

Jenny Chan, Mark Selden and Ngai Pun, *Dying for an iPhone*. London: Pluto Press, 2020. 273 pp. ISBN 9780745341293

On 26 October 2011, Zhang Tingzhen, a 25-year old electrician working at an Apple subsidiary in Shenzhen, fell four metres from a ladder after receiving an electric shock. Due to lacking safety equipment, he landed hard on his head and required emergency brain surgery to save his life. He spent the next five months in a critical condition where he underwent four additional surgeries, and has since remained crippled due to his permanent brain damage. Tingzhen's father spoke of daily life with his injured son as 'like living death', and he keeps a bone that has been removed from Tingzhen's fractured skull in a glass jar to remind him of the tragedy and the deep injustice that his son suffered.

Dying for an iPhone is a gripping book written by sociologists Jenny Chan and Ngai Pun from Hong Kong and US historian Mark Selden. They combine undercover fieldwork, interviews with workers and contextual documentation on labour and economy to make forceful arguments about the dark underbelly of globalisation. Like the story about Tingzhen's unwarranted accident, the book is littered with horrific stories of death and maiming on Apple's production line, starting with a grim rise of spectacular suicides in late 2010 at Foxconn, Apple's leading global supplier and the world's largest electronics manufacturer. These stories are not only saddening because of the suffering that a loss of (working) life brings to victims and their families, many of whom rely on a single child's successful income for their livelihood. Nor are they merely angering because of the neglect and indifference shown by employers to the safety and well-being of their workers. Tingzhen's accident, for instance, could have easily been avoided if the company had provided him with a safety belt, electricity-proof gloves and a helmet. The suicides, in turn, are prompted by a combination of brutal work conditions and tyrannical decisions that squash workers' aspirations for decent, or even just life-supporting, remuneration for their hard work. No, the real agony in these stories stems from the concerted efforts by Foxconn to punish workers who ask for a dignified treatment, and fighting those – like Tingzhen's family – who seek redress for injuries, a case the authors follow in a chapter aptly titled 'Dead man walking'. These cases show how Foxconn is not just cynically indifferent about its workers, it also swiftly mobilises its appara-

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tus of legal experts, 'human resource' managers and numerous media outlets to crush opponents of its meticulously crafted public image of corporate responsibility, thus propping up (corporate) brutality with (corporate) lying.

How does one begin to make sense of this level of cynicism? After assembling the first evidence of working conditions at Foxconn's industrial plants in 2013, Jenny Chan, Mark Selden and Ngai Pun in collaboration with researchers from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong sent a letter of concern to the directors of both Foxconn and Apple Computers. All they received in response were 'corporate rationalisations and platitudes' (p. xiv), i.e. what we might term expressions of conventionalised indifference. What they had uncovered was therefore not just a regime of neglect, but a much more savage (corporate) animal: a machine of deliberate exploitation. Herein lies the book's predicament and the 'sweet spot' of its engagement: while it documents a long line of abuses and struggles to bring Foxconn to act on its public endorsement of responsibility for workers welfare, it simultaneously narrates the complex power relations of global supply chains that connect affluent consumers eagerly awaiting the latest tech-device with assembly-line workers in China under duress to deliver new products at high speed.

Crucial to this global link between consumers and producers who each in their own way are 'dying for an iPhone' lies a violent gap between demand and supply that is responsible for the stark difference in what dying actually means for these 'structurally' opposed groups. While the authors do not clearly spell out the theoretical double-meaning of 'dying' in their contrast between consumers and workers, they nonetheless use the important difference between the two groups to indicate the inequalities separating them. For while 'dying' for an iPhone can be read as a metaphor for status and desire in the first instance, the book shows all too vividly how it turns into a nasty condition of materiality for workers; viz. the structural inability of Foxconn's labour regime to protect life precisely because its profits derive from the obverse ability to squeeze labour for additional productivity gains.

But - as also argued by the three authors - behind the concrete contradiction between Foxconn's industrial success and the debilitating status of its work environment that the book patiently documents lies the much more powerful contradiction between Apple and Foxconn who compete for global profits on starkly unequal terms. While Apple Inc. in 2018 employed 132,000 and recorded profits of US\$ 60 billion, Foxconn employed 863,000 and recorded profits of US\$ 4.3 billion,

or 13 times less than its primary customer. To keep competitors at bay, Foxconn has had to liaise with political intermediators to get access to cheap land for its production facilities and circumvent labour laws while aggressively building, expanding and improving what the book's authors call a 'militarized management system' (p. 54) that includes detailed 'industrial engineering' (p. 59) processes and a cheap, casualised labour force. These measures have allowed Foxconn's revenues to grow even while the number of employees has declined from a high of 1.3 million in 2012. However, with Apple capturing as much as 56 per cent profit on the sales of its iPhone with only 1.8 per cent going to Chinese assembly labour, workers share the unenviable double burden of being on the frontlines of production but at the bottom of the value chain. Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that both their suffering and demands are also pushed to the bottom of corporate concern.

There is by now a vast body of literature that documents the dire consequences for labour brought on by the neoliberal outsourcing of labour from advanced capitalist countries beginning in the 1970s and accelerating after the end of the Cold War. All of the book's authors have contributed in significant ways to an understanding of the contemporary dynamics of Chinese labour. Mark Selden (1995) has shown how agrarian relations in China form a crucial background for understanding the disenfranchised and mobile labour regime of the current factory system; Ngai Pun (2005) through her award-winning work on women factory labourers; and Jenny Chan (2019) through her interrogation of changing labour relations under China's political-economic compact. These and other important works (Gallagher 2011; Swider 2015) show how China is in unique ways at the leading edge of contemporary commodity frontiers because of the combined power it commands over labour, technology, economy and politics – in Michael Mann's (1984: 91) terms, China has both strong 'despotic' and 'infrastructural' powers. Regimes on the peripheries of capitalist development have sought to accomplish similar bulk mobilisations of labour at the cheap end of the value chain through the establishment of extra-territorial juridical zones that have proved just as dangerous and debilitating for workers (Neveling 2017; Campbell 2018). Despite mounting evidence and protests against the exploitative nature of these enterprises, it seems there are always regimes and destitute workers willing to subject themselves – with very different outcomes, of course – to the dictates of global capital.

Dying for an iPhone is an important book. It takes readers into what Karl Marx referred to as the 'hidden abode of production' (2010: 121). Similar to Marx's patient reading of factory inspection reports to expose everyday exploitation, the authors offer rich documentation for the abuse and struggles they recount, from precarious internships that have allowed Foxconn to find new ways to cheapen production, to industrial poisoning that has damaged workers' health. Possibly the most poignant moments are revealed in workers' poems that reflect experiences of defeat, such as in these lines from Xu Lizhi, a Foxconn migrant worker (p. 191): 'Workshop, assembly line, machine, work card, overtime, wages.../ They've trained me to become docile / Don't know how to shout or rebel / Don't know who to complain to or denounce / Only how to silently endure exhaustion.'

So much pain and so little power. Yet, the labour movement in China and elsewhere continues to fight this unequal war, and it is to this book's credit that it traces these partial victories and ends on an optimistic note about transnational activism. At the same time, it seems there is a need to confront the nature of the beast head-on, in writing as well as in activism. In the book's epilogue, the authors suggest that 'to serve humanity' (a slogan they take from Apple and ingeniously subvert to include labourers, not just consumers) a 'closer collaboration between buyers and suppliers is required so as to put 'the welfare of workers to the fore' (p. 195). But maybe it is not the affluent consumer's hyped-up desires for technological gadgets that drive this machinery of destruction – for what then to make of the low-cost garment supply chain that is no less lethal (Ashraf and Prentice 2019), but which relies on the anonymity of brands *and* corporate operators much like the incessantly violent 'rotten trade' in organs trafficking (Scheper-Hughes 2003: 197)?

The factory labour regime uncovered in this book has a recent history, which is intimately connected with the globalisation of capital, particularly in the period since 1990 when the fall of Soviet Communism removed the last major ideological obstacle to capitalist accumulation, leading to what David Harvey (2018) has recently termed the 'madness of economic reason'. Maybe the next book to investigate China's complicity in global supply chains, an excavation which Naomi Klein (2005) popularised with her book *No Logo, No Space, No Choice, No Jobs* at the beginning of the millennium, should turn the table and ask why iPhones continue to kill despite the advances made in 'fair trade' and other solidarity movements. Workers and disenfranchised populations all over the globe are feeling the brunt of capitalism's advances in

the past decades. But what sort(s) of movement(s) would it take to confront the unequal accumulation of profits and behind-the-scenes political alliances that spur the continued success of companies like Apple and Foxconn? At least this reviewer feels that something more radical is called for than an alliance between workers and (privileged) consumers or even (authoritarian) states, both of which appear to benefit from their respective position in capital's expanding orbit. Or, to put it differently, if the unequal distribution of power and profit in global supply chains is at the crux of the problematic of labour exploitation – as the authors convincingly show – what then might be its remedies?

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