

1. I Do Mind Dying

NEW MALDEN. Zhang Guo-Hua looked at the letters on the station sign as the train pulled in. Yes, it was the right one. Nervously he got out, handed in his ticket at the barrier and walked out on to the pavement of the Surrey town.

He was new to Britain as well as new to New Malden. He'd arrived from Yuhong, a rural district in the Liaoning province of north-east China. As he looked up and down the high street, wondering which way to go, he felt lonely, missing his wife and their eleven-year-old son and eight-year-old daughter. But he was also excited. He was doing this for them.

He'd been a poor farmer all his life. Since the early 1980s, waves of 'reform and opening' initiatives (*gai-ge kai-fang*) were ruthlessly exposing China to the fierce competition of the world market, while encouraging the fast growth of private enterprises. In the 1990s the so-called 'modern enterprise reform' swept across China. Many state-run factories, stores and mines were merged, shut down or went bankrupt, and around 30 million workers were made redundant.

The north-eastern provinces of Heilongjiang, Liaoning and Jilin, known as the 'rust belt' of China for its heavy industries, had a high concentration of state-owned enterprises, which were the backbone of the Chinese economy. Therefore, they were hit the hardest. Nearly five million workers in state-owned factories were made redundant here between 2001 and 2006.

Having been told they'd had a job for life, the workers could not simply be thrown out on to the streets – that would have been a recipe for revolution. So instead many workers were technically 'laid off' with a compensation package based on the number of years each worker had been employed at the

enterprise. However, the level of compensation offered to these workers, less than 9,000 RMB (£600) on average, was usually barely enough to live on.

Although some of these laid-off workers were re-employed, most ended up in low-paid temporary jobs and soon became unemployed again. And often, either because of a genuine lack of funds or because of bureaucratic incompetence and corruption, laid-off workers never received their rightful benefits. Geoff Crothall of China Labour Bulletin gave me one example out of the hundreds of such cases he'd come across.

Wang Andong, a seventy-five-year-old former 'model worker' (that is, Chinese working 'hero' who received official recognition from the Communist Party for his decades of hard work) from Heilongjiang, has spent the last eleven years trying to claw back his pension and medical benefits following the bankruptcy of the state-owned machine-repair shop where he worked. As he points out, if he as a former model worker and Party secretary can't get his pension, what chance do other less fortunate workers have?

In the first year of the new century, 20 million people were unemployed in the north-east and mass urban unemployment was as high as seven per cent. The inadequate social insurance 'safety net' wasn't able to maintain a reasonable living standard. Farmers were even worse off than urban workers. Their production often couldn't compete with incoming international agricultural products. Their earnings were around half those of urban dwellers, and the gap was widening. Living became very difficult for Zhang's family. Healthcare, now privatized, became impossible to access. Zhang and his wife, like the majority of the rural population, had no medical insurance. They felt powerless not being able to provide good medical care for their elderly parents and special care for their son who had learning difficulties. They finally decided in 2001 that in order to support his family, Zhang would have to travel abroad to work. Abroad, you could earn ten times as much as in China.

Ten times as much! How could he resist such a prospect? (China's national minimum wage is 5.5 RMB, about 36p per hour, and an eight-hour day would earn a wage of £2.88, if employers abided by the rules – that is, around fourteen times lower than the British National Minimum Wage.) The work might be hard, but Zhang was used to tough physical labour. And if the work was in England – well, England was famous for being a gentle, civilized country.

So here he was, on a bright April morning in 2001, following in the footsteps of thousands of others from the north and north-east of China who were coming into Britain at the time. He had a six-month business-visitor visa (arranged for him by an agency in Shenyang, the capital city of his province), which did not permit him to work. A few hundred pounds in cash, in an envelope hidden among the winter jumpers in his suitcase, was all the money he had. And his mobile phone: his Samsung mobile phone. He was hoping for a job at Samsung.

He turned right and walked towards a parade of shops. Speaking no English, he showed the name on his piece of paper to a passer-by. 'Over there.' The man pointed to an office building. 'S. C. Lim & Co' That was it: the name of the labour provider. Zhang straightened his shirt and walked in. A smartly dressed Chinese woman asked him to sit in the waiting area.

The managing director, Cheng-Zhe Lim, did not shake hands with him when he walked in. He searched Zhang with his eyes and then asked him a list of questions. Heart problems? Health problems? Zhang replied confidently. 'I've just reached thirty-nine and I'm fit and in good health.'

'You're going to work for Samsung,' Lim told Zhang. In return for a registration fee of £100, S. C. Lim & Co would sort out Zhang's documents for him, arrange his national insurance and employ him to work in the factory called Woo One in Hartlepool, a supplier for Samsung. He'd need to pay £150 per month for his rent and food.

The next day, following Lim's instructions, he took a coach

from London Victoria to Hartlepool. ('Har-li-pul. Har-li-pul,' Zhang practised saying it.) Five hours later he stepped out into the cold darkness. The ghostly silence of the place felt like an omen. It frightened him. He waited and waited. Eventually a middle-aged Korean man walked up to him from a distance. With no greeting, he introduced himself as Mr Han. Zhang understood he was one of Lim's men who'd been sent to pick him up. He felt relieved, even at the sight of this unfriendly stranger. He followed Han on to a bus.

Petrol stations, supermarkets, road signs . . . In silence, Zhang peered out of the bus, trying to make it all out. Lorries sped past. The windows were closed, but Zhang could still feel a stubbornly hostile blast blowing at him from the North Sea. This was supposed to be early summer, but it felt like the tail-end of a bleak winter.

Then came long avenues lined with massive industrial estates and warehouses. Zhang gasped. Truly a kingdom of factories!

At last they turned off into a residential road, and Han led him into a semi-derelict house. They climbed the stairs to the second floor. A tiny room was in front of them as they opened the door. A Chinese man, lying on a bed eating roasted peanuts, welcomed him in.

'Four of us share this room,' he told Zhang. But there was only one two-tier bunk-bed. 'This flat was a hotel before,' his new room-mate told him. 'Now it's been bought by Lim. The building's divided into ten rooms, shared by forty of us.' It dawned on Zhang that he'd have to use the same bed as another worker. 'He works night shifts for the next two weeks. So you can use the bed during the night. We change shifts every two weeks. When he gets on the day shifts, you'll be sleeping in the daytime.'

Zhang was soon to realize he was lucky to get a bed at all: when his nephew arrived a few days later, he had to take turns with a co-worker on the sofa. Clearly, Lim was trying to

accommodate as many workers as he could to make as much money as possible from the rent.

The next morning, Zhang awoke to a familiar smell of northern baked cakes. 'That reminds me of home!' he said to the man climbing down from the upper bunk.

'Yeah,' the man replied, 'some of the guys make their own breakfast, because Lim doesn't provide it. We pay for all our food, but they only give us two small meals a day. We have to share two dishes for dinner among ten of us, and the food's pretty rough.'

Following his flatmate, Zhang set out to walk to work for the eight o'clock shift. In the dreary morning light, he was now able to see the world of factories around him. SOVEREIGN BUSINESS PARK, said a sign. Red and grey box-like buildings stood next to each other. And there he saw the name: WOO ONE.

Thus began Zhang's six-month working life at the Woo One factory.

Arriving at the building, he took out the photocopied work permit which Lim had sold him for £50 in New Malden, and handed it to 'Supervisor Zhen', the Korean representative recruited by Lim to be in charge of scheduling the workers' daily shifts. Twenty copies of permits were shared between all the undocumented workers in the four plants to which Lim supplied labour. 'Li Ming' happened to be the name on Zhang's permit copy, so he'd be known as Li Ming during his time here. He was told to put on his work clothes and join a mass of Chinese, Xian (an ethnic group in north-east China) and Korean workers on the assembly line. (Lim, he discovered, spoke both Chinese and Korean, and workers from both of these countries flocked to him by word of mouth: he never needed to advertise.)

Zhang had never worked in a factory and didn't know how to use any of the machines. Would someone teach him? The next thing he knew, he was doing the job: putting screws into

the plugs of PCs. He had to copy the person next to him.

‘It’s easy,’ said a chubby Korean supervisor named Jin. ‘Anyone can do it.’

Hours later, at noon, it was time to have their half-hour lunch break. In the canteen, workers shovelled food into their mouths as if time was running out.

‘Have some *dajiang tang!*’ Zhang’s co-worker said to him. It was thick bean soup, and with it came rice and cabbage from a huge container at the end of the table. The worker beside him told him it was *da guo fan* – food roughly cooked in huge woks for large numbers of people – a throwback to collective dining in China’s communes in the 1950s. The worker admitted, ‘I didn’t know they still had such things in the West. And we’ll have the same meal for dinner. If we’re lucky, we’ll get some thin slices of meat with it.’

All too soon it was time to put the work clothes back on. When the twelve-hour shift finally ended, Zhang dragged himself back to the flat and fell asleep, exhausted, in the bed still warm from its occupant on night shifts.

A few days later, Zhang was moved to a different job: printing on the PC line. It looked much more skilled: there must be training this time. But no: Zhang was put to work at once alongside his cousin (who had arrived in Hartlepool a few days after him; it was common for people to come and join their relatives or friends already working here) and two other Chinese workers. They showed him how to mix different kinds of paint and liquid until the mixture was just right, and then how to press the metal mould into the mix, making a label. The names on the label were so famous! Samsung, Sharp, Sony . . . Zhang got to work, hoping he was doing it right.

There were four production lines in the printing department, he noticed: three were for ‘foreign’ (Chinese, Korean and Xian) workers, and one was for local workers. On each ‘foreign’ production line, there were three or four workers; on

the local one, there were eight. Yet the ‘foreign’ production line had double the production target of the local line.

Xiao Li, a man from Tienjin in northern China, joined the printing line. He seemed an outgoing, articulate man and he introduced himself to Zhang with a broad Tienjin accent. He’d arrived in England shortly after Zhang, and had followed the same path and been through the same interview with Lim. ‘I’ve never done factory work in my life,’ he told Zhang. ‘This is physically stretching me to the limit. How come we have less than half the number of workers on our lines, but our production target is 1,500 microwaves per shift, and theirs is only 800?’

Sometimes Supervisor Jin would move Xiao Li, Zhang and other Chinese, Xian and Korean workers to the other side of the factory, where doors were made for Samsung microwaves. Here, the workers had to struggle not only with the workload but also with the deafening sound of the machinery and the suffocating heat and polluting dust from the burning of plastic in the moulding process. Their concentration had to be absolute. There was not a moment to stand back or rest. Every second counted if the production target was to be met. The workers had had no health-and-safety training, and had no idea about the risks of working with the chemicals used in the colouring process.

Occasionally, Zhang would tell Xiao Li that his blood pressure was getting higher – he often felt weak, dizzy and feverish, and had a faster heartbeat – because of the long hours and lack of sleep. Zhang seemed aware that the work was wearing him out.

‘Don’t work too hard,’ Xiao Li always told him. ‘It’s not worth it.’

But it was different for Xiao Li. He was a divorcee, with no children to worry about. He told Zhang his story: he’d been a chef at the Sheraton Hotel in Tienjin, earning 1,000 RMB (£67) a month. It was an enviable job for many, but Xiao Li

wasn't content with the low wage. So he'd left the job and travelled to Germany on a four-year work permit in 1998. In Germany, he'd been a legal worker, working as a chef, getting a low wage and paying high tax. There was no chance of promotion, and he'd been the victim of appalling racism. 'I was spat on by a German man sitting in a car,' he told Zhang. 'I was furious, and pulled the man out of his car and hit him on the face. For that, I was given a six-month prison sentence. And in the prison, the racism was worse, if anything. My time in that place taught me all about Germany and the West.'

He'd gone back to China, hoping the work prospects there might have improved. But they were worse than ever. 'A lot of people were unemployed. Without connections, it was almost impossible to find a job,' he said. So he decided to use his saving of 20,000 RMB (£1,300) to get a business-visitor visa for Britain. He'd been hardened by his time in Germany; that was why he refused to tolerate injustice now. Zhang sympathized, but he was not so embittered by experience.

Workers who arrived in perfect health at Woo One found themselves becoming ill. Severe weight loss and exhaustion were common. Another co-worker of Zhang's, named Older Gao, also from Tienjin, developed acute asthma after two months. 'My brother's coming to England to work,' he told Zhang, 'and he wants to come to Hartlepool, but I'm not going to let him.' Older Gao didn't want to tell his family the details about working conditions at Woo One, but he guessed they knew: he had to beg them to send him regular supplies of Ventolin inhalers because he couldn't register with a GP in Britain.

Zhang worked alongside these people, quietly, complaining as little as possible, remembering that every hour of work brought an hour's worth of wages to his family. But there wasn't much money to send them after you'd paid your rent, and the hours were long – so long. All the undocumented workers worked a minimum twelve-hour shift each day, but

most days they were required to do overtime of four or six hours – sometimes working two shifts of twelve hours in a row. Zhang, Older Gao and Xiao Li watched with envy as the local workers came off their shifts long before theirs were finished, and went home to their families.

‘When the orders come in, we’re the ones to make sure the demand is met,’ said Xiao Li.

Some of the newcomers couldn’t take it. A Fujianese man detected the ruthlessness of the regime after his first sixteen-hour day, and left immediately. ‘This is not a place for human beings,’ he said. ‘I don’t come here to die.’ Workers’ ill-health was useful to Lim: he could sack people who were ill and get new workers in, earning new registration fees from them.

‘But it’s not just Lim, you know,’ said Xiao Li. ‘The factory likes it that way. Don’t forget: it’s the factory that puts us on the toughest production line with the highest target. It’s the factory that imposes these long working hours. Lim just happened to be there at the right time to make a profit out of us.’

Still Zhang worked on, determined to repress all physical and emotional feeling. Every working hour, he and all the undocumented workers earned £2.31 (£1.80 after tax). Locals earned £4.20 an hour. Differentiated wage levels and working conditions for local workers and the ‘international workforce’ were open, daily practice at Woo One.

In a twelve-hour shift, Zhang was allowed one half-hour break. During the night shift, he was given ten minutes off every two hours. Sometimes he was made to work for twenty-four hours at a time. From these countless hours of standing up during the interminable day and night shifts, his feet became so swollen and numb that he could hardly walk. He was getting bad headaches. But he couldn’t go to a doctor, for fear of his illegal status being found out.

‘Just say no to them!’ Xiao Li said. ‘I do!’ Xiao Li was a rebel by nature. He took two breaks on each day shift, regardless of

the supervisors' warnings. He knew he'd be sent back to the agency sooner or later. One day the supervisors locked the lavatories so the Chinese workers couldn't use them during work time. Xiao Li asked for permission to use them and was refused permission three times. So he unzipped his trousers and urinated on the factory floor. 'No disrespect,' he said to the supervisor, 'but you pushed me.' The supervisor hit him. He picked up a metal stick and chased the supervisor out of the building.

('I was trained by my father,' Xiao Li told me later when he described this incident. 'He was a martial arts expert. In his time, people thought it was important to know how to fight, because you didn't have other means to protect yourself. Your physical strength was your way to survive in those days. I'm surprised to find you need to defend yourself in this way in a British workplace. If I'd been allowed to really fight, that supervisor wouldn't have survived.')

After this incident he was given a final warning: one more act of rule-breaking, and he'd be sent back to the agency.

Zhang watched his friend with admiration, but still he kept on working. He tried not to get involved in disputes between the workers and the bosses. His sole aim was to earn a living for his family in China. Everything else was insignificant. He hardly saw the town of Hartlepool. A few boarded-up pubs and a petrol station were all that came into his view on the walks to and from work. During September, the workload became even bigger as demand grew but no new workers were brought in. Often Zhang did not see daylight for twenty-four hours.

His nephew noticed that he seemed to have no spirit left.

'Are you sure you have to work tonight?'

'I must. If I say no they'll remember it, and it'll count against me.'

As they changed shifts on the last Sunday of October, Xiao Li thought Zhang looked very unwell. 'Are you OK?'

'I'm just tired,' Zhang said.

During that night shift, Zhang had to tell his nephew and a few fellow workers that he had an acute headache. But he knew the production target was 1,500 completed microwaves per shift. There was no chance of stepping off the production line.

Halfway through the night, the headache became unbearable. For the first time ever, he asked the supervisor for an extra break.

The request was refused. 'Wait till you finish work.'

So he worked on. The night shift seemed so dreadfully long. He exerted all the strength in his body with all his will power, and he reached the target, stamping the Samsung label on the 1,500th microwave just as the shift ended.

His nephew led him back to the house. As they walked, he noticed that Zhang's arms were numb, and he didn't seem able to see. Back at the house, his housemates crowded round and tried to help him. One of the women tried to massage his shoulders, but he was losing consciousness. Like a worn-out machine, he was ceasing to function. He tried to speak, but could not make sense any more.

His housemates got him to the local hospital. A few hours later he was transferred to Middlesbrough General Hospital. There, on 2 November 2001, he died of a subarachnoid haemorrhage.

I first stumbled across the story of Zhang's death by chance a year and a half later. A friend of mine, a Chinese builder in London, mentioned it in passing. He was complaining (with justification) about the hardships of his own working life.

'Poor you,' I said.

'But it could be worse. At least I'm not working up north. I don't want to die like Mr Zhang!'

'Who's Mr Zhang?' I asked. 'I don't remember reading anything in the papers about a man called Zhang.'

'No, you wouldn't have,' said my friend. 'The story was

never allowed out. No one from that place wants to talk about it. Everyone wants to bury it – especially the company.’

‘Which company was it?’

‘It was Samsung.’

My friend did not know – and it took me a month to discover – that the incident actually took place at the factory of one of Samsung’s suppliers, Woo One. To manufacture their parts, Samsung relied upon a group of electronics suppliers: Dong Jin Precision in Peterlee, Young Shin in Billingham, and Chang Jin and Woo One in Hartlepool. Samsung was aware of (but did not shoulder responsibility for) the fact that these suppliers recruited at least half of their workers from an undocumented ‘international workforce’, as the Samsung personnel department called it when I enquired. The labour provider for all these companies was S. C. Lim & Co, New Malden.

I spent nearly two years piecing together Zhang’s story.

First I found out about the impressive public face of Samsung Electronics Manufacturing (UK), part of the multinational Samsung Group with its global turnover of \$100 billion. Samsung’s site in the UK was opened at Wynyard Park, Billingham, in 1995, six years before Zhang arrived. The Queen herself snipped the ribbon. Locals lined the route to welcome her to the opening ceremony. It was, the Queen said, the best chance the region could have to improve opportunities for local employment in the north-east.

Sure enough, locals were employed: not quite the 3,000 the company had promised, more like 1,500, but this allowed it to be awarded £20 million by the local authorities, which it could invest in training programmes. In Samsung’s assembly plant at Wynyard Park, ninety-five per cent of the workers were recruited from the local community. Peter Mandelson, the New Labour politician and MP for Hartlepool after the 1997 General Election, praised Samsung’s achievement. ‘Who said the economic miracle of Asia’s Four Little Dragons was based on cheap labour?’ (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong

and Singapore are known as Asia's Four Little Dragons; Samsung is the second largest corporation in South Korea.)

What was hidden, from the end of the 1990s to the first years of the new century, however, was a less attractive side of Samsung. Multinational corporate power and greed were at work, and the economic success of the conglomerate was depending on its suppliers' use of cheap migrant labour.

This was what Zhang, and so many others like him, got caught up in. I visited Zhang's co-workers many times between 2003 and 2006; I spoke to them for hours, asking for descriptions of Zhang's daily life in detail, wanting to fill out the bald words of my builder friend: *I don't want to die like Mr Zhang*.

I could now add my own epilogue: 'If someone I love dies, I don't want to be treated as Mrs Zhang was after her husband's death.' For I discovered, as I researched the story and later met Mrs Zhang herself, that she suffered almost unimaginable misery in the months which followed.

There was no autopsy, no inquest, no coroner's report on the unusual circumstances of Zhang's death. Middlesbrough General Hospital simply passed the death certificate on to Zhang's direct employer, Lim, who sent it to the Chinese Embassy, who posted it to Mrs Zhang without translating it for her.

She couldn't read it, but with the help of neighbours, she got its gist. He was dead. She lost consciousness. Her beloved husband was dead. Their children had lost their father. But how could he be dead? He was young, fit, thirty-nine.

(She was not to find out precisely what medical condition her husband had died of until one and a half years later, when I translated the death certificate for her.)

At once, she borrowed money from her relatives and applied for a visa to fly to England for her husband's funeral. Leaving her children in the hands of their grandparents, she came to Britain with her niece. They arrived in Hartlepool on 12 November 2001, to find that the arrangements for Zhang's

hasty cremation had already been made without her consent. Zhang's co-workers, horrified by his death, had got together to make a donation of £20 to £40 each, to pay for the funeral and for living expenses for his family.

There was unrest among the workers: they saw what over-work could do to a person, reducing him from a lively, fit father to a corpse. Lim was aware of the anger and agitation. To quieten things down, he made an offer to Mrs Zhang when she arrived in Hartlepool: he would pay her six months' wages in compensation. Naive, desperate for money to support her children, she accepted the offer.

'Making our donation towards the funeral was the least we could do,' Xiao Li told me later. 'But we couldn't be there at the funeral. We were on our shift, and weren't allowed to attend.' Instead, on that bleak November morning two days later, with unswept fallen leaves rattling around the crematorium, the cremation took place, attended by Mrs Zhang, her niece who accompanied her to England, Zhang's nephew who'd worked alongside him before he died, and by Woo One's English manager and Lim. For the company representatives being there was a matter of courtesy. A local priest who had never met Zhang gave a short address, incomprehensible to the Chinese.

As soon as the cremation was over, courtesy vanished from Lim's repertoire. For him the case was closed; for Mrs Zhang, the nightmare had just begun. Lim stopped all contact with Mrs Zhang. She tried to call him; she needed to know the chronology of what had happened, but he didn't answer her calls. All he did was send her husband's ashes back to his parents in China two months later.

From this time on, Mrs Zhang was confronted with an alliance of institutions and private interests that prevented her from gaining justice for Zhang.

How had he died? Why had he died? Middlesbrough General Hospital did not even try to contact her, let alone

explain what had happened. The only people who were in contact with the hospital were Woo One's Korean director, its English manager and Lim.

'All communication was conducted between the hospital and the factory,' Older Gao told me later. 'The family was kept out of it.'

By the time I met Mrs Zhang in 2003, she still had not been given access to her husband's medical records.

'But you must keep trying,' I said to her. 'You must write to the hospital again.'

She herself was, by now, an 'illegal', having overstayed her visa, so she was nervous about writing an official letter. But she knew she must if she was to have any hope of seeing the records, and I followed up with a call to the hospital. My own Chinese accent put me at a disadvantage: I was put through to the PR department, and dealt with by an insensitive and uninterested PR officer. Eventually I got through to the records department.

'Sorry,' said the team leader. 'Mr Zhang's name is not in the system.'

'Not in the system? But he died only eighteen months ago.'

To whom could Mrs Zhang turn? I contacted the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). First I enquired about industrial deaths in Britain in general. They were on the rise, the HSE told me; not only in obviously dangerous jobs like construction, but also in manufacturing jobs. Any industrial death, they said, should be reported to them, regardless of the person's nationality and immigration status.

I contacted the HSE in the north-east and homed in on specifics: was Zhang's death reported to them? I was told by Chris Gillies, the Principal Inspector of the HSE, that Zhang's death was not reported to them, and therefore no investigation was undertaken. Well, perhaps it should be undertaken now, I suggested.

They took the matter seriously and began their inquiry. Dr E. M. Gillanders, the HSE's Senior Medical Inspector, took charge of the investigation. She asked for Zhang's medical records from Middlesbrough General Hospital, and found that the records department had spelled his name wrong; that was why his records had been lost.

No apology ever came to Mrs Zhang for this piece of gross mismanagement.

Dr Gillanders revealed her findings to us: Zhang's doctor at the hospital 'was not sure of the relationship between his death and his work'. No one knows why he did not insist on an inquest. Dr Gillanders told me that Dr Clarke, the consultant of the Critical Care Services Unit at Middlesbrough General Hospital, had referred her to Newcastle General Hospital to seek advice regarding the link between Zhang's work and his death. However, to date, the HSE has not produced a report about Zhang's death. His medical records have now been transferred to James Cook University Hospital, as Middlesbrough General has closed down. In October I made a request for his medical records under the Freedom of Information Act, but my request was refused as they said I was not Zhang's personal representative, nor did I have a claim arising from his death.

Later, I asked James Cook University Hospital to comment on the gross mismanagement of Middlesbrough General Hospital regarding Zhang Guo-Hua's death. Simon Pleydell, chief executive of South Tees Hospitals NHS Trust, didn't give his view, but said that the hospital is unable to give any information regarding the circumstances surrounding Zhang's death directly to me without permission from his family.

There was nothing Mrs Zhang could do at the time. Not a legal resident, not an English-speaker, she was powerless.

On top of the misery of not being able to trace her husband's medical records, Mrs Zhang discovered that Lim's promise of compensation had turned out to be an empty one. He never paid up. Instead, he'd offered her a job in another of Samsung's

suppliers, Young Shin in Billingham. Mrs Zhang was now the only breadwinner of her family, and she desperately needed an income to support her children in China, so she took up Lim's offer of a job at Young Shin's factory. But Young Shin refused to employ her: they were afraid of being connected with Zhang's death, which might attract attention. She was left with nothing.

'The factory refused to pay the family compensation,' a worker from Tienjin told me, 'because, they said, Zhang was working illegally. That's ridiculous! Everyone knows the factory allows the agency to provide us with false documents so we can work day and night for them. When Zhang was slaving away for them, the factory didn't complain he was working illegally then, did they? Now they use his illegal status as an excuse to disregard his life and death.'

Zhang's co-workers, meanwhile, were still trying to help his family's cause. Xiao Li urged Mrs Zhang to sue the company, but she didn't have the courage.

A few of the workers from the north-east of China where Zhang came from went on a spontaneous strike in the months after the cremation. That was no problem for Lim: he simply dismissed them. But still the atmosphere of unrest went on; the cause of 'justice for Zhang's family' would not go away. So Lim resorted to a more sinister tactic: 'divide and rule'. This involved setting one group of workers against another, exploiting their fear. He told the supervisors to spread the word that 'Mrs Zhang is a bad influence on the workers, because she will attract public attention, which may hinder your job opportunities'. The supervisors hinted to the workers that they'd face possible immigration raids and deportation if they tried to draw attention to Mrs Zhang.

This tactic worked. Sympathetic faces – not all of them, but most of them – gradually turned away.

'I don't hold it against them,' Mrs Zhang said to me. 'I understand why they looked the other way.'

Now she had nothing left. It became clear that Lim and the factory manager were intensifying their pressure to force Zhang's family out of the workplace and the entire area. One day, without any reason, Zhang's nephew was dismissed from Woo One, with no notice period.

'In the end,' Mrs Zhang's niece told me, 'the factory manager told us to our faces that we must leave. They didn't want to invite an investigation from the authorities. We had one more place to resort to for help in suing the company: the Chinese Embassy.'

But the embassy shattered their last hope. 'Zhang Guo-Hua was working illegally,' they said. 'It takes financial strength and experience to sue a company. Can you meet these requirements?'

Indeed she could not, Mrs Zhang realized, once and for all. With no money, no knowledge of the law, no English and no legal status, she'd come to the end of the road.

The following day, she, her niece and her nephew were sent to Hartlepool station by Lim, and seen on to a train. He wanted them out: they had no option but to leave.

Xiao Li, the rebel, had witnessed all this and he was still working at Woo One. Now, he told me later, he bitterly resented the daily monotony and tyranny of the factory. He cursed the machines, detested the Samsung label he had to print on hundreds of thousands of microwaves. He felt an uncontrollable contempt for Zhang's family. Why hadn't they sued? Why had they given up?

He was finding it harder and harder to abide by the factory rules. One day he decided to take a break, right then and there, in the middle of his shift. He just went and sat down at the side, on the floor. Woo One's managing director happened to walk past. 'What the hell are you doing?' he shouted.

Xiao Li knew this was the end. He was right. Lim was told to take Xiao Li off the production line.

His dismissal caused barely a ripple. He was instantly replaced. For the undocumented workers at Woo One, life went on, just as before. Their weekly working hours ranged from seventy-two to a hundred hours. If anything, life became a little worse: the supervisors were more careful than ever to keep an eye on the workers, making sure they had no contact with the outside world. The twenty-four-hour sweatshop regime, and the workers' isolated existence, made them easy to keep an eye on. When I visited in 2004, the Chinese workers revealed that there had been no wage increase despite their continuous demands.

A year after Zhang's death, the HSE served eight notices to Woo One (although it knew nothing about Zhang's story at the time). There were five improvement notices, on major health-and-safety risks such as the lack of ways to ensure safe operating procedures for machinery, risks of injury from entrapment and risks of getting untrained workers to do skilled jobs. There were also three immediate prohibition notices due to risks such as possible access to dangerous moving parts of machinery, which breached the Health and Safety Act 1974 and the Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations 1998.

After two years of piecing together the story of Zhang's last months, and of the aftermath of his death, I felt I had a fairly clear picture of what had happened. But there was one man I hadn't yet met. Having heard from so many people about Lim – Cheng-Zhe Lim, of S. C. Lim & Co, New Malden – I was curious to meet the man himself.

The office in New Malden was as unremarkable as any recruitment office – though its darkened windows made it a little sinister. The secretary behind the desk was not welcoming. She was suspicious. 'How did you know about us?' was her first question. It was clearly unusual for a person to visit the office with no introduction or appointment.

I asked to speak to Mr Lim, and after a few minutes of

whispered conversation a wary man appeared from the back room.

‘How do you know of my company?’ he asked.

I did not divulge to him, yet, the true extent of my knowledge. ‘Oh, it’s quite well known among the fraternity of Chinese workers I’ve met.’

Cautiously, he answered my questions. He told me he’d been working with Samsung Electronics for four years, and had an annual contract with their suppliers to recruit 150 workers each year, the number peaking at times of high production. He told me that his company had recently taken over, and now part-owned, Woo One Ltd in Hartlepool.

I found out that his labour-providing business stretched from the construction trade in London to the seafood-processing industry in Scotland and as far as the Shetland Islands, where his small team of Chinese workers processed salmon for export. ‘Our company’s annual profits are £1.5 million,’ he told me.

I asked him about the working hours: I’d heard they were very long and that conditions were harsh.

‘The workers want to work hard,’ he replied. ‘The harder they work the more money they earn.’

I mentioned the matter of an industrial death I’d heard about. Had that been anything to do with working conditions?

He refused to comment.

S. C. Lim & Co dissolved on 29 May 2007, and was incorporated as a company of the same name on the next day, 30 May. Lim’s name was conveniently removed from the new company appointment records, while he still manages the company’s day-to-day business.

I visited Lim again in February 2008 and put all the allegations to him. Regarding the registration fee of £100, he said: ‘It was a fee for our accountant. Workers moved around quickly, to wherever the better jobs are. If the worker found a better job, say, in a salad factory, they could leave us within one to two months. We had 320 workers at that time. But in fact

only 147 of them stayed to work. Many of them came and left. My accountant had to deal with them and sort out their tax, therefore I had to charge them £100. This way, they would at least work for six months to a year. After a year, I returned the money to them.'

No workers had actually received the 'accountant's fee' back. Lim explained that was because the workers didn't sign a contract. Yet no worker had ever been offered a contract.

Regarding the claim that Lim's company sold photocopies of work permits for £50 each, he said: 'I never charged workers money for permits. I only sorted out tax for people. If workers couldn't give me their permits within three weeks of starting the job, I'd dismiss them. Some people with work permits asked me if I could sell the documents for them, for as high as £150 per copy. I tried to bargain it down for the workers and sometimes lowered the price to £100 per permit ... Twenty-five per cent of the permits were "borrowed" this way. Mr Han [department head at Woo One] managed the whole thing. The team leaders had a copy [of workers' documents], the permit lender [seller] had a copy, the department manager also had a copy. The team leaders made photocopies and then passed them to Mr Han who then passed them to my office. The team leaders negotiated conditions with the work-permit lender. When the team leaders wanted to keep the workers, they would find documents for them. They would get in touch with the lender, selling permits for £150 or £200. This way, permit copies were reused many times in different factories.' Lim admitted that from 2001 to 2002 his team leaders sold permits to workers on occasions. 'One team leader charged £50. I dismissed him. Another one charged £100. I transferred him to another workplace.'

Regarding the £150 charged for food and accommodation, Lim said: 'The food and rent wasn't arranged by us [S. C. Lim & Co Ltd] at first. If the minimum rate was £4.20, they [Woo One Ltd] would take 60p from us and left us with £3.60. And

then they deducted food and rent from this and left us with £3.10 in the end. Later, probably in November 2004, I bought Woo One's flat and took over the management and began to charge workers £150 for food and rent.' As to the hourly rate he paid to workers, Lim said: 'I remember it was more than £1.80 per hour.'

Regarding the overwork that workers believed had caused Zhang Guo-Hua's death, Lim said: 'People weren't forced to do overtime. They all liked to do overtime. But you can't give people overtime work to do only according to their own needs. Zhang wasn't alone. They all did the same work, but no one had the same thing happen to him. Later, his wife told me that Zhang's father had also died of haemorrhage. High blood pressure [Zhang's symptom] was closely related to pressure at work. But there wasn't that kind of pressure ... I didn't actually like them to work overtime because I had to pay them more wages then. I prefer to increase the number of staff rather than making people work overtime.'

As to where the responsibility lies, Lim said: 'I had a contract with Woo One saying how many hours people could work. It was 260 to 280 hours a month. But Woo One always wanted overtime work. I raised the issue with them before. I thought it might have negative effects if there was too much overtime work. They violated our contract. They said workers weren't forced to work, but, when some workers said no to overtime work, Woo One sacked them. I think Zhang Guo-Hua's death had something to do with the overworking. But Woo One wouldn't admit that. The working hours were Woo One's responsibility.'

Regarding Lim's unrealized offer of compensation (equivalent to six months' wages) to Mrs Zhang, he said: 'I never said I was to pay her compensation. I mentioned it to the team leader Mr Jin in the factory that I will ask Woo One for a minimum of three months' wages and a maximum of six months' wages as compensation. I said to Woo One Ltd that, as the death

happened in their building, they should be responsible. My lawyer told Woo One that they should be responsible and should have sent the worker to the hospital in time. I asked Woo One if they would compensate on humanitarian grounds but they didn't want to. I asked them for six months' wages as compensation but they refused. So I asked for three months' wages. They refused again. They said I should pay for six months' wages to Mrs Zhang as compensation, and they would pay for keeping Zhang's body in the hospital before the cremation.'

Regarding Lim's dismissal of Zhang Guo-Hua's nephew without notice, he said: 'He [Zhang's nephew] continued to work there after Zhang's death for about fourteen days. But Woo One wouldn't allow it. It wasn't legal. They [Mrs Zhang, Zhang's nephew and niece] were waiting [for work] for two months. Later they felt they had to go. They left voluntarily.'

With regard to unfair dismissal without notice in general, Lim said: 'If they [the workers] violated our rules, such as drinking and fighting . . . then I had to dismiss them.'

During my two years of research into Zhang's story, Samsung Electronics was gradually relocating to Slovakia. The reason given for the move was 'falling prices of electronic goods driven by competition against the cost of production'. The British wage level of £4.50–£5.50 an hour, they said (failing to mention the much lower wage level at some of their suppliers), was too high, compared with the Slovakian wage of £1 an hour. Production at Samsung's new site in Galanta, in the west of the country, began in 2004.

So those glorious employment opportunities, praised by the Queen and Peter Mandelson, were turned to dust. Samsung did not feel any obligation to return the £10.5 million they'd been awarded by the government: they claimed to have reached the required target by employing 1,600 people at the plant's peak time.

Quietly, in the shadow of the great global conglomerate, Woo One in Hartlepool was closing down and relocating to Slovakia as well. Without noise or fuss, the Chinese and Korean workers were laid off, and the factory was closed in March 2005. It was as easy as that to remove all evidence of past events. There happened to be a huge fire at the Woo One site on the very day when it was due to close. The cause of the fire was never established; but Xiao Li is in no doubt: 'The company did this to claim from the insurance company.'

Now it was the Slovakian president Robert Fico's turn to praise the employment opportunities granted by Samsung to his country's citizens. And the impressive statistics were rolled out, proudly boasting: Samsung Electronics has created 3,000 jobs in Galanta, with 2,500 of the workers employed on its 35-acre manufacturing site. Sales have increased tenfold in four years. Galanta (a barren city that has remained out of reach of tourists) is now known as 'Samsung City'. One of every five residents works for Samsung.

And if you look behind the scenes, you find that Korean suppliers have moved in to meet Samsung's needs. Today there are at least eleven Korean suppliers dotted around Galanta, manufacturing PC monitors and TV sets to supply to Samsung Electronics Slovakia.

Woo One has changed its name to Kihwa. The factory is twenty-five miles from Galanta in the town of Surany, and employs between 300 and 500 people, depending on the time of year. I visited Kihwa in autumn 2006. Had the change of name and of location brought an improvement in working conditions? Sadly, I could see no evidence of this. The one thing that had changed was that the Chinese and Korean workers from Woo One were gone. They could not have moved to a different country, having no immigration status to make the crossing of borders possible. Lim had scattered them across Britain to work at other factories or building sites. But, apart from that, the scene at Kihwa was all too recognizable: the

same toxic smell of burning plastic, the same gruelling twelve-hour shifts, the workers still not provided with masks to protect them from chemicals in the label-printing process, the same air of resigned acceptance among the workforce. I spoke to Martin, a local employee, who was pleased at least that his wage had gone up from 1.2 euro per hour to 1.9, meeting the new national minimum wage. And at least he had a job in an area where there was not much choice of work. But there was no sick pay at Kihwa, he told me, and no holiday pay written into the contract. 'The company's getting us cheap and not following the rules.' And, as had been the case for Zhang and so many others in Hartlepool, no training: 'you learn how to do the job by following others'.

The sales department of Kihwa are delighted with how things are going. They made a million euro from sales in October 2006 alone. 'Slovak workers choose to work for us,' the sales executive told me, 'because of the good image our company has. People trust us.'

Factories like Kihwa will never be short of staff. As we'll see in the following chapters, there are many more Martins, many more Zhangs, waiting to get on to the production line and go through whatever's required in order to bring some money home to their families. The factories know how to exploit their desperation. The global conglomerates meanwhile, high above the human everyday stories, increase their profits.

Samsung Electronics Ltd, Samsung Electronics Slovakia, Kihwa Ltd (Woo One Ltd today) did not respond to the allegations.