

BOOK REVIEW

Dying for an iPhone: Apple, Foxconn and the Lives of China's Workers

I read *Dying for an iPhone* the day it was delivered to my house. I have been trying to think of a non-clichéd way to express “I couldn’t put it down” but I can’t, so that phrase will have to do. It is an excoriating study of Foxconn’s operations in China, written with all the anger and emotion that the subject requires, and further brought to life with photographs and workers’ poetry. The book aims at a readership beyond academia — it is published by a left, rather than academic, press — and is all the better for it. This is the type of writing to which all academics should aspire.

The book has three authors: Jenny Chan, Assistant Professor of Sociology at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University; Mark Selden, Research Associate at Cornell University and Columbia University; and Pun Ngai, Professor of Sociology at the University of Hong Kong. All are well known for previous books and articles, including their research into Foxconn. Those who are familiar with some of that previous work will see it reflected here.

The core argument is simple: the success of Foxconn in China — and by extension Apple (Foxconn is one of the world’s biggest producers of Apple products) — is off the back of brutal exploitation of its workforce, supported by the Chinese state at both local and national levels. At its most extreme, this includes the deaths of workers from suicides, workplace accidents, or explosions. Twelve chapters of engaging prose convincingly demonstrate the argument, covering a wide array of topics such as wages, conditions, the labour process, social reproduction, class stratification, environmental issues and so on. There is so much squeezed in, so many facets to the argument and to workers’ lives, that the effect is to create a giant, powerful mosaic about work and life at Foxconn. Workers’ voices are present throughout. There is also a bitter juxtaposition of corporate social responsibility pronouncements against reality. Having laid bare the situation across the 12 chapters, for example, the Epilogue begins with a quote from the 2016 Apple Supplier Responsibility Progress Report: “There’s a right way to make products. It starts with the rights of the people who make them” (p. 194). An accompanying website, www.dyingforaniphone.com, includes additional materials such as videos and songs.

The book is not wholly one-sided. It also includes studies of how workers and civil society fight back, through strikes, riots, protests and legal disputes. We get the impression, though, that such actions are fundamentally limited and fragmented, unable to compete with Foxconn’s state-supported power. Strikes are broken, legal disputes are unsuccessful and protests have little impact. In the chapter on confronting environmental crisis, for example, we are told that “Workers’ campaigning efforts pale in the face of corporate expansion” (p. 144). This is somewhat depressing, especially as it comes after a number of studies of Chinese labour in recent years, which have

suggested that there might be more space for organising and a rise in working class consciousness and power. The book attempts to end on a hopeful note, suggesting that “the case of Foxconn [...] could inspire a new round of global labor struggles” (p. 205). But there is no suggestion as to if or how this could happen and, considering the picture which the authors’ have painted, we get the feeling that it would be very, very difficult.

Dying for an iPhone is rigorously researched, the culmination of the authors’ near decade-long project. It is based on fieldwork in 12 Chinese cities where Foxconn has large production facilities. The authors conducted interviews with workers, managers, officials, labour rights activists and others, and supported and cross-referenced the information they gleaned from these meetings with innumerable other documents. One of the appendices reflects on doing field research in China (p. 213).

I have a couple of minor gripes. First, there is so much packed in here, so many topics breathlessly covered, that at times it feels like some are not adequately dealt with. For example, discussions of people who leave Foxconn and instead attempt to make a living in the informal economy (p. 111), tales of the company forcing workers to relocate to other parts of China against their will (p. 115) or reflections on why two-thirds of Foxconn employees are male (p. 123) only last for a page or two each. Second, while the focus is on Foxconn in China, a broader contextualisation may have been nice, exploring global supply chains, Chinese political economy more generally, or Foxconn’s activities elsewhere. To be sure, there are frequent nods to other companies, cases and the national and global situation — the epilogue, for instance, finishes with a discussion of Foxconn’s worldwide activities (p. 201), and the final appendix is a table listing the company’s facilities around the world (p. 217) — but they often feel too brief, inadequate or incomplete. The main body of text runs to 205 pages, so there would probably have been space for a more detailed exploration of some of these issues.

But these are very small niggles about a fantastic achievement. The book is a brilliant addition to labour studies, and evidence of how good academic writing can be. It should be read by all.

JOE BUCKLEY 