

Book Review

Work, Employment and Society

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Jenny Chan, Mark Selden and Pun Ngai

Dying for an iPhone: Apple, Foxconn, and the Lives of China's Workers*London: Pluto Press, 2020, £14.99 pbk, (ISBN: 9780745341293), 304 pp.***Reviewed by Charlie Smith, University of Leicester, UK**

Written ‘for workers in China and globally’, this book results from a decade long study prompted by Foxconn (and by extension Apple) workers’ suicides. Its overriding purpose is investigating corporate perspectives of these workers’ exploitation. Empirically, the book reveals in detail how corporate success is achieved at the expense of workers’ health and well-being. Theoretically, the text demonstrates the complex relationship between the government, capital and labour that combine to produce such employment relations. Understanding the effects of this exploitation is particularly apt during a global pandemic wherein iPhones and virtual technologies are used globally as a rare lifeline to socialising. Pandemic aside, the issues revealed in the book will endure as the use of technology develops and ‘the company looks to a future in which its major growth areas centre on Foxconn brands operating at cutting-edge technological frontiers led by robotics and artificial intelligence’ (p. xii).

There are 12 chapters including an epilogue and extensive appendices. The fieldwork scale is exemplary, interweaving a wide variety of data collection methods to reveal the lived experiences of workers at Foxconn’s major manufacturing sites in nine Chinese cities. Data include interviews, observations, poems, songs, open letters, blogs, photos and videos produced by workers. The effects of capitalism are made strikingly real as the language used in the book avoids treating mental well-being and suicide as taboo; for example, a chapter sub-heading of ‘a suicide survivor’ (p. 1) and a poem presented ‘for my departed brothers and sisters’ (p. 176). Such is the powerfulness of the open accounts, they could have perhaps been put at the beginning.

Foxconn’s success in China has been produced via brutal exploitation of its workforce, taking advantage of lower wages incentivised by the Chinese state locally and nationally. The conditions producing this worker exploitation are clearly articulated and undoubtedly could be replicated by many other corporate giants’ business models globally. The book explains how Foxconn became a world leader in electronics, how their employees form the new working class and the appealing novelty of Apple products for

consumers. The book offers a lengthy discussion of workers receiving low wages without benefits, being forced to work compulsory overtime, working in unsafe environments without health and safety precautions and being abused by managers who repress their rights from employment contracts and legislation. The data intersperse snippets of other information with the inclusion of multiple graphs, tables and startling figures. With so many issues identified, the reader is left to explore further the parts that interest them the most and thus breadth of data comes at the expense of the depth of analysis. Specifically, more discussion could be added on ethics, morals and the workers' human dignity. Given that 'the company culture of sexual harassment and gender discrimination was a shared grave concern' (p. 124), it would also have been pertinent to include more analysis of these issues.

One of the most important cogs that turns the Foxconn wheel is revealed in Chapter 5, which focuses on the abuse of student interns who are sent to the company for vocational training. These internships did not fulfil their training needs but because they legally remain as students, they were not entitled to any social insurance and benefits, pensions or medical and work-related support. Students' well-being and mental health evidently suffered, with 18 workers sadly committing suicide at Foxconn.

From the second half of the book onwards, cases of employees' resistance start coming through. For example, on p. 60 workers mentioned slowing their pace when managers observed them so they would not be given extra work and suffer burnout. There is even a story of revolt in worker dormitories when there was intolerable pressure to meet production targets for a new iPad model. Nevertheless, this resistance appears limited and unable to compete with Foxconn's managerial and state-supported power that results in tighter worker supervision and surveillance.

The writing is captivating and is often fuelled by much warranted anger and emotion, perhaps leading the reader to feel increasingly hopeless, speculating what, if any, change might be possible. This despair reaches its peak when Chapter 11 discusses that Foxconn managers joined hands with the local government, trade union and police to suppress violent worker protests.

The latest iPhone release will be coming soon, and the contribution of this book extends beyond academia, speaking to the concerns of a broad readership, making the population think about the most iconic commodity of the past decade, highlighting a deep fear of what could become. Overall, the work touches on a wide range of human resourcing issues, the employment relationship and labour relations that also renders it applicable for teaching a range of student cohorts.