

# Safety First in China?

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With a weary sigh, Fred Turner sank into an armchair at the end of a long day's work and settled down to read a dog-eared copy of the China Daily. The newspaper was several days old, having been delivered to the steel mill in a remote part of Liaoning, between Shenyang and Fushun, where Fred worked after a tiring journey on crowded and bumpy roads. As usual, Fred turned first to the sports section to check on the progress of his football team back home in Chicago. As he turned the pages, a special pull-out section caught his eye. The banner headline proclaimed "*Chinese - be proud of yourselves. We have nothing to learn from the West*", and below it was a photograph of a mill similar, to the one where Fred was employed, captioned "*Built by locals, for locals - but at what terrible cost?*" His interest aroused, Fred began to read the editorial that accompanied the photograph.

*"The picture shown below recently appeared in an American journal which discussed the issue of safety on building and working sites in China. To our mind, the article was both patronising and pompous, and represented the all too common colonial attitude still prevailing among many Westerners toward emerging countries in Asia. The article claimed to be based on a letter sent in by an expatriate manager, an American, who had recently been involved in the construction of a steel mill in Liaoning. Typically taking a high moral tone, the expat dwelt at length on the lack of safety precautions evident on the site where he worked, and lamented the high incidence of death among local workers that had occurred during the two year construction period.*

*In emotive words, the expat described barefoot workers, clad only in torn trousers and T-shirts, working in deep muddy trenches pulling cables and heavy machinery, operating welding equipment or working on unstable scaffolding high above the ground. None of them, the author sanctimoniously pointed out, wore safety shoes, helmets or masks. In such circumstances, he claimed, the accident and death rates were unacceptably high - such a cost in human life would not be tolerated in Detroit or Birmingham, why should it be so in Harbin or Wuhan? The article concluded that China must act quickly to raise the safety standards on building sites throughout the country. Those responsible for building the new high rise towers, shopping plaza and factories must bring in consultants and safety experts from the US or Europe, and make every effort to approach the western ideal of safety.*

*Yet again, we are sorry to say, we find an example of a foreigner who has come to our country, looked at what we are doing and judged us to be lacking. Today, the issue is safety, human rights or environmental damage; tomorrow animal rights? In every case, the presumption of these westerners is quite astounding. Just imagine what would be the response if one of us were to go to New York or Zurich, and take a photo of a victim of a drugs' overdose in a shop doorway, or of a wounded and dying victim blasted to pieces by a shotgun in a liquor store robbery in Miami. And what if we then published those pictures in a newspaper, with a headline questioning the values of a society that allowed such things to happen, and advised Americans or Europeans to call in China experts to help to improve their way of living? Such actions would rightly be judged as interference and sharply rebuffed. So why do westerners constantly seek to preach to us about what happens in our country, and insist on the superiority of their way of doing*

*things, of their values? We could take any book of the history of the industrial revolution in the west, and point to far worse examples of unsafe working conditions; children being forced to climb chimneys or crawling under moving machinery to change bobbins in the cotton mills of Lancashire, or miners working in perilous conditions underground in any mine from Pittsburgh to Siberia. It took the west a long time to reach their present safety standards, in fact it took decades, during which time no outsider condemned them publicly for "wicked practices". Let the west have the grace to accord us the same freedom, to develop in our own way and at our own pace..."*

The article continued to develop its themes further, but Fred did not read on. The editorial had set him thinking about his own experiences during his two years at the mill. He had been in charge of the power plant, and could still vividly recall his first sight of Peng, one of his best foremen, swaying above him, his bare toes curled over the edge of a piece of scaffolding 35 metres above the ground. Peng had been hammering in rivets, using a home made hammer and hardly able to see where the blows were going. Around his waist had been a safety harness, but it had been unhooked.

Fred remembered when he first came to work in Liaoning, and how shocked he had been at the working practices he observed. One day, after finding a welder working without goggles, the cable of the equipment trailing behind through pools of water, he had protested about the safety standards to Zhou, the company's human resources manager. Zhou had explained that the company itself was deeply concerned with safety issues and had a full manual in the personnel office covering all safety rules and regulations. Policies and procedures had been fully defined, and every supervisor had been told where to find them. Only, said Zhou, in the pressure of finishing the mill on target these rules could not always be adhered to and so "there is a tolerance".

In any case, Zhou had continued, most of the deaths and most serious accidents occurred amongst the gangs - which included both men and women - of contract workers for whom the company was not responsible. At meetings, said Zhou, he himself had frequently remonstrated with the contractor supervisors about the lack of safety clothing, for it had been agreed that the contractors would set up a safety department and provide the proper equipment for its contract workers. The contractors always promised to obey the rules but once back at work, nothing changed. When challenged again, the contractors would claim that they had financial problems that they could not provide shoes for everyone, indeed could not afford to do so because they had not been paid on time by the company (and if a safety inspection would take place, the inspector would nicely be induced to write a positive report)

Concerned that his teams, at least, should be properly equipped, Fred had personally handed out safety shoes, hard hats, besides goggles to the welders. He had delivered a long lecture on the subject of safety, and was determined that there should be no serious accidents among his teams. However, within a few days he had been dismayed to note that several men were not wearing their hats and shoes. On enquiry, he had discovered that either the men had sold the hats, or given them to their children to play with, and that none of the shoes fitted the slender feet of the local workers. "Shoes are more dangerous, boss", Peng had explained to him. "They are heavy and we are not used to wearing them, so we are afraid we will fall". The goggles had also been rejected. His welders said that they made their heads ache.

Within a short time, Fred too had been swept up in the mad pressure to get the mill up and running by the target date, and his preoccupation with safety had begun to seem less urgent. With a chuckle, he recalled how once he himself had hung upside down from some scaffolding when trying to carry out a difficult emergency repair. Back home, he would never have dreamt of doing such a thing, whereas here it seemed the natural thing to do. As his friend Dan, in charge of maintenance, had observed, "Safety is a way of life. You can't expect everyone to think of safety if he has never been wakened to it. It's a long term process of education and training". Fred also recalled the comment of a newly arrived expat, who had had the same reaction as himself to such wilful disregard for elementary safety precautions, "It's amazing. Every second guy is doing something wrong. But considering the risks, they don't often hurt themselves. Under the circumstances, I think they are doing pretty well". Another Scandinavian expatriate worker, however, had not been so generous.

As Fred recalled, the man had argued that such disregard symbolised the fact that human life was held cheap out in the East, and that a dead or crippled worker was not worth worrying about. After all, with a population of 1.3 billion, what was the significance of the lives of a few local workers who lived in poor conditions with corrugated iron roofs, and whose living standard would only slowly rise beyond the level of poverty? Fred had felt compelled to challenge the Scandinavian about the implications of this view. Was he saying that the life of a Wall Street banker was worth more than that of a Chinese construction worker? In which case, where did a housewife or an automobile worker come in the scale of things? Just how did one put a value on a human life?

Fred remembered this conversation and others in the same vein as he looked again at the picture in the newspaper. It was such arguments that had troubled him throughout his time in China; now drawing to an end, and which had prompted his letter to the American journal. He had not realised what a storm he would cause. Both sides seemed equally convinced that their view was right. What, he wondered, would other readers think?