

Dying for an iPhone



APPLE, FOXCONN, AND THE LIVES
OF CHINA'S WORKERS

Jenny Chan, Mark Selden
and Pun Ngai

Praise for *Dying for an iPhone*

“*Dying for an iPhone* is far and away the most comprehensive account of the lives and working conditions of the people who produce what is perhaps the iconic commodity of the twenty-first century—the iPhone. But it is much more than that. We also see how Apple and Foxconn, working within a neoliberal trade regime promoted by the US, Taiwanese, and Chinese governments alike, transcended national boundaries to develop a brutally exploitative system of labor discipline. It is an incisive account of the social dislocation, but also the resistance, wrought when capitalists of many nations unite against workers. Global in outlook while still presenting fine-grained and highly engaging accounts of workers’ lived experiences, this book is a shining example of public scholarship.”

—Eli Friedman, coeditor of *China on Strike*

“Critical, accessible, and rigorously researched, this book offers the most comprehensive analysis of Foxconn, the world’s largest electronics factory: its bleak landscape, dire consequences, and inspiring efforts to change it for the better.”

—Jack Linchuan Qiu, author of *Goodbye iSlave: A Manifesto for Digital Abolition*

“Holding a sleek new iPhone in our hands it is difficult to imagine the brutal work lives of the people who assemble our smartphones. In *Dying for an iPhone* Jenny Chan, Mark Selden, and Pun Ngai make this reality visible. Drawing on in-depth field work and a deep knowledge of the global electronics industry, the authors demonstrate not only the steep human cost of our love affair with smartphones, but also the fierce struggles by Chinese workers to improve their working conditions.”

—Nicole Aschoff, author of *The Smartphone Society: Technology, Power, and Resistance in the New Gilded Age*

“*Dying for an iPhone* takes readers deep inside the dark Satanic mills of Foxconn’s industrial empire. Drawing on the words of the workers themselves, the book offers an invaluable portrait of the Chinese working class as it pumps blood (sometimes literally) into the productive heart of world capitalism.”

—Ben Tarnoff, cofounder of *Logic Magazine*

“A deep dive into exploitation and labor struggle in the world of high-tech electronics manufacturing in China during the past decade. *Dying for an iPhone* is an exposé of the human suffering behind the brands. Everyone should read this.”

—Hsiao-Hung Pai, Taiwanese journalist

“*Dying for an iPhone* is an absolutely necessary read for anyone seeking to understand the realities of modern-day capitalism. Contrary to the mythology of Silicon Valley, this carefully researched book explains why companies like Apple owe their success more to exploitation than to innovation.”

—Wendy Liu, author of *Abolish Silicon Valley:
How to Liberate Technology from Capitalism*

“A sobering investigation into the human, social, and environmental costs of producing the devices we have come to rely on, a process in which both corporations and we, the consumers, are complicit.”

—Nick Holdstock, author of *Chasing the Chinese Dream*

“When reading chapters describing the assembly line experience of workers, and the scientific management system, I could only compare it to the chapter in Marx’s *Capital*, when we are taken into the hidden abode of production. *Dying for an iPhone* is truly a great achievement to present such incisive description and analysis in a highly readable and accessible form.”

—Jeffery Hermanson, International
Union Educational League

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For workers in China and globally

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Preface

To die is the only way to testify that we ever lived.
Perhaps for the Foxconn employees and employees like
us, the use of death is to testify that we were ever alive
at all, and that while we lived, we had only despair.

—A Chinese worker's blog, May 27, 2010¹

It was in January 2010 that we first heard about the suicides of workers at the Foxconn electronics plant in the Chinese city of Shenzhen, adjacent to Hong Kong. In subsequent months, we closely followed reports—dubbed the “suicide express” in the media. After “the 9th Foxconn jumper” committed suicide on May 11, several university researchers and students, including the authors, discussed what might be done to prevent more suicides. One week later, we joined others to issue a public statement calling on Foxconn, the Chinese government, and the All-China Federation of Trade Unions to act decisively to end the “chain of suicides.” The statement read:

From the moment the new generation of rural migrant workers step beyond the doors of their houses, they never think of going back to farming like their parents. The moment they see there is little possibility of building a home in the city through hard work, the very meaning of their work collapses. The path ahead is blocked, and the road to retreat is closed. Trapped in this situation, the workers face a serious identity crisis and this magnifies psychological and emotional problems. Digging into this deeper level of societal and structural conditions, we come

closer to understanding the “no way back” mentality of these Foxconn employees.²

By December 2010, eighteen workers were known to have attempted suicide at Foxconn facilities. Fourteen were dead. Four survived with crippling injuries. They ranged in age from seventeen to twenty-five—all were rural migrants in the prime of youth, emblematic of the new Chinese working class.³



The large banner on the ground reads, “What is the price of flesh and blood?” The banner on the top right says, “Dreams shattered.” Demonstrators in Taipei placed flowers to commemorate the Foxconn worker victims on May 28, 2010.

Foxconn’s parent company, the Hon Hai Precision Industry Company, was established by Terry Gou in Taiwan in February 1974. The trade name Foxconn alludes to the corporation’s claim to produce connectors at fox-like speed. Within four decades, Foxconn would evolve from a small processing factory to become the world leader in high-end electronics manufacturing with plants extending throughout China and, subsequently, throughout the world. Foxconn has more than two hundred subsidiaries and branch offices in Asia, the Americas, and Europe.

As Foxconn strives to dominate global electronics manufacturing and advanced technology, its aspirations align with China’s goal to

become the world's economic and technological superpower. Foxconn has achieved stunning growth through a combination of shrewd business practices, mergers and acquisitions, patent acquisition, and astute cultivation of relations with the Chinese government.

The company's claims go beyond its technology: "Hon Hai / Foxconn's commitment to continual education, investing in its people long term and localization globally not only leads to the deep collaborating relationships with leading institutions of higher learning, but also helps to make Hon Hai / Foxconn the largest exporter in Greater China and the second-largest exporter in the Czech Republic."⁴ Foxconn, with nearly one million workers—the vast majority of them in mainland China—is the world's largest industrial employer.⁵ But what precisely are Foxconn's priorities, and is a "commitment to continual education, investing in its people long term" among them?

China remains the heart of Foxconn's global corporate empire and its profitability. In 2018, Foxconn accounted for 4.1 percent of China's total imports and exports,⁶ with revenues topping US\$175 billion—or, in the currency of the New Taiwan dollar, TWD 5.2 trillion.⁷ The company's claims are grandiose: "Foxconn is a global industry-leading manufacturer of Computer, Communications and Consumer Electronics (3C) components." Focusing on "Cloud Computing, Mobile Devices, Internet of Things, Big Data, Artificial Intelligence, Smart Networks, Robotics/Automation, Foxconn has built sophisticated capabilities around key Industrial Internet technologies."⁸ Indeed, Foxconn has striven to move from low value-added processing and manufacturing to more profitable businesses and services, harnessing the power of intellectual property and technical invention. Where others have focused on these issues, we repeatedly return to gauging the corporation's rise as it affects its one million employees, the great majority of them rural migrant workers.

Apple, Foxconn, and Chinese Workers

Foxconn's largest customer by far is Apple. But its clients are a Who's Who of global electronics corporations, among them Alphabet (formerly Google), Amazon, BlackBerry, Cisco, Dell, Fujitsu, GE, HP, IBM, Intel, LG, Microsoft, Nintendo, Panasonic, Philips, Samsung, Sony, and Toshiba, as well as such leading Chinese firms as Lenovo, Huawei, ZTE, and Xiaomi. Foxconn assembles iPhones, iPads, iPods, Macs, TVs, Xboxes, PlayStations, Wii U's, Kindles, printers, and myriad digital devices. While primarily contracting for global electronics firms, Foxconn also produces a variety of products under its own name. The company looks to a future in which its major growth areas center on Foxconn brands operating at cutting-edge technological frontiers led by robotics and artificial intelligence. It is a future with profound implications for its labor force, the world economy, and geopolitics.

Apple and Foxconn are independent companies, but they are inextricably linked in product development, engineering research, manufacturing processes, logistics, sales, and after-sales services. By the end of the 1990s, Apple had exported all of its US-based manufacturing jobs and some of its research facilities overseas.⁹ Apple only retained a small number of workers and staff at its Macintosh computer factory in Ireland. This outsourcing means that Apple's success is inseparable from the contributions of its international suppliers and their workers, above all Foxconn and its Chinese employees.

The Apple mystique has centered on its rapid rise to a hegemonic position in the design and marketing of a range of electronics products led in recent years by the iPhone, and the aura surrounding Steve Jobs (1955–2011), its cofounder and for decades its dominant presence. Tim Cook, who succeeded the late Steve Jobs as Apple CEO in August 2011, is hailed by journalist Leander Kahney as “the genius who took Apple to the next level.”¹⁰ Overshadowed in that American success story are the lives and welfare of the mainly Chinese workers who produce the products

of the global megabrand that so many long to possess, and the relationship between Apple and Foxconn that sets the parameters of factory life.

Dying for an iPhone

Dying for an iPhone has a double meaning. A new generation of workers is struggling to meet corporate requirements for speed and precision in producing iPhones and other high-tech products precisely at a time when consumers around the globe are queuing up to buy the newest models. Apple's success is intimately bound up with the production of quality products at high speed. Given its control of the commanding heights of hardware, software, and design, Apple has remained in the driver's seat in setting the terms and conditions for Foxconn and, in turn, for its workers. As of 2010, Foxconn was the exclusive final manufacturer not only of iPhones for Apple, but also a major contractor of a wide array of electronics products for many other technology giants.

The suicide-prevention nets strung around Foxconn's China-based facilities and the barred dormitory windows in late May 2010—appearing at the peak of the suicide clusters and remaining ever since—serve to refresh collective memories about the despair that drove young workers to kill themselves, the companies' responsibilities for this tragedy, and collective efforts by workers and their supporters to create a more humane workplace.

A Collective Investigation in China

In summer 2010, we collaborated with researchers from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong to conduct undercover research at Foxconn's major manufacturing sites in nine Chinese cities, mainly in southern, eastern, and northern regions: Shenzhen, Shanghai, Kunshan, Hangzhou, Nanjing, Tianjin, Langfang, Taiyuan, and Wuhan. Our goal was not just to look into the hidden abode of

Foxconn production on the ground, but also to assess the extent to which the Chinese state and global tech corporations fulfilled their responsibilities to protect workers in the context of transnational production.

In spring 2011, we returned to Foxconn's manufacturing bases in Shenzhen, where half a million employees were toiling day and night to make our smartphones, tablets, and many other electronics products. We also visited two emerging "Apple cities"—Zhengzhou in Henan province and Chengdu in Sichuan province—where Foxconn's new megafactories assembled iPhones and iPads, respectively, at wages well below those in the coastal areas that were the sites of older plants. Following capital movements and through multisited research, we witnessed Foxconn's rapid expansion across provinces with strong support by local governments, thereby creating a 24-hour, high-speed production network with more than forty industrial parks in China alone.

In December 2013, we wrote to Terry Gou, Foxconn founder and CEO, and Tim Cook, the CEO of Apple, describing the conditions our research had uncovered and expressing concerns about the well-being of Foxconn workers. In addition, we contacted the Foxconn Global Social and Environmental Responsibility Committee, the Apple Supplier Responsibility Program, and the Fair Labor Association (Apple was a member from January 2012 to October 2016). Our purpose was to gain corporate perspectives on issues that our research had uncovered: low wages and benefits, compulsory overtime, lack of fundamental health and safety precautions, abusive treatment of teenage student interns, and managerial repression of workers' attempts to press demands for securing rights guaranteed by employment contracts and national labor laws. While Apple and Foxconn paid close attention to the public relations challenges posed by strikes, fires and explosions, and worker suicides, our effort to engage the corporations in discussion of labor responsibility produced only corporate rationalizations and platitudes.¹¹

By contrast, workers would be far more responsive to our attempts to understand their lives. Our multiyear fieldwork, which continued to the outbreak of new coronavirus in the end of 2019, is based on interviews with Foxconn workers, student interns, teachers (who monitor the internship programs of their students), managers, and government officials, supplemented with field observations and extensive documentary research. Through interviews, poems, songs, open letters, photos, and videos shared with us, this book presents firsthand portraits of workers and teenage student interns—their hopes, dreams, and struggles to survive.¹²

Challenges to a Global Labor Regime

Foxconn is the king of the “electronics workshop of the world.” While the company has achieved enormous wealth, it remains subordinate to the global brands, above all Apple, which sets the price and the volume of the orders placed with Foxconn and rival producers. In this competitive terrain, Foxconn is vulnerable to sweatshop charges as it seeks to meet the demands for quality and speed set by Apple and other brands. Not only Foxconn but also Apple and other brands may be named and shamed through labor strikes and walkouts as well as press criticism, undermining the corporate image with economic and reputational loss. In these circumstances, workers and their supporters may succeed in exploiting corporate social responsibility discourse to win public support for worker rights, at times appealing for consumer support at home and abroad, and force corporate compliance with legal and moral norms.¹³ In particular, we recognize that universities—their students and faculties—are open to learning about and acting upon information about corporate abuses as many have taken part in social movements involving sneakers, sweatshirts, and other products that particularly catered to students and universities.

With the reintroduction of capitalist production methods since reform and opening-up, China in recent decades has been the

site of high levels of contentious politics with numerous worker strikes and protests. In key nodes of globalized electronics production, particularly in periods in which sales leaps are expected, such as the launch of new models, large-scale labor actions can send important messages to the state, to Foxconn, and to global brands, including Apple, sometimes contributing to worker gains. Officials, in the interest of maintaining social and political stability, serve as brokers to pressure companies into compromising with workers. However, workers who confront management, and, on occasion, the government and police, risk being charged with disrupting the social order and being fired and/or imprisoned.

Chinese labor relations remain unstable, prompting legal reforms that have meant to improve the lot of workers and to preserve the corporate-state nexus of power that demobilizes workers. Aggrieved workers oscillate between legal and extralegal tactics for resolving conflicts in order to draw attention and responses from the government, media, and the concerned public. Under the leadership of Xi Jinping from 2013, defiant workers, including Foxconn employees, have continued to protest abuses and fight to secure fundamental rights. Despite crackdown on nongovernmental organizations and human rights lawyers, they have persisted, at times with support from students and citizens. Should workers at Foxconn and elsewhere succeed in organizing and mobilizing effectively, they would inspire many more to strive to make a better future together.

A Suicide Survivor

I was so desperate that my mind went blank.

—Tian Yu, a 17-year-old suicide survivor¹

At about eight in the morning on March 17, 2010, Tian Yu threw herself from the fourth floor of a Foxconn factory dormitory. Just a little over a month earlier, she had come to Shenzhen city, the fast-rising megalopolis adjacent to Hong Kong that has become the cutting edge of development in China's electronics industry. While still a predominantly rural area when it was designated as China's first Special Economic Zone in 1980, Shenzhen experienced extraordinary economic and population growth in the following decades to become a major metropolis with a population exceeding 10 million by 2010, with nearly 8 million internal migrants from within Guangdong and other provinces (who were also known as the "floating" population).²

Yu, who hailed from a farming village in the central province of Hubei, landed a job at Foxconn in Shenzhen. At the moment that she attempted to take her life, global consumers were impatiently waiting for the revamped iPhone 4 and the first-generation iPad. Working on an Apple product line of Foxconn's integrated Digital Product Business Group (iDPBG), Yu was responsible for spot inspections of glass screens to see whether they were scratched. An ever-shorter production cycle, accelerated finishing time, and heavy overtime requirements placed intense pressures on Yu and her coworkers.

Miraculously, Yu survived the fall, but suffered three spinal fractures and four hip fractures. She was left paralyzed from the waist down. Her job at the factory, her first, will probably be her last.



Tian Yu, half-paralyzed after jumping from the Foxconn Longhua factory dormitory, received treatment in the Shenzhen Longhua People's Hospital in Guangdong province.

Surviving Foxconn

Our first meeting with Yu took place in July 2010 at the Shenzhen Longhua People's Hospital, where she was recovering from the injuries sustained in her suicide attempt. Aware of her fragile physical and psychological state, the researchers were fearful that their presence might cause Yu and her family further pain. However, both Yu's parents at her bedside, and Yu herself when she awoke, put them at ease by welcoming their presence.

Over the following weeks, as Yu established bonds of trust with the researchers, she talked about her family background, the circumstances that led to her employment at Foxconn, and her experiences working on the assembly line and living in the factory

dormitory. During interviews with Yu and her family, it became clear that her story had much in common with that of many Foxconn employees, comprised predominantly of the new generation of Chinese rural migrant workers.

“I was born into a farming family in February 1993 in a village,” Yu related. What was recently a village is now part of Laohekou (Old River Mouth) city, which has a population of 530,000. Located on the Han River close to the Henan provincial border, it was liberated in the course of the anti-Japanese resistance of the 1940s. Following a redistributive land reform, in the mid-1950s, agricultural production was organized along collective lines. During the late 1970s, with the establishment of a household responsibility system in agriculture, followed in 1982 by the dismantling of the people’s communes, farmland was contracted to individual households.

“At best my family could earn about 15,000 yuan on the land in a year, hardly enough to sustain six people. Growing corn and wheat on tiny parcels of land and keeping a few pigs and chickens might not leave us hungry,” Yu said, “but making a better life is challenging if one seeks to eke out a living on the small family plot.”

Yu belonged to the generation of “left-behind children” as both parents joined the early out-migration wave that enveloped China’s countryside. Yu’s grandmother brought her up while her parents were far from home supporting the family as migrant factory workers. Like many of the 61 million children who were left behind, she spent her early childhood playing with other neighborhood children.³ There was little parental guidance. Eventually, her parents returned home to resume farming having earned just enough money to renovate the house. Yu, the eldest child, has a sister and a brother. She hoped, in the future, to be able to help look after her brother, who was born deaf.⁴

From Farm to Factory

China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 brought about great challenges to villagers, who faced a flood of cheap subsidized crops imported from overseas even as export-driven industrialization expanded. Despite gains associated with the elimination of agricultural taxes in 2005 and the subsequent establishment of a social insurance scheme under the new socialist countryside campaign, as most young people departed for the cities and industrial jobs, the prospects for household-based agriculture and rural development generally darkened. Sporadic efforts toward cooperative rural construction and alternative development initiatives aside, opportunities for sustainable farming and lucrative nonfarm work in remote villages remained scarce.

After graduating from junior secondary school and completing a short course at the local vocational school, Yu decided to leave home to find a job. For her cohort of rural youth, the future, the only hope, lay in the cities. By 2010, TV and especially internet technology and mobile communications had opened a window on the real and imagined city lifestyle. "Almost all the young people of my age had gone off to work, and I was excited to see the world outside, too," Yu explained.

Soon after the Spring Festival, the Chinese New Year, in early February 2010, Yu's father gave her 500 yuan to tide her over while searching for work. He also provided a secondhand cell phone so that she could call home. He asked her to stay safe.

In the morning, "my cousin brought me to the long-distance bus station," Yu recalled of her departure for the city. "For the first time in my life I was far away from home. Getting off the bus, my first impression of the industrial town was that Shenzhen was nothing like what I had seen on TV."

On February 8, at the company recruitment center, "I queued up for the whole morning, filled out the job application form, pressed my fingertips onto the electronic reader, scanned my identity card, and took a blood test to complete the health check procedures."

Yu was offered a job and assigned a staff number: F9347140. She also received a color-printed Foxconn Employee Handbook, which was replete with upbeat language for new workers: “Hurry toward your finest dreams, pursue a magnificent life. At Foxconn, you can expand your knowledge and accumulate experience. Your dreams extend from here until tomorrow.”

Later, after a quick lunch, a human resources manager at an employee orientation told a group of new recruits, including Yu, “Your potential is only limited by your aspirations! There’s no choosing your birth, but here you will reach your destiny. Here you need only dream, and you will soar!”

The manager told stories of entrepreneurs like Apple chief Steve Jobs, Intel chairman Andrew Grove, and Microsoft founder Bill Gates to inspire youthful new Chinese workers. Indeed, no less than Apple, Foxconn executives were masters of painting an idyllic future for workers and consumers.

“Then, I and hundreds of other new workers were taken from Foxconn’s recruitment center to the factory, about an hour’s ride on the company bus. The setting sun bathed the Foxconn facilities in golden light,” Yu recalled.

Inside Foxconn

The gigantic Longhua “campus,” as the Foxconn managers like to call it, organizes production and daily living activities in a densely populated environment. The complex includes multistory factories, dormitories, warehouses, two hospitals, two libraries, a bookstore, a kindergarten, an educational institute (grandiosely dubbed Foxconn University), a post office, a fire department with two fire engines, an exclusive television network, banks, soccer fields, basketball courts, tennis courts, track and field, swimming pools, cyber theaters, shops, supermarkets, cafeterias, restaurants, guest houses, and even a wedding dress shop. Container trucks and forklifts rumble nonstop, serving a grid of factories that churn

out iPhones and other electronics products for Apple and many global giants.

The factory directory displays a list of ten total zones—eight covering A through H, and two other zones labeled J and L—and they are further subdivided into A1, A2, A3, J20, L6, L7, and so on. It takes almost an hour to walk from the south main gate to the north main gate, and another hour to walk from the east to the west gate. Yu did not know what each building was, nor did she know the meaning of the English acronyms that could be seen written everywhere.

“I arrived late for my first day of work. The factory was so big, and I got lost. I spent a long time looking for the workshop,” Yu said. When asked if she was scolded for being late, she answered so quietly that we could not hear her response.

Sisters or Strangers?

“I woke up at 6:30 a.m., attended a morning meeting at 7:20, started work at 7:40, went to lunch at 11:00, and then usually skipped the evening meal to work overtime until 7:40 p.m.” On top of the “standard twelve-hour shift” during busy periods, like all other workers, Yu attended compulsory unpaid work meetings every day. “I reported to the line leader twenty minutes before the start of work for roll call. He exhorted us to maintain high productivity, reach daily output targets, and keep discipline.”

A long workday of enforced silence, punctuated only by the noise of the machines, is the norm. Yu noted, “Friendly chit-chat among coworkers is not very common even during the break. Everyone rushes to queue up for lunch and eat quickly.” In contrast to the corporate image of “a warm family with a loving heart,” Foxconn workers frequently experience isolation and loneliness, some of it seemingly deliberately created by managerial staff to prevent the formation of strong social bonds among workers.

Managers, foremen, and line leaders prohibit conversation during working hours in the workshop. The assembly lines run on a 24-hour, nonstop basis, particularly when the production schedule is tight. The well-lit factory floor was visible throughout the night from afar. Yu felt that there was no way to say no to overtime.

New workers, like Yu, are often reprimanded for working “too slowly” on the line, regardless of their efforts to keep up with the “standard work pace.” Emphasizing the company’s claim to produce the world’s best products for global customers, the maximum allowable rate of defective products is set low. Yu several times said that she had made no mistakes on the screens she worked on, but the line leader blamed her repeatedly for mistakes that she did not make.

With only a single day off every second week, or two rest days during the whole month, there was no spare time for Yu to use the Olympic-sized swimming pool or other recreational or educational facilities in “the factory city.”

“I was switched to the night shift in March. Checking the screens of the products made my eyes feel intense pain,” Yu told us.

Living in the Dormitory

Foxconn houses its employees in dormitories at or close to the factory. The workplace and living space are compressed to facilitate high-speed, round-the-clock production. The dormitory warehouses a massive migrant labor force without the care and love of family. Whether single or married, the worker is assigned a bunk space for one person. The “private space” consists simply of one’s own bed behind a self-made curtain with little common living space.

Yu’s roommates had jobs in six business groups and seven production departments. With roommates assigned from different departments and different shifts, and many speaking different dialects, it was difficult to socialize. When speaking of her roommates,

Yu said, “We were not close.” She then showed us the management record of her dormitory room.

Table 1.1 A Foxconn dormitory room list, 2010.

	Staff No.	Business Groups*	Production Departments	Dormitory Registration
1.	F9341932	NWInG	FKD	January 29, 2010
2.	F9450222	SHZBG	Mac BU (II)	March 18, 2010
3.	F9422526	CMMSG	AP (V)	March 10, 2010
4.	F9447733	CCPBG	TAMG TEAM	July 27, 2009
5.	F9425127	CMMSG	IPPD LX (I)	March 10, 2010
6.	F9347140 [Tian Yu]	iDPBG	DSPG DSD LCM	February 8, 2010
7.	F9341960	NWInG	FKD	January 29, 2010
8.	F9295026	PCEBG	ABD (II)	December 21, 2009

*NWInG (Net-Work Inter-Connection Business Group)

SHZBG (Super Hong Zhun Business Group, also known as Super Precision Mechanical Business Group)

CMMSG (Component Module Move Service Group)

CCPBG (Consumer and Computer Products Business Group)

iDPBG (integrated Digital Product Business Group)

PCEBG (Personal Computing Electronics Business Group)

Note: Workers receive no explanation of the English acronyms of business groups or production departments.

Although eight young girls were housed in the same room, Yu explained, “We were strangers to each other. Some of us had just moved in as others moved out. None of the roommates was from Hubei.” None spoke her dialect. Yu’s father explained the significance of this: “When she first came to Shenzhen, sometimes when others spoke, she couldn’t understand much.”

“At Foxconn, when I felt lonely, I would sometimes chat online,” Yu told us. But those chatting on the QQ instant messaging community often remain far apart in time and space.⁵ For factory newcomers from distant provinces, it takes a long time to develop a virtual friendship with mutual trust and shared understanding.

The Accumulation of Despair

“After I had worked a month, when it was time to distribute wages, everyone else got their wage debit cards, but I did not.” Yu was deeply troubled.

At Foxconn, the cash flow required for workers’ wages is large and payment is done by a banking system through the provision of wage debit cards rather than paying cash to individual workers. A debit card is a bank card with which a worker can deposit, withdraw, and transfer money from 24-hour ATM machines that are accessible from within the Longhua complex and other Foxconn facilities.

Yu asked the line leader what had happened. Although she worked at Longhua, she was told that there was no record of her personal information at Longhua.

Unbeknownst to Yu, the Human Resources Department at Foxconn Guanlan had kept her personnel file and failed to transfer the documents to Longhua where she actually worked. She had been interviewed at the recruitment center in Guanlan before being sent to the Longhua facility. The result was that her debit card account at Foxconn Longhua had never been set up.

“I had no choice but to take a bus to Foxconn Guanlan on my own,” Yu recounted.

The Foxconn factory in Guanlan subdistrict, which began production in 2007, employed 130,000 workers in early 2010. Entering an unfamiliar factory compound, Yu remembered, “I went to Block C10, B1, B2, and from floor to floor of building after building to inquire about my wage card.” After a fruitless day of searching for the right office, with managers and administrators deflecting responsibility, Yu was unable to learn what had happened to her wage card or how to solve the problem. “I went from office to office by myself but no one would point me in the right direction. They all brushed me off, telling me to ask someone else.”

Yu had not been paid for a month of work, approximately 1,400 yuan consisting of basic pay of 900 yuan plus overtime premiums.

By then it was the middle of March, and after more than one month in Shenzhen, she had spent all of the money her parents had given her. “Where could I borrow money? At this moment of crisis my cell phone broke, and I was unable to get in touch with my cousin in Shenzhen.”

Yu had reached the breaking point. The exhausting assembly line, harsh factory discipline, and friendless dormitory, together with the difficulty she faced contacting her family, were compounded by the exhaustion of her funds and the company’s failure to pay her. She felt overwhelmed.

One Life to Live

“I was so desperate that my mind went blank.” In the early morning on March 17, Yu jumped from her dormitory building. After twelve days in a coma, she awoke to find that she had become paralyzed from the waist down.

Yu was hospitalized for more than six months. Finally Foxconn disbursed a one-off “humanitarian payment” to “help the Tian family to go home.” It was a bid to end its responsibility over employee suicide and to remove the problem from the eyes of the Chinese and international press.

In the words of Yu’s father, “It was as if they were buying and selling a thing.”

When Yu left the hospital, she also left us with some troubling questions about the lives of one million Foxconn workers and the responsibilities of corporations and the Chinese government to protect workers.