



Book review

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Chan J, Selden M and Pun N (2020) *Dying for an iPhone: Apple, Foxconn, and the Lives of China's Workers*. London: Pluto Press. 304 pages. Hardback - £75.00 ISBN: 9780745341286. Paperback - £14.99 ISBN: 9780745341293

Reviewed by: Zhou Yang, postdocotral fellow, *Department of Sociology, the Univeristy of Hong Kong*

Critical communication scholar Dan Schiller (1999, 2007) once observed a systematic change in post-war global capitalism, that is, the reorganisation of the global economy around digital technologies and the emergence of the internet-related sector as a new pole of growth. This, he contended, is at the expense of labour rights, public interest and democracy. In *Dying for an iPhone*, Chan, Selden and Pun dive deep into the Apple-Foxconn empire, and make a strong case of this steep human cost, with a comprehensive and highly engaging account of the exploitation, struggles, hopes and dreams of Chinese workers behind the brands epitome of global digital capitalism.

All established scholars on Chinese reform and labour politics, before starting the project, the three authors had had decades of experience of research and activism with workers and labour NGOs in China. This had allowed them to quickly point out that Foxconn (and Apple)'s attribution of the 2010 spade of suicides in Shenzhen to workers' fragile psychological state was actually a shamelessly evasion of responsibilities. Instead, they demanded an explanation in the context of the company, the industry, and the wider society.

How, then, do they achieve this? While the book is written to appeal to a broad audience, the arguments are grounded in data collected through rigorous research. Over a decade, the authors and their collaborators followed Foxconn's spatial expansion and travelled extensively to conduct undercover fieldwork across 12 cities in China. In each city, they held interviews with workers, student interns and their teachers, managers and government officials, and supplemented these with field observations and extensive documentary research.

Drawing on this extensive data set, the authors start by sketching the contours of a buyer-dominated global production regime which they argue is central to workers' lived experience. And they do so by situating it within the dynamism of Chinese state capitalism and global capitalism. Specifically, the 1970s saw corporate giants in advanced economies like Apple outsourcing its production abroad for lower cost while focusing on design and innovation to retain dominance in the global value chain. Concurrently, China

began to embrace global capitalism, actively eliciting foreign capital and technology to advance its productive force. Foxconn stood out in this process because of Taiwan's industrialisation policy and cultural proximity, as well as its partnership with Apple, among other tech giants. To provide the much-needed cheap labour force, China's rural peasants and urban workers were mobilised, through reforms of the *hukou* and *danwei* systems, land reform and the dismantling of state provision of public service and social welfare. Until now, these trends and developments continue. The hierarchical system remains largely untouched, with the role of capital and technology enhanced and that of the Chinese government(s) becoming ever more multi-layered and complicated.

How does this buyer-dominated regime set parameters for workers' experience on the ground? In chapters 4-11, the authors provide a fine-grained thick description in this regard, juxtaposing analyses of cultures, priorities and interconnections among Apple, Foxconn, and Chinese government(s) in real-world situations, with stories of workers' work and lives.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 delve into the hidden abode of production. At Foxconn, workers typically are subject to a hierarchical and despotic management system that employs myriad incentive and punishing measures to create docile worker subjects who aspire to individual success. They are forced to work for illegally long hours, at a pace closely monitored by industrial engineers, but earn only a meager wage. An industry with fast product cycles, seasonal spikes in consumer demand and high aesthetic standards, in consumer electronics, suppliers are often pushed by buyers to impose intense work hours and unreasonably high standard, and use temporary workers to keep orders to deadlines. As both Apple and Foxconn prioritise profit maximization and public relations, vocational school students are constantly hailed to become *mere* low-cost, disposable substitutes for regular employees, while work protection is at best limited to words, putting workers' health and life under severe threat. Moreover, as chapter 9 unveils, the waste and hazards generated in production by such procedures as polishing and electroplating, and rampant consumer desires for upgraded models, expose workers to hazardous substances and produce dire environmental consequences locally. All these, the authors show, have been under the tacit approval or active participation of authorities in China.

Like in production, workers' everyday lives are also heavily imprinted by this buyer-dominated regime. In chapters 7 and 8, we meet Foxconn workers in their shabby, demoralizing accommodations. The realms of production and reproduction are divided and disruptive rather than integrated and mutually supportive. Meanwhile, patriarchy remains relevant, with female workers constantly underrepresented, undervalued and assaulted in the workshop and beyond, while male workers faced with mounting pressure of marriage. In this circumstance, ironically, predatory consumerism become what many rely on to escape temporarily from troubles, and achieve dreams of love, entertainment and success.

Facing this buyer-dominated global production regime, are workers machines? The authors give this a firm NO. Throughout the book, they demonstrate with numerous cases that workers are actively exploiting legal and extra-legal means to improve their own conditions. Although they do not necessarily see the law as neutral or empowering, despite the insurmountable institutional barriers, many do make their cases to the court, especially victims of occupational diseases and work injuries. Besides, in the past decades, worker

have been emboldened and accumulated organizing experience, leadership skills, and the capacity to present and display collective claims and power. Worker unrest of all kinds (strikes, sit-ins, demonstrations, rallies, etc.) grow in numbers, and their demands have been both economic and political, that is, to push for genuine workplace representation. It is true that these efforts have been challenged and contained by corporate-state interest through miscellaneous absorbing strategies, the authors nevertheless conclude with a positive note: labour movement can be strengthened by building a broader movement that engages wider social forces, and as they show in the epilogue, this is happening.

Overall, with its historical and theoretical in-depth, global and comprehensive in scope, *Dying for an iPhone* represents a landmark contribution to debates about Chinese labour politics. It also adds new threads to critical communication scholarship as it enriches our understanding of the relationship between communication and labour, by charting the labour politics underlying the expansion of global digital capitalism and embedded in the material base of digital communications infrastructure. It is recommended reading for anyone who wishes to reflect on the underlying human sufferings when digital technologies become mundane.

References

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