main frame, these articles mostly used the sub-frame that defined the suicides as the result of individual workers' psychological problems. Correspondingly, some news reporters employed the 'diagnose causes' sub-frame that attributed the cause of suicides to psychological vulnerability among the Chinese younger generation. In China, newer generations, labeled as 'Post 80s' or 'China's "Generation Y"',⁸ refer to a young generation whose members were born after 1980 when China's one-child policy was just applied. Growing up in modern China as the only child in the family, 'Post 80s' members have been usually characterized as spoiled kids who cannot deal with pressures (Stanat, 2006). In these news articles, the young migrant workers working and/or living on Foxconn campuses also suffered the same criticism. A *People's Daily* article titled 'Let them love their lives more' offered a typical example:

Facing a harsh environment where they cannot find happiness, young people who do not know forbearance and persistence became vulnerable. A broken relationship, a minor illness... perhaps were already enough to act as fuses pushing them to the window and jump. (A Z, 2010, original in Chinese)

Under this non-sweatshop frame, Foxconn was blamed for its ignorance of staffers' mental health, another 'diagnose causes' sub-frame. Accordingly, 12 Chinese newspaper stories used the 'suggest remedies' sub-frame and suggested that the company should improve its management in the aspect of providing psychological counseling services. Except for this managerial oversight, Foxconn was generally depicted as a company that provided legal welfare to its workers under the non-sweatshop frame.

Articles from *The New York Times* were not as explicit as those from Chinese newspapers in defining the problem as an individual case or the Chinese younger generation's psychological problems. However, similar discourses emerged in some *Times* articles. For example, the *Times* referred to the World Health Organization's 1999 data in six articles (26%), indicating that the suicide rate at Foxconn during the observed period was below the national rate. This citation echoed Steve Job's response to the Foxconn suicides, in which he stated that Foxconn is not a sweatshop (Viticci, 2010).

Human rights abuser frame. Almost 80% of the *Times* articles framed the Foxconn suicides case from a human rights abuse perspective. This percentage is almost twice that of the Chinese newspaper articles (39.1%). Under this main frame, more than two-thirds of *Times* articles (73.9%) used the 'define programs' sub-frame which defined the Foxconn suicides case as a China-specific sweatshop issue, whereas only 13.0% of the Chinese newspaper articles used the same sub-frame. In more than one-third of the *Times* articles (34.8%), Foxconn and other Chinese companies were characterized as human rights abusers who tended to exploit their workers in order to make profits, a 'diagnose causes' sub-frame. For example, in a *Times* article titled 'A night at the electronics factory,' the reporter vividly described the life of Mr Yuan, an ordinary Foxconn worker, as a 'cog in China's labor-intensive factory,' continuing:

Working at a company known for its precision manufacturing and military-style regimentation is not easy . . . He can chat with other line workers, but on the line there are no wasted movements; they have been analyzed and tested with a stopwatch, he said. (Barboza, 2010)

In contrast, only eight Chinese newspaper articles (8.7%) used this cause-diagnosis sub-frame.

The *Times* also blamed the collective Chinese society as a human rights abuser responsible for the sweatshop phenomenon, another ‘diagnose cause’ sub-frame under the ‘human rights abuser’ frame. The title of one *Times* editorial explicitly illustrated this sub-frame, ‘China, the sweatshop.’ The first two paragraphs of this article described the Chinese government’s response to the Foxconn suicides as well as the *Times*’ stance:

. . . Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, aka ‘Grandpa Wen’, . . . told laborers at a Beijing subway station that the government and society ‘should treat migrant workers as they would their own children.’ . . . China’s exploited workers don’t need an extra parent . . . They need China to stop being sweatshop to the world. (Editorial, 2010)

Such articles regarded the sweatshop issue as a special, ‘made-in-China’ product, expressing the view that China is responsible for the global problem.

This human rights abuser frame was also salient in 27 Chinese newspaper articles even though the proportion was less than that in *Times* stories. In *China Daily* and *Southern Weekend*, there were some articles that critically examined the working conditions and human rights issues in the TNCs contract factories in China. For instance, a few articles quoted an open statement issued by nine Chinese scholars who called on Foxconn and the government to give justice to the migrant workers. Nevertheless, among the 27 articles, none of them were from *People’s Daily*, the newspaper representing the Chinese government’s stance on the issue.

Economic consequence frame. An economic development/consequence frame was prominent in both *The New York Times* (47.8%) and the three Chinese newspapers (44.9%). Within these articles, most framed the issue within China’s context rather than a global one. Seven Chinese newspaper articles (10.1% out of 44.9%) depicted the issue in a global economic framework, while none of the *Times* stories did so.

Using China’s economic consequence as a frame, quite a few *Times* and Chinese newspaper articles covered the Foxconn suicides case as an implication of China’s soaring labor cost. Some newspaper stories discussed the structural weakness of China’s economic model – a ‘diagnose causes’ sub-frame – and provided suggestions for the country to encourage innovation-oriented industries to replace its labor-intensive business – a ‘suggest remedies’ sub-frame. On the other hand, a number of Chinese newspaper articles left the country’s development structure unquestioned. They echoed Foxconn’s narratives, using another ‘suggest remedies’ sub-frame and proposing that labor costs can be reduced simply by moving campuses to inland China or other third world countries where labor cost is cheaper. Six *China Daily* articles mirrored this discourse, such as:

Inland cities are welcoming such a transition to create new economic growth engines. Both Henan and Sichuan are major sources of the country's huge army of migrant workers. (Li et al., 2010)

Under this sub-frame, the articles were concerned with corporations' benefits or China's economic model rather than the working conditions and lives of individual workers.

Other frames. Both *The New York Times* and the three Chinese newspapers primarily contextualized the Foxconn suicides case as a China problem. The US-specific frame, consumption vs. production, which dominated previous US media coverage of sweatshops, was much less mentioned in the *Times*' coverage of Foxconn suicides (13.0%).

Though the sweatshop is a phenomenon regarding global social justice and world economy, very few articles discussed the Foxconn suicides case from an international perspective. Among the four newspapers, only *Southern Weekend* more than moderately used the frame 'labor vs. capital' in its coverage of the case (38.5%). In particular, one of the newspaper stories featured its intern reporter's undercover investigation into one Foxconn campus where the intern worked for 28 days. Drawing on personal experience, the intern scrutinized the sweatshop problem from a labor vs. capital angle:

Times magazine credited the group of Chinese workers as person of the year 2009. This magazine said that Chinese workers 'are leading the world to economic recovery' with their 'struggles.' However, the so-called 'struggle' means the alienation of the labor and the erosion by capital.... When computer, cell phone, and automobiles, every single commodity becomes the capitalized product, sweat, youth and even life [of these workers] is thus running out also because of capital. (Liu, 2010, original in Chinese)

Nevertheless, these articles discussed 'capital vs. labor' in a broad way with few mentions of any specific TNCs' responsibility. In other words, in the 92 news articles about the Foxconn suicides case, TNCs for which Foxconn workers assemble components or products were able to keep a distance from the issue.

Conclusion and discussion

This study identified four groups – Foxconn and Chinese companies, Chinese experts, Chinese workers, and Chinese governments – as the four most cited social actors in both *The New York Times* and the three Chinese newspapers' coverage of the Foxconn suicides case. Nevertheless, the four groups were represented differently in different newspapers. Foxconn and Chinese companies dominated the two countries' press for both their opinions and statements of fact. While Chinese experts were quoted mostly for their points of views in defining the problem, Chinese government officials were presented primarily to provide factual information. Also, *Times* reporters regarded Chinese workers as background information providers whereas Chinese news reporters also

highlighted some workers' personal thoughts. In addition, TNCs' points of views were also salient in some *Times* articles, but almost unseen in the Chinese newspapers.

In terms of the news frames, the Chinese press heavily framed the Foxconn suicides as a manifestation of young workers' psychological problems, which had little to do with the sweatshop phenomenon. Following the main US frame in framing China (Akhavan-Majid and Ramaprasad, 2000; Peng, 2004; Zhou, 2008), the *Times* preferred a human rights abuser frame, which positioned the Foxconn suicides as a specific China's human rights issue. There were some articles in both countries that framed the issue from an economic development perspective, yet most of them were constructed in the context of China. The global justice and world economy aspects of this global sweatshop issue were limited in the two countries' media coverage of the Foxconn suicides.

Notably, Foxconn and other Chinese companies represented the most prevailing voices in both countries' news discourse. This finding is consistent with the trend that corporate public relations campaigns are more advanced today than 15 years ago (Brown, 2009). In fact, the non-sweatshop frame that recurrently emerged in Chinese news media exactly stemmed from Foxconn's intended discourse. According to the company's press releases, Foxconn has made great efforts in avoiding the series of suicides being correlated to the sweatshop issue and thus has conducted a series of activities dealing with mental health of its young workers (Foxconn, 2010). Additionally, key Foxconn representatives were repeatedly quoted to perpetuate the non-sweatshop frame. Under this frame, workers were portrayed as a psychologically vulnerable generation. In other words, the victims of the sweatshop system were framed to be responsible for their suicides. Their working conditions and the sweatshop issue were not blamed.

Another significant finding was the near-absence of both Chinese and American activists' narratives in the media coverage of the Foxconn suicides. Compared with previous US news coverage of sweatshop problems in which activists represented the most outstanding voices (Greenberg and Knight, 2004; Opel, 2003), activists including Chinese labor activists who protested at Foxconn's headquarters and the United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) were all silent in the Foxconn suicides coverage.

It is true that Chinese experts and Chinese workers were frequently quoted and the two groups provided rich critical rhetorical resources to examine the sweatshop problem. However, many of their quotes were used to support corporate-facilitated frames. In all four newspapers, Chinese psychologists were often cited to discuss the workers' mental health. Likewise, many of Chinese workers were presented merely to provide background information to the suicides. Some of them articulated points of views that were along the same line of Foxconn representatives. For example, in terms of Foxconn's decision to move inland, workers were quoted saying that they were 'looking forward to the proposed move to Tianjin next spring' (Li et al., 2010). In this regard, the news media coverage of the sweatshop problem seems to be more heavily impacted by corporate-facilitated discourses rather than those from critical sides.

The *Times* placed much more emphasis on the human rights abuse frame than its Chinese counterparts. Additionally, the majority of *Times* articles regarded the

Foxconn suicides case as a China-specific problem whether from the perspective of human rights or from the economic angle. This finding confirms those in previous framing studies: the US media framing about China was inevitably influenced by the dominant anti-communism ideology (Peng, 2004; Wu, 2006; Zhou, 2008). In these *Times* articles, the global neoliberalism rationale behind the global sweatshop phenomenon was neglected and the TNCs' responsibility was invisible. Instead, China became the only culprit in the global issue.

Southern Weekend was the only newspaper among the four analyzed in this study that discussed the Foxconn suicides extensively using a 'labor vs. capital' frame. The finding not only suggested the difference within Chinese newspapers under China's party-state media system, but also indicated that the sweatshop issue was mainly treated as the case of some individual workers or a China-specific problem in the majority of the two countries' press coverage. In other words, even the spate of dramatic suicides failed to trigger widespread criticism of the structural weakness of the global sweatshop practice.

This study not only provides significant cross-cultural insight into the modern media discourse on the global sweatshop problems, but also contributes to framing research theoretically and methodologically. A framing approach integrating the examination of social actors in stakeholder countries, context of the discussion, main frames as well as sub-frames defined by framing functions is especially conducive to map out different countries' framing discourses on a global issue. In addition, the combination of qualitative and quantitative framing analysis not only provides strong numerical evidence, but also supplies the contextual background in the discussion.

Appendix: Frames and sub-frames of the Foxconn suicides coverage in the US and the three Chinese newspapers (excerpt)

Frame	Sub-frame	Function	Newspapers	
			New York Times (N = 23)	Chinese newspapers (N = 69)
Non-sweatshop (individual context)	Foxconn suicides case is not a sweatshop problem but individual workers' problems.	Define problems	21.7%	27.5%
	Psychological problems of Chinese younger generation resulted in the Foxconn suicides case.	Diagnose causes	17.4%	27.6%
	Foxconn's management problems resulted in the suicides.	Diagnose causes	8.7%	14.5%
	Foxconn should take measures to deal with workers' mental issues.	Suggest remedies	0	17.4%
	Government and society should take measures to address young workers' mental health.	Suggest remedies	0	13.0%
	Though it is not a sweatshop problem, Foxconn should improve its worker welfare.	Suggest remedies	4.3%	15.9%
Human right abuser (China context)	Foxconn suicides represent a China-specific sweatshop problem.	Define problems	73.9%	13.0%
	Chinese society should be responsible for the Foxconn suicides case.	Diagnose causes	17.4%	11.6%
	Chinese companies tended to abuse it workers, which resulted in the Foxconn suicides.	Diagnose causes	34.8%	8.7%
Economic consequences (China context)	Labor unions should be organized to fight for workers' human rights.	Suggest remedies	4.3%	11.6%

(continued)

Appendix. (continued)

Frame	Sub-frame	Function	Newspapers	
			New York Times (N = 23)	Chinese newspapers (N = 69)
	Chinese companies should improve their workers' welfare to stop the sweatshop practices	Suggest remedies	17.4%	14.5%
	Government and society should take measures to stop the sweatshop problem.	Suggest remedies	0	15.9%
	This is mainly a Chinese economic problem.	Define problems	21.7%	21.7%
	China's problematic economic structure is not sustainable.	Diagnose causes	26.1%	11.6%
	China should transform its economic model.	Suggest remedies	8.7%	13.0%
	Chinese companies can move to inland provinces where labor cost is much cheaper.	Suggest remedies	4.3%	11.6%
Consumption vs. production (the US context)	Foxconn suicides represent a problem of consumers' accountability in the US context.	Define problems	13.0%	1.4%
Labor vs. capital (global context)	Foxconn suicides represent a global social justice problem.	Define problems	8.7%	2.9%
	Discuss the structural weakness of the global sweatshop problem in the perspective of labor vs. capital.	Diagnose causes	8.7%	11.6%
Economic consequences (global context)	This is mainly a global economic problem.	Define problem	0	7.2%

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Notes

1. According to the literature review for this study, only two academic studies specifically examined the media coverage of the sweatshop problem. The two studies were both conducted in the US context.

2. Neoliberalism refers to global market liberalism (or global capitalism) and free-trade policies.
3. Based on the search of Foxconn coverage using the Lexis/Nexis database, other major US newspapers such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times* were found to have barely covered the issue.
4. When Greenberg and Knight (2004) analyzed the news sources in the media coverage of sweatshops, they used 'quotes' and 'point of view' as two coding categories reasoning that 'quotes' played a more important role in framing. However, this classification is not appropriate to measure the weight of news sources, or social actors, in this study because 'quote' can both be used to state a fact or convey opinions.
5. An excerpt of the frame matrix used in this study can be found in the Appendix.
6. There is one article coded as 'other.'
7. The difference of the use of sub-frames between *The New York Times* and the three Chinese newspapers can be found in Appendix.
8. In English, the group of individuals born between 1980 and 1989 is also called 'China's Generation Y,' the term coined by Michael Stanat in his book *China's Generation Y*.

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