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### **CLB BOOK REVIEW: *Dying for an iPhone* (2020) [1]**

Because of an administrative error, 17-year-old Tian Yu did not receive her first month's salary after relocating from a village in Hubei to Shenzhen, where she conducted spot inspections of Apple products' glass screens. A "left behind child," Yu arrived at Foxconn with only 500 yuan and an old cell phone, and when she discovered that she had not been paid for her labour and no one would help her, she jumped from her workers' dormitory window. She was out of money, her cell phone was broken, and she describes feeling "so desperate that my mind went blank." Yu survived the fall with seven fractures and paralysis from the waist down.

Yu was not the only young Foxconn worker who felt this way. In the spring of 2010, 18 young workers attempted suicide, only four of whom survived. This disturbing pattern at Foxconn factories producing Apple products in China made international headlines [2]. Over the course of the decade since then, the authors of *Dying for an iPhone* conducted fieldwork at Foxconn sites in twelve cities, interviewing workers and student interns, including suicide survivors, to first understand the life circumstances and conditions in the factories that led to these 18 young people, ages 17-25, becoming so desperate. In their investigation, the authors expose myriad systemic problems highlighted by this tragic phenomenon, and ask whether it had any resultant effects on the responsible stakeholders: improved work conditions at Foxconn, changed corporate practices at Apple, or enforcement of China's robust labour laws. Unfortunately, that answer is in the negative. Rather, Apple's vision to "serve humanity" applies to consumers, at the exclusion of the workers who make the products under stressful and coercive conditions in Foxconn factories across China.

The book examines conditions for Foxconn factory workers from a variety of angles: the disparate gender impacts on women workers, work safety issues, occupational health and the link to environmental harm, corporate-state interests in China, the difficulties of workers in navigating China's legal and regulatory system, and instances of worker strikes and protests at Foxconn facilities that ultimately failed to coalesce into a broader movement. In addition, the authors study Foxconn as an employer and Apple as a brand, and how these entities' cultures, leadership, and priorities have failed to take into account workers' dignity, all under the tacit approval and even active participation of authorities in China.

Throughout their well-researched analysis, the authors bring to the forefront the segment of humanity most affected by the confluence of these conditions: the workers themselves. By treating the workers as individuals with agency that have often become trapped in an exploitative labour cycle – rather than under the all-too-common pitying gaze – *Dying for an iPhone* gives

voice to young workers who eloquently express not only their frustrations and challenges, but also hopes and dreams for their futures, in poetry and song, and through humour. Juxtaposing their lives and stories with hard data from a variety of sources – labour contracts and agreements, work injury and medical reports, company publications, and government data – powerfully centres the impacts of these policies and the range of responsible actors on the workers who make our devices.

Although instigated by events that occurred ten years ago, this book and its implications are not mired in the past. The authors follow Apple’s corporate culture and various product launches over the decade, and connect recent events such as Foxconn’s CEO Terry Gou’s recent loss in the Taiwan Presidential Primary to Han Kuo-yu, while foreshadowing the impact of Covid-19 on workers, the U.S.-China trade war and companies souring on supply chains in China, and Foxconn’s plans for further expansion outside of China and particularly along China’s Belt and Road.

Ultimately, are Foxconn’s factories in China an outlier, or representative of labour conditions? As Foxconn reaches to other jurisdictions, will the same labour practices also be exported, or will international and domestic law be enforced to curb the abuses? To the first question, CLB can emphatically answer that the specific problems researched and studied in the book are representative of broader labour conditions, from limits on freedom of association and collective bargaining, to employers dodging labour laws with impunity, and workers being given the run-around across the bureaucracy when attempting to enforce basic rights. As for the second question, *Dying for an iPhone* powerfully shows that international attention and consumer awareness are not enough momentum for systemic change. The solution lies in empowering workers themselves to participate at the factory level. Indeed, international solidarity is more important than ever to support workers in finding representation to hold responsible parties accountable.

## NOTES

[1] *Dying for an iPhone: Apple, Foxconn, and The Lives of China's Workers*, by Jenny Chan, Mark Selden, and Pun Ngai

[www.dyingforaniphone.com](http://www.dyingforaniphone.com)

<https://www.plutobooks.com/9780745341293/dying-for-an-iphone/>

<https://www.haymarketbooks.org/books/1493-dying-for-an-iphone>

[2] “String of Suicides Continues at Electronics Supplier in China,” by David Barboza, *The New York Times*, 26 May 2010

<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/26/technology/26suicide.html>