

The Real *i* in the Apple Universe

The State of Workers in a ‘Workers’ State’

ANAND PARAPPADI KRISHNAN

The violence in the Wistron factory—Taiwanese supplier producing Apple products—in Karnataka in December 2020 due to serious lapses in labour practices generated considerable debate on the realities of hi-tech manufacturing, which are built on outsourced, precarious labour. This incident also provided a window into the modes of operation of global electronics and hi-tech brands that bolster their corporate profile and reap profits through transnational production processes and practices involving chains of suppliers and subcontractors while also squeezing the lives of workers who produce sleek, high-definition gadgets and devices in sweat-shop conditions. The debates over labour contention and resulting violence in the Wistron facility had somehow missed the connections and parallels in the work practices and operations of Taiwanese subcontractors in Mainland China (Krishnan 2020). It is in this context that *Dying for an iPhone: Apple, Foxconn and the Lives of China’s Workers* provides a rich, in-depth study of the lived experiences of the workers of Foxconn, the major supplier for Apple, thereby also helping to comprehensively understand the intertwined relationship of the global brand and its suppliers.

The title of the book itself, while being provocative, also juxtaposes two kinds of deaths—on one side, the figurative one, where consumers around the world who are keyed into the new products of Apple, queue up to buy them; and on the other, a new generation of workers forced to bear the costs of producing these products, keeping up with corporate requirements of speed and precision. Thus, both the “deaths” are well connected to each other.

Emerging from deep research and investigation by the three authors who collaborated with researchers from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong for close to 10 years—with significant work being done

Dying for an iPhone: Apple, Foxconn and the Lives of China’s Workers by Jenny Chan, Mark Selden and Pun Ngai, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020; pp xvi + 277, \$19.95.

undercover in Foxconn’s manufacturing sites across nine locations in China—the book provides first-hand accounts of the precarious lives of thousands of young male and female migrant workers. As the authors note in the preface, the seed for their research was the rampant suicides by workers in Foxconn’s factories in China in 2010–14 in total, along with four attempted but survived with injuries, as enumerated and tabulated in detail in Appendix 2 of the book. In fact, it was the spate of these suicides that brought Foxconn and its production ecosystem into focus. From then on, Foxconn as well as other suppliers of Apple in China have been under scrutiny with reports of violations of labour standards and safeguards on various counts; a good portion of these reports also included forced internships of students studying in vocational educational institutions to work overtime on the assembly lines without any social protection, even amidst wilful violations of mandatory labour laws and regulations in this regard.

Divided into 12 chapters, along with four appendixes, the book covers all the different aspects related to the ecosystem of Foxconn and its intertwined relationship with Apple, exploring the experiences on the factory floors and assembly lines on the one hand, and the lives of young workers in working as well as living spaces on the other. The book is able to build a powerful narrative which is informed by rigorous ethnographies of workers and their lived experiences, with numerous first-person accounts. In fact, the latter is made possible by the strong rapport the authors and their team of researchers were able to build with the workers and their community networks.

The book successfully combines the different contentions and stories that have emerged over the past decade with regard to labour practices in Foxconn—and other suppliers of Apple as well as other electronics brands—and is able to provide a focused analysis.

Precarity of Workers’ Lives

Over the last four decades since the 1980s, China has witnessed successive waves of rural to urban migration as young male and female workers make their way into cities to find opportunities in the booming industries and services. According to the country’s official statistics, there are some 288 million rural migrants in the manufacturing, services and construction sectors. Their move to the cities is “driven by the desire to broaden their horizons and experience modern life and cosmopolitan consumption” (p 120). Foxconn has been one of the biggest beneficiaries of this migration as it absorbs the workers either through direct recruitment or through labour dispatch agencies. At Foxconn, the young workers “aspire to earn a living wage, develop technical skills, enjoy comprehensive welfare benefits, marry and secure the full range of citizenship rights in the cities they inhabit” (pp 177–78).

However, these dreams and aspirations crash when it meets the harsh realities of the assembly lines, factory floors and exploitative conditions in working as well as living spaces. These include regimented work arrangements and practices, constant disciplining and surveillance by line leaders, supervisors and managerial staff, compulsory overtime work, often with low pay and inadequate social protection, the blurring of their working and living spaces; being forced to handle hazardous industrial chemicals without proper safety equipment (Chapters 6 and 9); lack of proper compensation on work-related injuries and accidents (Chapter 10); forced transfers and relocations to newer cities as production units expand (Chapter 7); and socio-spatial exclusion in the cities on account of hard urban regulations (Chapter 7). The exhaustion, strain and hardships of the workers are not just physical but also extend to mental and emotional realms. The “hidden

injuries” include strain and disruption of marital and familial relations. The precarity of workers’ lives and the complete disregard for their well-being in Foxconn is aptly summed up in this small poem below titled “A Screw Plunges to the Ground,” penned by a former worker Xu Lizhi, who committed suicide in 2014, which also figures in this book (Chapter 12)¹

A screw plunges to the ground
working overtime at night
it drops straight down, with a faint sound
that draws no one’s attention
just like before
on the same kind of night
a person plunged to the ground.

With a lack of avenues or resources to escape from the vicious cycle of production and reproduction on the assembly line, lives are unsettled, and experiences of alienation are deep. While capturing these experiences vividly, the book also captures workers’ anxieties and unresolved tensions regarding their future and families, and how some attempt to seek solace in religion (Chapter 9). In the absence of any substantive and truly representative unions for the workers in which they are invested or inadequate collective bargaining mechanisms, the book also elaborately discusses the various minor and major strategies and tactics employed by them to amplify their grievances and discontent—this ranges from stoppages and slowing down the assembly line through well-crafted coordination (these are timed at critical moments in the densely connected, just-in-time manufacturing process. The transnational production process also ensures that localised work stoppages could cause disruptions at a wider level), to strikes, walkouts, traffic blockades, and in extreme cases, rioting (Chapter 11).

Intertwined Business Models

As rampant labour violations and workers’ suicides gained international attention, Apple came under strict scrutiny for its role and responsibility (or lack thereof). Unlike in present time where global activism, international labour solidarities and consumer awareness have prompted greater responsiveness, the brand’s standard strategy was to shift the onus onto its suppliers including introducing a

code for them in this regard. One of the two important hallmarks of the book is how the authors have throughout persevered relentlessly in bringing to relief the intertwined business models and relationships of Apple and Foxconn. In doing so, they also successfully demonstrate the dependency of both entities on each other, and how global brands also cannot escape responsibility by pushing the blame on suppliers while themselves taking the moral high ground. The authors also detail the establishment and growth of both Apple and Foxconn, their pioneers and leaders, their products and business practices to lay the background to understand the logic and rationale for both joining hands. With a strong reference like “Apple meets Foxconn, *here*, on the shop floor where workers assemble iPhones day and night” (p 27, Chapter 3), the authors are able to profoundly capture the reality of this relationship on the actual terrain where it gets played out.

Elaborated further, the book finds that the regimented management systems, unsafe working conditions and severe labour disciplining in Foxconn facilities that dehumanises the workers and accentuates “their race to bottom” emerge from Apple’s very business model and practices to stay ahead of the curve and be the global leader—the tight timelines, constant upgradation and fine-tuning of design and style based on consumer choices/evaluation, and striving to maintain high quality precision standards and efficiency, thus demanding high speed. Percolated down, it meets Foxconn’s own standards and specifications based on Taylorist “scientific management,”² by squeezing workers to pay meticulous attention to detail while at the same time maintaining high pace on the assembly line. This requires the Foxconn facilities—remarked as a city in itself by the authors—to work 24×7, continuously churning out “SMART” devices. Furthermore, by uncovering the hazardous chemicals involved in electroplating and polishing of the products, the authors are also able to accurately pin down Apple since it is corporations who determine the kinds of chemicals and processes that go into manufacturing, rather than the suppliers. There are also

other illustrations provided throughout the book to fix proper accountability on transnational electronics brands and how they shape the lives of workers who manufacture their products.

Foxconn and the Chinese Party-state

The other equally important hallmark of the book is the symbiotic relationship between Foxconn and the Chinese party-state, especially provincial and sub-provincial governments. As the logic and rationale of market became embedded in the state-directed development under the Reform and opening up of the Chinese economy post 1978, it coincided with the global transformation of industrial production and increased outsourcing by corporate giants in the United States, Europe and East Asia, as part of the strategies of maintaining lean workforces. The unlimited supply of rural migrant labour at low wage levels further propelled the creation of offshore assembly facilities. As transnational brands eyed the huge potential of the Chinese consumer market, and the Chinese diaspora increased their investments in the Mainland, the country’s formal entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001 solidified matters.

Foxconn was one of the prime beneficiaries of these changes. Beginning initially from the coast in southern China, Foxconn gradually expanded across the Mainland (especially under the “Go West” strategy for inland development), on the wings of lavish incentives, infrastructural support and preferential policies of local governments who are eager to showcase development and whose officials’ career progression is indexed to the levels of economic progress. Further, Foxconn has also hung onto the coattails of China’s Belt and Road Initiative, thereby aligning their interests to the party-state’s strategic objectives. The authors lay out in detail how, in the face of regional competition for foreign investment, local governments have led active mobilisation efforts for the ease of doing business ranging from infrastructural support, recruitment of labour (workers and student interns) and also charting out the division of labour for different administrative departments in the service of Foxconn.

Given China's skewed tax and revenue system in favour of the central government, the local governments are also dependent on suppliers like Foxconn for resource support, especially in the field of education. This illustrates the serious constraints and limitations on local governments to ensure the compliance of labour standards by companies like Foxconn. The inadequate labour protection system that forces workers to resort to different protest methods on their own against violations, is met with ad hoc responsiveness at times but mostly with different modes of repression by the local governments. Such state absenteeism in everyday practice in the labour arena is a visible contradiction for a country ruled by a vanguard party whose political and ideological system places workers in the forefront. In fact, there have also been vivid imaginations of Karl Marx visiting industrial facilities in Mainland China in the country's online sphere despite tight controls by the party-state.³

The book truly covers a vast canvas and travels through the worlds of work in China and shows how workers are integral to the large ecosystem of corporations that transcend territorial boundaries; and whose profit maximisation is at the cost of dehumanising the workers who manufacture their state-of-the-art, hi-tech products. It is another valuable addition to a wide range of literature that rigorously interrogates China's state-directed, market-oriented economic growth and development, bringing into relief its faultlines, and thereby, further underlining the "success trap within the success story" (Mohanty 2018). As the book covers such an expanse, almost breathlessly, a little more exploration of the lives of those workers who do manage to break the vicious cycle and are able to move out of Foxconn, and stories of workers who are forced to relocate to newer locations as the Foxconn facilities expand across the country could have been undertaken. These are but minor quibbles.

Overall, the book is a tour-de-force. While built on substantial interviews with Foxconn workers, student interns, teachers who monitor internship programmes, managers and government officials

by the authors and their team of researchers, these are supplemented with embedded field observation and extensive documentary research through poems, songs, open letters, photos and videos shared by the workers and their support groups. Additionally, the authors also list a dedicated website—dyingforaniphone.com—which is a repository for all the visual and audio materials as well as a platform to further amplify the global networks and solidarities that have developed in support of workers in supply chains in China on the one hand and hold global electronic brands accountable on the other. While not compromising on rigour in research, the authors have also taken great care to stay off from jargons and keep the language lucid, thus making it accessible to a wide range of audiences.

Anand Parappadi Krishnan (anand.p.krishnan@gmail.com) is a visiting associate fellow at the Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi, and a non-resident fellow, under the China India Scholar Leaders Initiative, at the India China Institute, the New School for Social Research, New York City.

NOTES

- 1 Original poem in Chinese edited by Qin Xiaoyu and published as a selected collection, titled *Xin de Yi Tian*, in 2015. English translation appears in *Iron Moon: An Anthology of Chinese Migrant Worker Poetry*, edited by Qin Xiaoyu and translated by Eleanor Goodman (2016), Buffalo: White Pine Press.
- 2 Propounded by Frederick Winslow Taylor (1856–1915), this philosophy breaks down the labour processes into minute components and forcing workers to maximise their intensity, thus emphasising on orderliness, cleanliness, standardisation and discipline. For more, see Taylor (1998).
- 3 "Marx Pays a Visit to Foxconn" (English translation of an illustrated piece circulated among electronics workers in the Pearl River Delta, in southern China), originally published in *WeiGongHui, an independent platform of news and analysis by and for young migrant workers in southern China*, 13 March 2018, accessed on 12 February 2021, <https://chuangcn.org/2018/03/marxconn>.

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