

Supply-Chains, Workers' Chains
and the New World of Retail Supremacy

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A globalized world of commerce and labor has existed for centuries. The Vanderbilts and the Victorians knew all about the China trade. But today's globalization differs radically from that of even a few decades past because of the contemporary role played by the corporate king-makers of our day, the big box retail chains that now occupy the strategic heights once so well garrisoned by the great manufacturing firms of the Fordist era. At the crux of the global supply chains stand the Wal-Marts, the Home Depots, and the Carrefours of our time. They make the markets, set the prices, and determine the world-wide distribution of labor for that gigantic stream of commodities that now flows across their counters. The deindustrialization of Detroit, Pittsburgh, and Cleveland entailed not just the destruction of a particular set of industries and communities, but the shift of power within the structures of world capitalism from manufacturing to a retail sector that today commands the supply chains which girdle the earth and directs the labor power of a working class whose condition replicates much that we once thought characteristic of only the most desperate, early stages of capitalist growth.

All this is graphically apparent upon a visit to the two most dynamic nodes of transnational capitalism today. It is easy to get to Bentonville, Arkansas, where Wal-Mart has its world headquarters in an unimpressive, low slung building hard by the company's original warehouse. There are lots of direct flights from Denver, Chicago, La Guardia, and Los Angeles to this once remote Arkansas town. It is still not very big. Between Fayetteville and the Missouri line there are hardly more than 300,000 people. But it is now the fastest growing metropolitan region in the country. The parking lots are full, the streets crowded, and new construction everywhere. Most important, Bentonville is now home to at least 500 branch offices of the largest Wal-Mart "vendors" who have planted their corporate flag in Northwest Arkansas in the hopes that they can maintain or increase their sales to the world's largest buyer of consumer products. Proctor & Gamble, which in 1987 may well have been the first company to put an office in Bentonville, now has a staff of nearly 200 there; likewise Sanyo, Levi Strauss, Nestle, Johnson and Johnson, Eastman Kodak, Mattel, and Kraft Foods maintain large offices in what the locals sometimes call "Vendorville." Walt Disney's large retail business has its headquarters, not in Los Angeles, but in nearby Rogers, Arkansas. These Wal-Mart suppliers are a who's who of American and international business, staffed by ambitious young executives who have come to see a posting to once-remote Bentonville as the crucial step that can make or break a corporate career.¹ If they can meet Wal-Mart's exacting price and performance standards, their products will be sucked into the stream of commodities

that flow through the world's largest and most efficient supply chain. For any manufacturer, it is the brass ring of American salesmanship, which explains why all those sophisticates from New York, Hong Kong, and Los Angeles are eating so many bad meals in Arkansas.

If Bentonville represents one nerve center of capitalism's global supply network, Guangdong Province is the other. Located in coastal South China it constitutes the raw entrepreneurial engine that links a vast new proletariat to the American retailers who are putting billions of Chinese-made products on a million U.S. discount store shelves every day. With more than 40 million migrant workers, 130,000 garment factories, and new cities like Shenzhen, which has mushroomed to more than seven million people in just a quarter century, Guangdong lays an arguable claim to being the contemporary "workshop of the world," following in the footsteps of 19th century Manchester and early 20th century Detroit. This was my thought when we taxied across Dongguan, a gritty, smoggy, sprawling landscape located on the north side of the Pearl River between Guangzhou (the old Canton) and skyscraper etched Shenzhen. We drove for more than an hour late one Sunday afternoon, along broad, but heavily trafficked streets, continuously bordered by bustling stores, welding shops, warehouses, small manufacturers, and the occasional large factory complex. This is how the cities of the old American rust belt must have once looked, smelled, even vibrated.

Because of its proximity to Hong Kong and Macao, as well as its remoteness from the capital, the Chinese government in Beijing chose Shenzhen as a special economic zone in 1979. A few years later the entire Pearl River Delta became a virtual free market, with low corporate taxes, few environmental or urban planning regulations, and most importantly, the free movement of capital and profits in and out of the region. The results were spectacular. Gross Domestic Product in the Pearl River region leaped from eight billion in 1980 to \$113 billion in 2002. Shenzhen's population rose 20 fold. Guangdong province itself, which covers most of the Pearl River Delta, produces a third of China's total exports. And ten percent of all that finds its way to Wal-Mart's U.S. shelves.²

Although Wal-Mart owns no factories outright, its presence is unmistakable. It's world buying headquarters is now in Shenzhen, it has already put eleven big stores in the province, with more to come, and Wal-Mart is feared and respected by everyone involved with any aspect of the export trade, which is why the executives at the Yantian International Container Terminal in Shenzhen, now the fourth largest port in the world, give Wal-Mart bound cargoes top priority. "Wal-Mart is king" a port official told us. But the Pearl River Delta is not merely an export platform like the border region of northern Mexico or the free trade zones of the Caribbean. In Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and their environs, well-paved roads pass through a staggeringly crowded landscape of factories, offices, dormitories, apartments, and streams of migrant labor. Governments at both the provincial and national level are making huge infrastructure investments, likewise tens of thousands of foreign investors from Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan, and the United States are building production facilities of increasingly complexity and capacity. This makes it possible to transform raw materials into containerized consumer goods in just a few weeks. Managers at the huge Nike-Yue Yuen factory complex in Dongguan

bragged that they could fill an order from the states in just two months. Container ships are loaded in half the time it takes in Los Angeles.

Wal-Mart in China is therefore a “joint venture” between the company and the Chinese government. This is not only because so many of its suppliers have governmental investment, but because for Wal-Mart and other multinational companies doing business there, a stable currency, political peace and a compliant workforce are nearly as important as low costs. “There might be places in other parts of the world where you can buy cheaper, but can you get [the product] on the ship?” asked Andrew Tsuei, managing director of Wal-Mart’s global procurement center in Shenzhen. “If we have to look at a country that’s not politically stable, you might not get your order on time. If you deal in a country where the currency fluctuates, everyday, there is a lot of risk. China happens to have the right mix.”³

The workforce in Guangdong, like that of the other coastal provenances, is overwhelmingly composed of migrants from inland villages. The men work in construction and the women in export manufacture and commerce. Factory wages are low – about \$100 a month – but far higher than in agriculture, and they are rising fairly quickly because of the labor shortage generated by the export boom in toys, garments, shoes, and electronic devices. But as in apartheid South Africa or along the employment pathways carved by so many Mexican workers in the U.S., these millions of migrants are essentially stateless. Because their official residence remains the home village, migrant workers in coastal China do not have access to social services or adequate housing so long as they are without residence permits. They work and reside on the sufferance of their employer, which often holds their identity papers until they complete their labor “contract.” This is why so many factories throw up huge dormitories, some housing eight or twelve workers to a room, where residence is dependent upon employment at the enterprise next door. Women workers who are fired or get pregnant are practically compelled to return to their home villages. Marriage is difficult because there is so little affordable housing for couples who work in the contract manufacturing sector.⁴

Neither Bentonville nor Guangdong just happened; these anchors of the trans-Pacific supply chain are not the product of some abstract process of globalization, but rather both were constructed by a set of political and policy choices, in the U.S. and throughout the globe, that have shifted power from manufacturing to retail distribution, and from an economy in which the interests of relatively high wage men played a central role to one in which the flexible, low-wage labor of women is increasingly crucial.

For more than a century, from roughly 1880 to 1980 the manufacturing enterprise stood at the center of the U.S. economy’s production/distribution nexus. The government sometimes challenged the more egregious oligopolies and a few big merchants like Sears and A & P exerted sufficient leverage to actually bargain on prices, but for the most part the mass production firms administered their price schedule so as to insure continuous production and a healthy return on investment. General Motors wanted a 20% pretax return on investment, and for more than half of the 20th century it got it, through the New Era of the 1920s, depression, war, and on into the early postwar decades. U.S. Steel,

which Andrew Carnegie and J. P. Morgan had created as the defacto price umbrella for the nation's most basic industry, used an elaborate system of freight surcharges – Pittsburgh Plus – to sustain the valuation of its capital-intensive mills and mines in Pennsylvania and Ohio. Ford and General Motors proved shameless in their exploitation of the dealer network that they had built, which is why U.S. car dealers felt themselves in chronic battle with Detroit for most of the 20th century.⁵ Even the manufactures of food items and light consumer goods, like Hartz Mountain, Gillette, P&G, 3M, Hershey, Kraft, and Coca Cola conducted themselves in an imperious manner when they stocked the shelves of the regional grocery and drug chains that sold their wares. And these manufacturers had a vocal, politically powerful ally among the small town merchants who in the 1920s and 1930s demanded “retail price maintenance” laws to curb the power of the retail chains and eliminate the nefarious discount chiselers who had begun to pop up in the less desirable sections of some big cities.⁶

Today, however the retailers stand at the apex of the world's supply chains. Indeed, the very phrase “supply chain” did not exist 20 years ago. Manufacturers had “distribution channels,” wholesalers operated throughout a defined “sales territory,” retailers had a network of jobbers and suppliers. Academic theorists such as Emmanuel Wallerstein developed the idea of a “commodity chain” as part of a world systems schema. They were not new, not even a product of the industrial era, and as a consequence, such systems of world trade had something close to an organic, naturalistic provenance. Frederick Abernathy and John Dunlop used the phrase “commodity channels” as recently as 1999 to describe the way apparel moved from Asian and Central American suppliers to North American retailers. But in the 21st century “supply chain,” with its hard linkages and sense of domination and subordination, has become the artful phrase. Theorists such as Gary Gereffi and Gary Hamilton have emphasized the market-making potential of the contemporary buyer-driven supply networks in order to more clearly evaluate the hierarchy of power and profitability that characterizes contemporary global trade.⁷

Thus the global economy revolves around and is driven by the supply chains that have their nerve centers in Bentonville, Atlanta (Home Depot), Minneapolis (Target), Troy, Michigan (K-Mart), Paris (Carrefour), Stockholm (Ikea) and Kirkland, Washington (Costco). The goal of these mega retailers is to procure only those goods that consumers will actually buy, not what the supplier finds it convenient and profitable to ship. Using a wide variety of new information technologies, these retailers collect point-of-sale (POS) data and relay it electronically through their supply chain to initiate replenishment orders almost instantaneously. When Wal-Mart sells a tube of toothpaste in Memphis, that information passes straight through to the P & G headquarters office in Cincinnati, flashing directly to an offshore toothpaste factory which adjusts its production schedule accordingly. The venerable Ohio home product manufacturer long used its market power and sophisticated research on consumer buying habits to secure an outsized share of shelf space from traditional retailers. Although many drug and grocery chains considered P&G a self-aggrandizing bully, Wal-Mart turned this power relationship on its head. The retailer's superior point-of-sale data collection system enabled Wal-Mart to know more about the consumers of P&G products than did the manufacturer, which is one reason

that P&G moved its main sales office to Bentonville in the 1980s. By the mid 1990s, Wal-Mart was P&G's largest customer, generating more than three billion in sales, or about 20 percent of P&G's total revenue. But executives at the Cincinnati soap maker were well aware that their good fortune turned on Wal-Mart's sufferance, which explains why they bought Gillette in 2005. The \$57 billion deal was designed to transform P&G into an even larger supply firm that could challenge Wal-Mart's pricing power and its private label brands. But even this mega merger may not be enough. "If you want to service Wal-Mart you have got to be more efficient," asserted the retail consultant Howard Davidowitz, "The power will stay with Wal-Mart."⁸

. Wal-Mart is therefore not simply a huge retailer, but increasingly a manufacturing giant in all but name. The retailer tracks consumer behavior with meticulous care and then transmits consumer preferences down the supply chain. Replenishment is put in motion almost immediately, with the supplier required to make more frequent deliveries of smaller lots. This is just-in-time for retailers, or "lean retailing." To make it all work, the supply firms and the discount retailers have to be functionally linked, even if they retain a separate legal and administrative existence. The giant retailers of our day, Wal-Mart first among them, "pull" production out of their far flung network of vendors. The manufacturers no longer "push" it onto the retailer or the consumer. Or to extend the metaphor, the nearly continuous stream of container ships which move between Shenzhen and the Long Beach/Los Angeles port complex are "pulled" across the Pacific, not "pushed" by the Chinese manufacturers who stuff their product into nearly half a million 40 foot containers each year. Moreover "pull" production requires speed, predictability, and accuracy in the delivery of goods, since available inventory has been cut back. Constant and unpredictable changes in sales patterns must be met by just-in-time delivery systems. "Supply Chain Management" – that is the new Business School buzz phrase – is the "science" of getting this to happen in the most efficient and cost-effective way.⁹

Elements of this system have existed for decades. Before the 1980s "logistics," the task of scheduling production, storage, transportation, and delivery, was a purely military term, familiar to all those who studied why the Russians took so long to mobilize in 1914 and how Patton's Army was resupplied during its dash across France in the summer of 1944. "Amateurs worry about tactics, but professionals worry about logistics," asserted old hands at the Army Quartermaster Corps.¹⁰ The Vietnam War ended in a humiliating U.S. military defeat, but it turned into a triumph of supply chain logistics when civilian-run container ships proved enormously efficient on the trans-Pacific run between Oakland and Cam Ranh Bay. A decade later, Japanese "just-in-time" production methods, first in automobile and electronic production, demonstrated that inventory and labor costs could be slashed if subcontractors were kept on a tight leash by the firm that stood at the apex of the manufacturing supply chain.¹¹

These Pacific Rim logistical innovations were then assimilated into the retail supply chains when, in the 1970s and 1980s, Sears, K-Mart and numerous U.S. apparel makers began to take advantage of the cheap labor and growing sophistication of the export manufacturers who fueled the rapid growth of the Asian tiger economies,

especially Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea. At first this was largely through contract manufacturing, whereby U.S. retailers directly sourced batches of differentiated goods specially ordered for sale in niche American markets. Wal-Mart opened a buying office in Hong Kong in 1981 and then quickly added a second Far Eastern purchasing office in Taipei. Of course, direct imports by Wal-Mart and other discounters only made up a small share of all the goods sold in the United States; in the mid 1980s Sam Walton estimated that his company's direct imports accounted for but 5.8% of its total sales. The bulk of the importing was done by the manufacturers that sold goods to Wal-Mart. Of key import, as Naomi Klein and Steve Ross remind us, was the rise, both cultural and economic, of the "branded" firms who have taken the fashion idea and extended it from upscale women's clothing to shoes, blue jeans, swim wear, toys, athletic equipment, and electronics. Once a brand becomes well established, or the store that sells those brands achieves cache, it is no longer necessary for The Gap or Reebok or The Limited to manufacture anything. They design and advertise their product, contract for its manufacture and transshipment and promote its sales either through other retailers or their own outlets. Production becomes but one stop, one service element, to their tightly coordinated supply chain.¹²

Until about 1985 the supply chains that led from East Asia to the United States were loosely linked and relatively unstable. But in that year, or shortly thereafter, two developments took place that decisively shifted production to mainland China, and in the process tightened up the retail supply chains and gave the big box stores even more leverage against their vendors, both foreign and domestic. The first was the 40% revaluation of most East Asian currencies negotiated in September 1985 at the Plaza Hotel. Combined with rapidly rising real wages, in South Korea and Hong Kong, the Plaza Accords set off a scramble for a new set of export platforms, chiefly in Guangdong and other sites in coastal China. This production shift was rapid but not difficult. A set of Taiwanese and Hong Kong contractors had already begun to supply the American retailers. When they set up new factories in South China, they naturally maintained their existing links with the U.S.¹³

But the global integration of capitalism is not just a product of better technology or trans-Pacific currency readjustments. Sam Walton and the generation of top executives that he groomed were innovative and energetic entrepreneurs, who quickly deployed each new generation of telecommunications hardware and computer software to build a system that can track, order, and price a tube of toothpaste from one end of the planet to the other. But neither hard work, clever ideas, nor even the rise of cheap Asian imports would not have been enough to have sustained Wal-Mart's tremendous growth, and that of the entire big box retail industry, in the years since 1980. Wal-Mart's extraordinary success is also the consequence of conservative political victories that generated the terrain upon which big box retailing would flourish. These included the collapse in the real value of the U.S. minimum wage, a simultaneous disintegration of the Wagner-era labor law, and the growth of a "free trade" regime that has proved exceptionally beneficial to the conquests made by America's new retail oligarchy.

The minimum wage is crucial because discount retailing is a labor intensive enterprise. And because margins are so low, wages are decisive to a retailer's competitive profile. Sam Walton knew this in his gut.¹⁴ He systematically broke the minimum wage and overtime laws from the moment Wal-Mart became a small chain. He did this by creating a series of family-centered corporate shells, all of which had retail sales that came in just below the threshold – about a quarter million dollars in the 1960s – that enabled Walton to avoid paying the federal minimum wage. This was rather helpful because in 1968 the minimum wage reached its 20th century apogee, so Walton could employ, at rock bottom wages, thousands of women who were pouring off Arkansas and Missouri farms during the years when the revolution in American agriculture belatedly reached the Ozark plateau.

In the late 1960s when the courts finally ruled that his decentralized ownership structure was but a device to avoid the wage and hour law Walton got lucky. The stagflation that would soon roar through the American heartland stripped the minimum wage of much of its real value. It fluctuated in the early 1970s and then plunged after 1978 just as Walton was expanding his retail barony into metropolitan Missouri, Texas, and Tennessee. Because Walton placed his stores in small communities, where rural, underemployed women were available at the minimized minimum wage, he held a striking competitive advantage over urban/suburban department stores like Sears and Macys, whose wage scales had long been structured by their effort to avoid unionization and retain a core workforce of male workers. Thus today, when Wal-Mart asserts that its average pay is almost twice the minimum wage it exaggerates only modestly. But in 2006 the buying power of the real minimum wage is a third less than it was 30 years ago.¹⁵

The second policy vacuum that Wal-Mart exploited was the evisceration of the American labor law. The key to Wal-Mart success was not just a low wage retail operation, but keeping its logistics system non-union. Among truck drivers and warehousemen, unionization has been an historically vigorous presence, especially in Missouri which was Wal-Mart's growth frontier all through the 1970s. But Walton did not establish its first distribution center in that state until the mid 1980s. Indeed all three of Wal-Mart's first distribution centers were put in Bentonville and the fourth in Searcy. The workers in those centers knew that wages were a couple of dollars higher across the Missouri line and they also knew that Wal-Mart's frenetic growth was pushing them right up to their physical and psychic limit. Organizing efforts and wildcat strikes therefore took place in almost every Wal-Mart distribution center in the 1970s, and in Clinton and Mexico, Missouri unionization attempts were mounted at two of the company's early discount stores as well. Walton crushed all these efforts by hiring John Tate, an anti-union lawyer who had fought the emergence of interracial unionism in the upper South in the 1940s, and a quarter century later, had been employed by the new cohort of anti-union meatpacking firms in Nebraska and Colorado, who were determined to keep Chicago-style unionism out of their territories. In later years Wal-Mart would develop an infamous "Union Prevention Index" for each store, designed to measure and track employee discontent, and if necessary, trigger the rapid deployment from Bentonville of a squad of anti-union executives skilled in the latest union avoidance techniques.¹⁶

Wal-Mart also led the way in squeezing labor costs out of its vendors both at home and abroad. Ironically, the company's famed "Buy American" campaign of the late 1980s proved most useful in this endeavor. The origins of the program lay in a confluence of factors. Sam Walton may well have been personally offended by the poor working conditions he witnessed when visiting Central American garment factories in 1984. More important, many Wal-Mart customers blamed the recession of the early 1980s, which destroyed so many blue collar jobs, on the first flush of global competition. In the mid 1980s the closure of several Arkansas firms led to an outcry against the import practices of big retailers like Wal-Mart. Governor Bill Clinton was among those who appealed to Sam Walton to save Arkansas jobs by shifting or keeping production at home.

Wal-Mart's "Buy American" program proved "a public relations coup historic in its dimensions," rued Discount Store News, which reflected the chagrin of the Bentonville retailer's competitors.¹⁷ By 1986 Wal-Mart stores were festooned with red-white-and blue "Buy American" banners and signs on the counters that proclaimed, "THIS ITEM, FORMERLY IMPORTED, IS NOW BEING PURCHASED BY WAL-MART IN THE U.S.A.. AND IS CREATING OR RETAINING – JOBS FOR AMERICANS!"¹⁸ Even today, long after its formal abandonment, Wal-Mart is thought of as a more "American" firm than some of its competitors who actually import fewer goods. Wal-Mart never released any firm figures on the proportion of its product costs that came from overseas. But Asian procurement rose steadily all during the hey-day of the Buy American program as the corporate buying staff resident in East Asia more than doubled in size.

The real import of the "Buy American" campaign lies elsewhere, however. Wal-Mart would increase domestic purchasing, but the company used the prospect of such procurement as a hammer to drive down supplier costs, including their wages and profits, and transform these vendors into Bentonville pawns. "One of our big objectives" in the Buy American program, a Wal-Mart board member told Walton biographer Bob Ortega, "was to put the heat on American manufacturers to lower their prices."¹⁹ Wal-Mart recognized that U.S. labor costs were much higher than in Central America or East Asia, but it sought to make up the difference by freezing wages and forcing logistic and production efficiencies on its suppliers. "Our American suppliers," said Sam Walton "must commit to improving their facilities and machinery, remain financially conservative and work to fill our requirements, and most importantly, strive to improve employee productivity."²⁰

Thus an embittered spokesman for the National Knitwear and Sportswear Association complained that Wal-Mart used its "flag-waving" Buy American campaign "as a negotiating club that forces domestic manufactures to compete, often unrealistically, with foreign suppliers who pay their help pennies an hour. As a result vendors see their gross sales sky rocket and their net profits plunge." Indeed, a packaged goods vendor told Discount Store News that "Wal-Mart's highly proactive approach to product development may, unintentionally, be making American business less competitive." Because Wal-Mart now sets the parameters of product development, companies like his are "no longer manufactures." Instead they are becoming sources who

“produce only the products that Wal-Mart has decided it wants to sell, which in turn make R&D and introduction of new products redundant and unprofitable.”²¹

Such was the case with Ferris Fashions, an Arkansas producer of plaid work shirts, that became a poster boy for the “Buy American” campaign. Three hundred jobs would have been lost in Brinkley, Arkansas, after Van Heusen shifted production off shore had not Sam Walton personally stepped in with a contract for 50,000 dozen red check shirts a year (later made famous when Lamar Alexander ran for the presidency in 1996). But Ferris Fashions was now Wal-Mart’s creature. The big retailer designed the shirts, found the Taiwanese supplier from which it bought the plaid fabric in huge bulk, and remained virtually the sole customer. When workers at Ferris signed up with the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, company president Ferris Burroughs told them “to stop messing around with the union” because Sam Walton “wouldn’t buy union goods;” otherwise he would turn the plant into “a chicken coop.” Ferris kept making Wal-Mart shirts but neither unionism nor higher wages ever made their appearance in Brinkley.²²

Indeed, the Buy American campaign actually helped prepare the way for the Big Box rush to China that took place in the 1990s. By then Wal-Mart had become a defacto manufacturing enterprise, with skilled buyers who helped vendors develop and design products according to the tastes and proclivities of its customers, as analyzed by the “data mining” made possible by Wal-Mart’s enormously clever IT department in Bentonville, not to mention a computer data facility said to be second in size only to that of the National Security Agency. Because Wal-Mart has an intimate understanding of the manufacturing process and because its purchasing power is so immense, the Bentonville company, which now employs almost 500 people in its Shenzhen world purchasing headquarters, has transformed its 3,000 Chinese suppliers into powerless price-takers, rather than partners, deal-makers, or oligopolistic price administrators. While many of these suppliers are small and undercapitalized, a growing number of East Asian contractors manage factories that are of stupendous size, first among them Yue Yuen Industrial, which makes shoes for Nike, Adidas, Reebok, New Balance, and other well known brands.²³

The dialectical relationship between a brand – which is really just a disembodied reputation – and the tangible factory that turns out such branded commodities became graphically apparent to us when we visited the Nike headquarters, located right inside the Yue Yuen factory in Dongguan.²⁴ Yue Yuen anchors the global supply chain in footwear because it is the largest shoe maker on the planet. It employs upwards of 250,000 workers, in China, Vietnam, and Hong Kong, who turn out some 40 footwear brands on 290 production lines. At the Dongguan facility we visited in September 2005 more than 20,000 workers, 80% women, produce just under a million pairs of shoes a month.²⁵

Yue Yuen was not our host when we visited that company’s Dongguan factory. Rather it was Nike, whose offices were in the same place, who gave us the royal welcome. They were happy to do so because Nike saw any group of visiting U.S. academics as but another chance to advertise what they considered the exemplary

working conditions under which their shoes were manufactured. We were told the Chinese labor codes were strictly enforced, the dining rooms did look clean, and the dormitories were safe, if crowded. And Nike had even built a disco and a reading room, full of the Chinese equivalent of *People* and *Cosmo*. Their social responsibility staff numbered about 25. All this cost money – we were told at another Yue Yuan factory that such social amenities and adherence to legal wage and safety standards had pushed the wholesale cost of Reebok shoes from \$7 to \$11 dollars a pair. This seems excessive, but whatever the cost, Nike, Reebok and other branded distributors felt it essential to sustain the reputation of their brand and the goodwill of the Non Governmental Organizations who have begun to monitor South China production facilities. They don't want to turn CNN on one afternoon and watch an expose of the poor labor or environmental conditions fostered by a foot ware brand whose goodwill is measured in the billions.²⁶

Wal-Mart has not neglected this public relations front. Like Nike, Reebok and other branded distributors, Wal-Mart has an elaborate factory certification program which was set up right after a devastating 1992 NBC expose that documented abusive child labor practices in Bangladesh. Since then Wal-Mart has replicated many of the features found in the factory inspection and certification programs that have been supported by branded companies like Nike and Liz Claborne. Wal-Mart audits at least once each year the 5,300 factories from which it purchases directly. And the company requires audits of supplier factories from which it indirectly sources apparel, shoes, sporting goods, and toys. The company's Ethical Standards Department employees more than 200, half in China; and Wal-Mart has established an elaborate green-yellow-red "traffic light" system that categorizes factories according to their adherence to Wal-Mart's labor and environmental code. One percent of all factories fail inspection outright and are dropped from the Wal-Mart supply network."²⁷

But none of this has enabled Wal-Mart to escape a barrage of criticism. The AFL-CIO has proved an early and persistent critic, focusing on the use of prison labor by Wal-Mart suppliers in China. Then in 1995 when Kathie Lee Gifford was confronted with evidence that the factories producing her clothing line, marketed at Wal-Mart, employed children in Honduras sweatshops, she broke into tears on national television, thereby adding a bit of glitz, and a satisfying victory, to anti-Wal-Mart campaigners. In more recent years the drumbeat of criticism has been almost constant. In 2001 KLD & Co. the largest mutual fund aimed at social responsibility, said it sold its shares of Wal-Mart and removed it from the Domini 400 Social Index because Wal-Mart wasn't doing enough to prevent sweatshop abuses. Wal-Mart has refused to join the Fair Labor Association, a monitoring group endorsed by many companies in the apparel and shoe industry, and it contracts with commercial firms like Price Waterhouse Coopers, rather than local NGOs, to do its factory safety and labor audits. And in 2005 the International Labor Rights Fund inaugurated a lawsuit against Wal-Mart on the grounds that it systematically fails to enforce labor standards in its corporate code of conduct, and then lies about it to the American public.²⁸

So Wal-Mart is the "dirty king" of South China, as one of our NGO informants told us, the "the lowest of the low" observed a Reebok executive.²⁹ Managers at three

Wal-Mart supply factories told the Shenzhen-based Institute for Contemporary Observation, whose scruffy, bustling offices we visited, that Wal-Mart staff from the company's Shenzhen purchasing department both sought and accepted bribes. Moreover, workers are often coached by their foremen to lie about conditions to inspectors, otherwise, they are told, the factory might lose its orders and they will be on the street. And the ICO found that many of Wal-Mart's social responsibility inspection teams "only spent about three hours at the factories, during which they verified wages, working hours and personnel records, made a brief inspection tour of the factory and met three or four workers in the factory office's reception room. Wal-Mart inspections were quite easy to bluff..."³⁰ Indeed, even Wal-Mart CEO H. Lee Scott has admitted that the company needs to become more "committed" and "transparent" in order to "provide additional credibility to our factory certification program."³¹

So why Wal-Mart's poor record? There are two reasons. First, there is an absolute conflict between Wal-Mart's drive for low prices and its effort to enforce a code of conduct. When Wal-Mart's Shenzhen buying headquarters advertises a contract for a big production run, Chinese entrepreneurs jump at the chance to fill it. Even without Wal-Mart's infamous price squeeze, the Chinese are willing to take a loss on a first Wal-Mart contract in hopes that they will recoup their fixed costs in the long run. But given Wal-Mart's enormous appetite, and its bias toward large suppliers, the Chinese vendors must themselves sub-contract, and the sub-contractors also find their own sources of labor.³² As with the turn of the 20th century garment manufacture on the Lower East Side, no one can effectively police the complex network of contractors, subcontractors, and family workshops, especially when it is a private company, not the state, which is trying to do the police work. "The factory owners don't think they violate the law because they do not know the law," said Liu Kai-Ming of the Institute for Contemporary Observation. "Ninety percent of Wal-Mart sub-contractors and suppliers cannot meet Wal-Mart's own code of conduct."³³

Contributing to this price and production pressure, is the telecommunications infrastructure that has so integrated the supply chain. These instantaneous links between Bentonville and Shenzhen are a mechanism that puts relentless pressure on the Chinese vendors to meet production and shipping deadlines. Because Wal-Mart can so accurately forecast its inventory needs, and change those forecasts as conditions shift in the United States, it now expects the same kind of flexibility from its manufacturers. Thus, the stop and start nature of work in so many Chinese factories, the heavy overtime punctuated by short work weeks and unpaid vacations. As a manager at a Dongguan company asserted, "We are forced to apply the labor codes... but we can judge from our intuition that when production and codes clash, which side we can cling to. Once I phoned their production department and asked, 'Do you still want your products on time?' The monitor then left our company alone."³⁴

Second, although Wal-Mart itself is a "brand," few of the products it sells depend on the kind of brand reputation so carefully nurtured by Nike, Reebok, or some of the fashion apparel makers. This makes the company far less vulnerable to consumer pressures targeted at a well-known product. The commodities Wal-Mart sells are

interchangeable. The advantages of all this were driven home to us when Tiger Wu, a production manager at Nike, drove us over to the local Wal-Mart to inspect the shoe department. Nike does not sell its shoes to Wal-Mart, in either China or the United States. They would not be able to command \$100 a pair if they were found near the same shelf with the plastic flip-flops. But Nike has recently purchased the non-brand, “Starter” line, which Yue Yuan now produces in increasingly large quantities.³⁵ At the Dongguan Wal-Mart the shelves were full of cheap Starter athletic shoes. Mr. Wu was contemptuous of their workmanship, but even more so of their invisibility as an attractive “brand.”³⁶ But from Wal-Mart’s perspective, this is highly advantageous because it has no investment in the brand reputation, so it can easily and rapidly shift production from one Chinese source to another. As a consequence, the ICO found that “the level of enthusiasm in implementing codes of social responsibility among brand name companies far exceeded that of retailers.”³⁷

The real value of these corporate codes of conduct, even at the best companies, lies in the realm of ideology. They legitimize the idea of a world-wide social standard, even as their chronic failures demonstrate that any real transformation of the global supply chains must come from other sources. In Guangdong, as in so many other parts of China, resentment, anger and social conflict lie just beneath the surface. China’s Ministry of Public Security reports that the number of “mass incidents” rose eight fold in the decade after 1993. Labor Ministry statistics on industrial disputes have recorded an even more rapid increase, and hardly a week goes by without a journalistic report of a demonstration or police crackdown in the coastal industrial districts. Most such conflicts still occur in the northeast rustbelt provinces where layoffs and pension corruption have generated enormous unrest. But the full employment and rising wages of coastal China have done little to ameliorate social conflict. Guangzhou City reported nearly 900 protests involving more than 50,000 workers in 2004. One protest in seven involved more than 100 people.³⁸

These protests are directed less toward the national government than toward local authorities, specific employers, and corrupt officials. They have not, and seem unlikely, to achieve the national character of the Solidarity movement that challenged the Communist regime in Poland a quarter century ago. They have a far more local, although hardly a parochial, thrust, seeking to pressure factory managers and provincial officials to live up to Chinese labor and environmental laws, as well as to the specific employment contracts and working condition promises which brought so many to Guangdong’s factory districts in the first place. The protesters are fighting for the kind of democratic citizenship that will liberate them from a workplace regime that has left them in a purgatory half-stateless and half-free. As they push back against this system, they begin to crack the chains, supply chain as well as others, that have given Wal-Mart and its retail competitors such overweening power in the global economy.

¹ Author's interview with Hillary Claggart, April 29, 2005, Bentonville; Jeff Glasser, "Boomtown, U.S.A.," *U.S. News and World Report*, June 25, 2001, 17-20; Anne D'Innocenzio, "Wal-Mart Suppliers Flocking to Arkansas," *The State*, September 21, 2003, 1.

² Joseph Y.S. Cheng, Guangdong: Preparing for the WTO Challenge (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2003); Michael Enright, Edith Scott, Ka-mun Chang, Regional Powerhouse: The Greater Pearl River Delta and the Rise of China (Singapore: John Wiley, 2005), Joe Studwell, The China Dream, (London: profile Books, 2005)

³ Philip Goodman and Philip Pan, "Chinese Workers Pay for Wal-Mart's Low Prices," The Washington Post, February 8, 2004, 1.

⁴ Author's interview with Pun Ngai, Hong Kong, September 15, 2005.

⁵ Alfred Chandler, Jr. Strategy and Structure: Chapters in the History of American Industrial Enterprise (Garden City: Doubleday, 1962), 158-99 passim; Louis Galambos and Joseph Pratt, The Rise of the Corporate Commonwealth (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 167-69

⁶ Richard S. Tedlow, New and Improved: The Story of Mass Marketing in America (New York: Basic Books, 1990), for studies of Coca Cola, Sears, A & P, and the automobile companies.

⁷ This paragraph needs considerable revision and elaboration. I've been influenced by Jennifer Bair, "Global Capitalism and Commodity Chains: Looking Back, Going Forward," Competition and Change 9, 2 (June) 129-156; Frederick Abernathy, John T. Dunlop, et. al. A Stitch in Time: Lean Retailing and the Transformation of Manufacturing – Lessons from the Apparel and Textile Industries (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). Also influential has been the work of Richard Appelbaum and Gary Hamilton.

⁸ "Wal-Mart, P&G Link up for Efficiency," St. Louis-Post Dispatch, February 14, 1989, 12B; Constance Hays, "What's Behind the Procter Deal? Wal-Mart," New York Times, January 29, 2005, C1; Davidowitz quoted in Jeremy Grant and Dan Roberts, "P&G Looks to Gain Strength Through Unity," Financial Times, January 31, 2005, 25.

⁹ Edna Bonacich with Khaleelah Hardie, "Wal-Mart and the Logistics Revolution," in Lichtenstein ed., Wal-Mart: The Face of Twenty-First Century Capitalism, 163-188.

¹⁰ Major Van Hart, (Retired), "Logistics: The Art of Doing War," at <http://www.chuckshawks.com/logistics.htm>.

¹¹ Marc Levinson, "The Box: How The Shipping Container Changed the World," (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), Chapter on Vietnam, forthcoming; Bahar Barami, "Productivity Gains from Pull Logistics: Tradeoffs of Internal and External Costs," paper presented at the Transportation Research Board Conference on Transportation and Economic Development, Portland, Oregon, September 22-25, 2001.

¹² Misha Petvoic and Gary Hamilton, "Making Global Markets: Wal-Mart and Its Suppliers," in Lichtenstein, ed. Wal-Mart, 107-142; and also Gary Hamilton, "Remaking the Global Economy: U.S. Retailers and Asian Manufacturers," Hearing on "China and the Future of Globalization," before the U.S. China Economic and Security Review Commission, May 20, 2005; Naomi Klein, No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies (New York, 1999).

¹³ Hamilton, "Remaking the Global Economy."

¹⁴ Sam Walton and John Huey, Sam Walton, Made in American: My Story (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 127.

¹⁵ Jared Bernstein and Isaac Shapiro, “ Unhappy Anniversary: Federal Minimum Wage Remains Unchanged for Eight Straight Year, Falls to 56-Year Low Relative to Average Wage,” Economic Policy Institute, September 1, 2005; W. W. West v Wal-Mart, Inc., 264 F. Supp. 158; 1967 U.S. District Court, February 16, 1967.

¹⁶ Bob Ortega, In Sam We Trust (New York: Random House, 1998), 87-90, 105-109.

¹⁷ “Wal-Mart Boasts ‘Made in USA’,” Discount Store News, June 15, 1992, 127.

¹⁸ Bob Ortega, In Same We Trust (New York: Random House, 1998), 208.

¹⁹ Ibid., 206.

²⁰ Michael Barrier, “Walton’s Mountain,” Nation’s Business, April 1988, 64.

²¹ “Wal-Mart Boasts ‘Made in the USA,’” 127.

²² Caroline Mayer, “Wal-Mart Flies the Flag in Import Battle; Prods U.S. Producers With Favorable Terms,” The Washington Post, April 21, 1985, E1.; Farris Fashions, Inc. and Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, Southwest Regional Joint Board, Cases 26-CA-14258 and 26-RC-7323, September 30, 1993, 550.

²³ Sam Hornblower, “Wal-Mart & China: A Joint Venture,” on Frontline: Is Wal-Mart Good for America? web site; Bill Bowden, “PREL CEO Says Wal-Mart’s Policy is No Sweat,” Northwest Arkansas Business Journal, June 25, 2001.

²⁴ Richard Appelbaum organized this trip as part of his exploration of global supply chains. Eileen Bors and Karan Shapiro were also participants in the trip and almost all the interviews.

²⁵ Richard Dobson, “Pou Chen Corp.: Shoe-in for Success,” Taiwan Business Topics, vol 33, no. 8 (2003); Marcus W. Brauchli and Dan Biers, “Green Lanterns: Asia’s Family Empires Change their Tactics for a Shrinking World,” Wall Street Journal, April 19, 1995, 1.

²⁶ Author’s interview with Tiger Wu, Nike Manufacturing Manager, Dongguan, September 12, 2005; author’s interview with Dick Ambrocio, Senior Director, Reebok, Zhongshan, September 13, 2005.

²⁷ “Wal-Mart: 2004 Report on Standards for Suppliers,” at Wal-Mart Stores web site, 2005.

²⁸ Kyle Johnson and Peter Kinder, “Wal-Mart Stores, Inc.” Domini 400 Social Index Decision Series, No. 3, May 16, 2001; Molly Selvin, “Wal-Mart Faces Suit by Labor Group,” Los Angeles Times, September 14, 2005.

²⁹ Author’s interview with Billy Han, SACOM, September 14, 2005 Hong Kong; Author’s interview with Dick Ambrocio.

³⁰ Liu Kai-ming, “Global Purchasing Practices & Chinese Women Workers.”

³¹ H. Lee Scott, “Twenty First Century Leadership,” October 24, 2005, Wal-Mart Stores Web Site.

³² Author’s interview with Tom Mitchell, South China Morning Post, September 17, 2005, Hong Kong.

³³ Author’s interview with Liu Kai-ming, September 14, 2005

³⁴ As quoted in Pun Ngai, “Global Production, Company Codes of Conduct.”

³⁵ AP, “Nike Ventures into Discount Shoe Business,” The Clarion-Ledger, April 23, 2005.

³⁶ Author's interview with Tiger Wu, September 12, 2005, Dongguan.

³⁷ Liu Kai-ming, "Global Purchasing Practices & Chinese Women Workers."

³⁸ Murray Scot Tanner, "Chinese Government Responses to rising Social Unrest,"
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