

The Elie Wiesel Prize in Ethics Essay Contest 2009

Essay topic: “Articulate with clarity an ethical issue that you have encountered and analyze what it has taught you about ethics and yourself.”

“Blood, Sweat, and Tears: My experience in human rights and workers’ rights”

The 228 Incident, my father, and I

*“With two sons as my companion,
Our blood was sprayed over the prairie.”*

- English translation of the epitaph
on the tomb of my great-grandfather, great
uncle, and grandfather

When my dad was only six years old, on April 4, 1947, his father, great uncle, and grandfather (all doctors, educators, and statesmen) were taken from their home, tortured, and murdered. As the oldest male left in the house, my dad was sent to find all three bodies in the field near their village home, and his memory of this unthinkable task is still so very clear: lying in the prairie like forgotten old toys, all three bodies were beaten to the point of being unrecognizable and were shot twice, execution style. His father’s eyes were pricked with needles to a pulp and his right arm was broken, his uncle’s intestines were spilling out of his abdomen, and his grandfather’s body was the most badly beaten and tortured. In what became known as the 2.28 Incident, approximately 30,000 innocent Taiwanese citizens were massacred by the Chinese Nationalist government, who at the time ruled over Taiwan . . .

On February 28, 1947, when Taiwanese-Chinese relations were already at the brink of conflict, a Chinese soldier publicly punished and pistol-whipped an elderly woman and her young children for selling “illegal, untaxed” cigarettes on the streets. Taiwanese passersby were enraged and a riot ensued. That day became known as the start of the “2.28 Incident,” when the Chinese Nationalist “Kuomintang” government began its purge of the island’s Taiwanese “elite,” including doctors, government officials, statesmen, professors, etc. Supposedly, it was the party’s way of cracking down on dissidents (Chou, 2007).

To secretly take the three bodies back to his home, my dad asked a family friend to help transport the bodies in his straw-filled oxen wagon. At six years old, my dad lifted the bodies of his forefathers to the wagon when the night was at its darkest and hid them with straw, lest the Nationalist soldiers discover this wrongdoing. At six years old, my dad watched his 19-year-old mother, 18 year-old aunt, and 62-year-old grandmother clean the bodies of their husbands, preparing them for burial. At six years old, my dad watched the Kuomintang party soldiers strut around their village selling the clothes they stole off his three forefathers’ bodies. At six years old, my dad watched as the world cruelly changed his life forever.

After the incident, my great-grandmother was left as the head of the household. She had to bring faith and encouragement to the two 19 and 18-year old widows, to the three young fatherless children, to the rest of the community. She kept the household strong, despite the absence of father-figures and the ensuing poverty. My father remembers her being strict with everything – behavior, education, money, etc. But he also remembers hearing her cry and cry every morning, when she took her lone walk to the top of the mountain.

My great-grandfather was the Hualien County Commissioner, the Hualien Council Chief,

the Taiwanese member of the National Assembly of the Republic of China, a local middle and high school founder and principal, and a doctor (Huang, 2008; Simon, 2003). He and two of his three sons (all doctors) were betrayed by their own country. They had dedicated their entire lives to bettering the lives of others – they did not charge impoverished patients or aborigines. They promoted peace and education throughout both their town and country. And yet after the murders, the Chinese government refused to acknowledge that the 228 Incident actually happened and did not formally recognize or apologize for the event until almost 40 years later (Simon, 2003).

The house that my dad lived in during the 228 Incident still stands today (albeit greatly renovated) in Fonglin, a quaint little town near the east coast of Taiwan. In the second floor study room, there is a 1946 photograph of my great-grandfather as the Taiwanese member of the National Assembly in Nanjing, China, pleasantly standing with Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the Nationalist government. I remember when I first saw this photo; I couldn't believe my eyes. Did my great-grandfather know that in one year, he would be murdered on the orders of the man who stood next to him (Gluck, 2007)? The man who was supposed to represent the ideals of Taiwan – *Ilha Formosa*, as the Portuguese discoverers called it -- as a country? Did *Chiang Kai-shek* know that the man next to him and his two sons would be three of the 30,000 innocent Taiwanese citizens killed in the next year?

My father is frequently asked by organizations and colleges to speak at conferences or meetings about his 228 story. What he tells everyone inspires me: he always asks for peace between Taiwan and China. He discourages the common feeling of hatred that arouses when 228 is spoken of. He, the rest of my family, and I tell people that we do not have to forget this event,

but we must forgive. After all, how much better would we be than the Chinese government, if we do not forgive and continue this battle?

I know my dad is an emotionally strong person. He has overcome such great obstacles in his lifetime – from growing up fatherless and penniless to attaining his Ph.D. in Chemistry and caring for his wife and child. But the only times I have ever seen him breakdown and cry were when he read the epitaph that precedes this essay. When I was younger, I would often ask myself, why was it that when he spoke of his forefathers, he wouldn't cry? But when he reads these 14 Chinese characters, all the pain and suffering floods back to him?

I think I now know the answer. How could the country that my forefathers loved so much turn its back on them and countless innocent others? Their “blood was sprayed over the prairie” that they so cherished, and at the hands of those they trusted in. A government so hungry for power and survival will relinquish its sense of ethics to attain what it wants. Human rights today holds an international community responsible for offenses against individual citizens – a huge leap from pre-World War II, when human rights were viewed as “protected domestic jurisdiction” (Donnelly, 2007).

I believe that we have come very far in making a nation's human rights issues into the world's human rights issues. Since the crisis in Darfur began in 2003, hundreds of advocacy groups and nongovernmental organizations have been springing up in order to encourage policy makers to help the Sudanese (Amnesty International, 2007). For the current crisis between Israel and Hamas (bound by customary international humanitarian law), Human Rights Watch is imploring Israel and Egypt to allow humanitarian aid into Gaza (Human Rights Watch, 2008).

But there is still another issue that remains to be addressed more widely. It was once the subject of the day in the early 20th century, then again beginning in the 1980s (Boris, 2003).

Now, it is high time to revive our duty to those less fortunate in the textile and apparel industry. Here is how my experience in human rights intertwines with mine in workers' rights . . .

The factory, the corporation, the government, the nonprofit, and I

I still remember the feeling of walking through my first textile and shoe factory tour in Taiwan in August 2007: appalled, disappointed, and disturbed. I remember the 3 x 4' windows and the home-use fans that somehow constituted a "legitimate" ventilation system. I can still smell the acrid epoxy glue pervading the entire floor. No workers wore face masks. Workers stitched, wove, and glued furiously, never glancing up, on backless wooden stools. They were given only two breaks throughout the whole "eight-hour" day, and these had to be asked for.

Upon returning to the States, I knew I had to do something. I first participated in one of my university's study abroad program in Winter 2008, during which I researched workers' rights in Egypt, Greece, Morocco, Ethiopia, India, Thailand, and Laos. Next, in order to better understand the ethical issues that face the fashion industry, I decided to first drop my then Biological Sciences major and create my own major, "Social Responsibility in the Textile and Apparel Industry" as part of the university's Dean's Scholar program.

A few months later, on behalf of The Fair Labor Association (FLA), a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving global textile and apparel factory working conditions, my professor and I began to create an online course for multinational corporations' top executives to teach ethical purchasing practices, in order to improve global textile factory working conditions. Already, several leading brand name apparel companies have registered. When my professor

approached me with this opportunity, I thought to myself, how better to give back to the Taiwanese factory that I visited, than by creating change at the roots?

It is becoming progressively more evident that purchasing practices conducted by retail staff have a substantial negative impact on the supply chain's working conditions. That is, merchandisers' purchasing decisions affect how manufacturers control their employees and production, often causing the deterioration of working conditions. The idea that purchasing practices can have a positive impact on factory conditions is relatively new. There has always been controversy about this method of change, since altering purchasing practices is targeting the heart of how a corporation earns its profit. Properly implemented, however, I believe that corporations can actually be socially responsible and earn a profit at the same time.

Every textile and apparel factory in the world is competing with each other. Each one is doing everything they can to stay on top and earn profits. But with the combination of pressure from buyers and, in turn, suppliers, the workers cannot rise out of their dismal and painful, poor lives. If their lives can't develop, communities can't develop, and countries can't develop – all they can do is struggle just to survive.

Corporations should have the social duty to ensure that their clothes were made under ethical circumstances. The FLA, Worldwide Responsible Apparel Production (WRAP), and Business for Social Responsibility (BSR) are just a few nongovernmental organizations that monitor their member corporations' factories, checking to see whether factories provide a healthy and safe working environment, pay fair wages and proper overtime pay, institute freedom of speech and freedom of association and collective bargaining (unless in countries where it is illegal), and employ no child labor.

I also believe that the ethics of politics is just as heavy a factor as the sourcing factory on how well workers are treated. For instance, in many Southeastern Asian nations, first and second generation human rights, including the freedom of association and collective bargaining and freedom of speech, are denied to laborers (Dickson, Loker, & Eckman, 2007). In China, less than 10 percent of rural migrant workers have medical insurance, thanks to the *hukou* household registration system (Harney, 2008). To make matters worse, approximately 70 percent of a local Chinese official's performance assessment is based on the GDP growth of his/her area. As one can imagine, this leads to excessive corruption within the local government – in order to improve the local GDP, the official is now more willing to turn a blind eye toward factory violations, such as illegal waste dumping (BusinessWeek, 2007).

But what experts are now realizing is that it is not just the sourcing factories that play a significant role in how their workers are treated, but also the corporations' purchasing practices (ETI, 2008). For example, say "Apparel Corporation X" ordered 10,000 screen-printed t-shirts with pockets to be made at "Factory Y" within three months. But, as it has occurred too many times in the past, it is highly likely that the corporation's design or buying team will change the design or quantity of the order at the last minute – giving the sourcing factory a significantly less amount of time to produce the desired order. The factory is always afraid of losing their customers and their business, and so they usually agree to this last minute change. To continue with the aforementioned example, if Apparel Corporation X wanted to follow a new trend and decided at the last minute to change the location of the pocket even by only a few *millimeters*, the consequences of this seemingly simple decision is dire: Because of the change in design or change in quantity desired, the factory managers will usually force their employees to work overtime, oftentimes without proper pay. Especially in rural Africa and Southeast Asia, having to

work overtime is dangerous, since there is no longer late night transportation from the factory back to the workers' villages, causing female workers to walk home alone in the rural dark.

Working on this online course, which will be released in early 2009, with my professor has proved to me my desire to make the change that should and needs to happen for these factory workers. Change for them will not happen overnight – it is a process. Those Taiwanese workers I saw two summers ago may not even witness the change until a few years from now. The course I created with my professor may just be worth a few “hems and stitches,” but I am determined to complete the final product, find the global solution, and give the lives that factory workers deserve, no matter what it takes.

The best question is, “Why?”

As I end my essay, I'd like to answer a question that you may be wondering: Why did I choose to include both the 228 Incident and social responsibility in the textile and apparel industry in this essay? It was not to “kill two birds with one stone,” nor to tell my life story, but for two core reasons: The first is more of a personal reason, one to pull my past and my present together. As I grow older, I realize more and more how much the 228 Incident impacts me – the ideas of justice and equality have always been concepts that I strongly believe in, and I want to honor my ancestors' spirit. On the future track that I see myself on, I want to work hard to make the lives that factory laborers are entitled to a reality.

The second reason is to prove the main commonality between human rights and workers rights: ethics in people and ethics in politics. Governments can choose to show their altruistic, positive side, or they can exhibit their worst possible behavior. The point is, they have the choice. Almost all political systems are striving to survive and extend their reign, but all

implement different methods. Were 30,000 innocent lives worth sacrificing in order to attain almost 40 more years of rule? Is the denial of first generation human rights, causing millions of laborers to lead miserable lives producing goods and services for us, worth it?

No.

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