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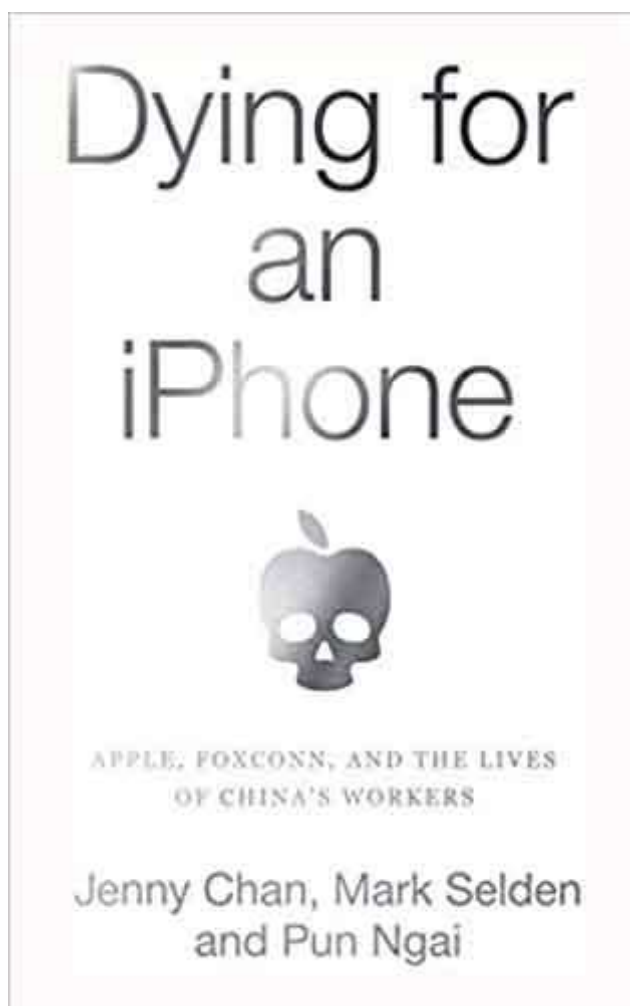
The Human Costs of iPhones

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<https://www.counterpunch.org/2021/09/29/the-human-costs-of-iphones/>

Dying for an iPhone



Like many of you, I use an iPhone. It is a technological wonder and allows me to do things unimaginable even a few years ago; it has more computer power than NASA had

to put men on the Moon in the late 1960s-early 1970s. These phones are designed by Apple, Inc.

Yet, how many of us users ever ask what are the conditions under which these iPhones are produced? What are these conditions doing to China's workers, who assemble such wonderful instruments?

These are questions rarely asked in a world where the "free market" reigns. Actually, the free market is an ideological construct, where basic questions about the impact on workers or upon the environment are precluded by definition: the whole game is to focus concentration on consumption. In other words, as long as you have the money (or access to credit), you can get whatever your heart desires, and issues of size, style, color, texture, etc., prevail. But just don't ask about the workers, or the environment.

Until now, the fate of the workers (and the environment) in the production of the iPhone has been ignored. However, with [*Dying for an iPhone: Apple, Foxconn, and the Lives of China's Workers*](#), those days are over: Jenny Chan, Mark Selden and Pun Ngai examine in great detail the lives of workers of a company called Foxconn, the company that produces the overwhelmingly large number of Apple's products. (Foxconn also produce for other American companies, such as Amazon, Microsoft, and others, but the overwhelming focus in this book concerns production for Apple.)

Because Foxconn is based in Taiwan, with much production in China that is produced for consumers in the United States, this is a global study of labor discipline, and we need to keep that perspective in mind. But it's strength is the detailed examination of production within China.

Motivating this study was a number of suicides by Foxconn workers during early 2010: workers were killing themselves to spare themselves further misery of working in these factories. The authors begin the book with a statement from a Chinese worker's blog:

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.

These workers were largely migrants from rural parts of China, seeking a better life for themselves and their loved ones. Their paths took them into Foxconn's factories. Not all survived, but factory life took a toll on all of them.

Foxconn's parent company was started in 1974 and has become a corporate behemoth.

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.

Foxconn is the world's largest industrial employer, with over 1 million workers, mostly based in China. This book focuses on working conditions in China: "*Foxconn's largest*

customer by far is Apple,” and “Apple’s success is intimately bound up with the production of quality products at high speed.”

With this understanding and beginning in the summer of 2010, researchers from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong began undercover research in Foxconn’s major manufacturing plants in nine different Chinese cities.

Their’s is a sophisticated study, not only looking at different plants in China but in recognizing the differences—and lower wages—for workers in the interior from those working in coastal regions. Accordingly, these looks at the developmental processes by the Chinese government as it seeks to improve the lives of Chinese people throughout the country.

Accordingly, this book looks at the intersection of Apple’s products, Foxconn’s production facilities, and Chinese development policies—and how, together, they affect Chinese workers, especially in Foxconn’s factories.

The authors do not see workers as passive victims; they seem them as active subjects trying to maintain their personal dignity, their unity, and their sanity while working under extremely demanding conditions. Obviously, not all survive. Yet these workers often seek opportunities to engage in collective efforts, and strikes are not unheard of. One example provided was a strike during 2011: workers struck in one plant when Foxconn was under pressure to produce a new model of the iPad. Within 10 minutes after workers walked off the job in one action, senior management was down on the shopfloor talking with the workers about their demands after previously refusing.

Yet the typical response is quick:

In massive strikes, either the employer or government officials require workers to elect representatives, generally limited to five, to engage in talks. Once worker representatives are elected, the company moves to take control. Their intervention typically marks the beginning of the fragmentation, co-optation, and crushing of worker power. Frequently, the worker representatives are identified as troublemakers and dismissed.

Yet the workers also learn. When this strike took place, instead of sending up a few representatives, the workers’ cried, “*We are all leaders,*” and refused to back down. It was interesting to see the Chinese workers provide an answer to management that was the same used by Wobblies in the US in the early 1900s!

There are also environmental problems affecting workers’ lives. For example, the shiny aluminum MacBook cases need to be grinded down, putting aluminum dust in the air, harming workers’ respiratory systems. There are also chemicals used in production that are discharged into the environment, and toxic wastes are often untreated before discharging.

In short, this is not just about China, Taiwan, or the United States: it is a very sophisticated study of the development of capitalism—whose key is control of labor—in modern electronics factories around the world. There is much to learn from it.

This is the latest in a growing literature on China and Chinese workers under the Chinese Communist Party. It shows there are major inequities still remaining, and like said above, much of it is based on labor being controlled. This book is a major contribution to understanding the situations of Chinese workers and it is extremely well done. I give it my highest accolade: I wish I had done this study.

Yet, following, there are two things I think the growing globalization from below literature shows: Chinese workers need to be able to extend their organization not only within particular regions, but across regions of the countries; they must learn from others' experiences as how to do this. Yet I doubt they can solve their problems alone. At the same time, American and other workers around the world, and especially those within unions, need to develop links to these Chinese workers' organizations as they develop, and build on-going and practical solidarity with these workers: my thinking is that seafaring, longshore, and transportation workers in particular need to further organize among themselves, and be prepared to support Chinese workers' efforts.

Kim Scipes is a long-time political activist and trade unionist. He teaches sociology at Purdue University Northwest in Westville, Indiana. His latest book is an edited collection titled [Building Global Labor Solidarity in a Time of Accelerating Globalization](#). (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016.)

See also, [Book Review](#) — by Kim Scipes — 27/09/2021

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