

BOOK REVIEW

Dying for an iPhone: Apple, Foxconn, and the lives of China's workers

Jenny Chan, Mark Selden, and Pun Ngai

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Reading the seminal work *Dying for an iPhone*, authored by the prestigious labour scholars Jenny Chan, Mark Selden and Pun Ngai, carries me back to my experience of participation in the collective investigations in Foxconn's major manufacturing plants in the summer of 2010 and the spring of 2011. In particular, I was one of the members accompanying the suicide survivor Tian Yu at the hospital in July 2010. At the beginning of this book, the authors recount Yu's tragic experience of jumping off the fourth floor of a Foxconn dormitory and surviving with life-long disabilities, which is reminiscent of our sympathetic tears when we left her ward for the first time.

In contrast to the numbing suicide figures reported in the media, a detailed life history review in Chapter 1 helps readers crystalize Tian Yu as a real human being whose whole life is devastated in Foxconn. Hence, *Dying for an iPhone* is a gripping work, that goes beyond the 'personal psychological reasons of suicide' proclaimed by Foxconn, to explore the socio-economic interpretation for her jumping from the fourth floor of the dormitory.

The authors did not write the book in a structuralist academic paradigm, rather, they choose to deliver the major aspects of migrant workers' hard lives under the quasi-militarised factory regime in Foxconn, with a target readership of the global iPhone consumers, specifically in industrially developed countries. Thus, the three authors elaborate on the interdependent relationship between Foxconn and Apple in Chapter 3 and disclose that 'labour costs in China accounted for the smallest share of the "made in China" iPhone, a mere 1.8 per cent or the nearly US \$10 of the US \$549 retail price of the iPhone 4' (p. 39). In this regard, the three authors put the Chinese workers' plights in the context of global capital's 'race to the bottom' (Silver, 2003).

In the view of new structural economics, China's economic achievements since the late 1970s stem from the 'comparative advantages' which refer to the seemingly inexhaustible supply of workers from the countryside, triggering the development of labour-intensive manufacturing industries in the eastern coastal areas (Lin et al., 2003). In contrast to treating migrant workers as factorial resources, the three authors with sociological and historical backgrounds provide a bottom-up perspective, focusing on the economic, social and political

[Correction added on 19 November 2021, after first online publication: The names of the authors have been corrected to Mark Selden and Pun Ngai in this version].

exploitation of migrant workers. This is the systematic driving force that highlights the 'low human rights advantage' (Qin, 2007) behind China's ostensible development miracle.

Migrant workers in China are essentially peasants living in rural areas. In the planned economy era, the household registration system hampered the free migration of peasants to work in urban areas. Since the market-oriented reform and opening up in the late 1970s, the restrictions on peasants were loosened that they were permitted to find jobs in manufacturing factories with the promise of better lives. However, after migration from inland villages to coastal cities like the Pearl River Delta, migrant workers find their dreams are easily shattered. In this book, readers can feel migrant workers' endeavours to work, but the exploitative labour regime always fails them.

In Foxconn plants, all assembly lines are designed following Taylorist principles of scientific management that ultimately deskills migrant workers, plus these workers are highly atomised and disciplined under the militarised management system which the authors significantly emphasised in Chapter 4. Indeed, they are not allowed to talk, laugh or eat during work hours. Moreover, they have to work excessively long hours every day to earn overtime fees, which account for a large part of their monthly salaries. For example, Yu had to work at least 12 h per day during her short period of work in Foxconn. The first chapter details her schedule on a workday, '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.' (p. 6). Moreover, some workers face the risk of industrial injuries and occupational diseases. Apart from the mechanical accidents, workers also suffer from chemical pollution, for example, 'nickel levels in wastewater discharged by Foxconn and nearby factories were almost 40 times over the limit', and 'large doses or chronic exposure to nickel in 12-h shifts can be damaging to one's health' (p. 136).

Chapter 6 details the dangerous workplace with aluminium dust in the production process of iPads in Foxconn's Chengdu plant, which results in the risk of fire, explosion and death to workers. In Chapter 10, the narrative of Zhang Tingzhen's miserable lived experience of work is presented. On 26 October 2011, Zhang Tingzhen suffered a fatal industrial accident caused by an electric shock. Due to not having adequate safety equipment, such as electricity-proof gloves, helmets and an industrial safety belt, he fell from a 4-m ladder and landed hard on his head. Through emergency brain surgery, Zhang Tingzhen survived, but half of his left brain was severely damaged. When I met Zhang Tingzhen at the hospital, half of his body was paralysed, losing the ability to even talk.

According to the legal definition of industrial injury in China, it is Foxconn's legal liability to pay for medical treatments and economic compensation. However, Foxconn denied Zhang Tingzhen's actual labour relations in the Shenzhen plant where the industrial accident occurred, because his wages and social insurance benefits were actually paid by the Foxconn Huizhou plant. That triggered a labour dispute between Foxconn and Zhang Tingzhen because the work-related injury insurance benefits are higher in Shenzhen than in Huizhou.

As the victim of an industrial accident, Zhang Tingzhen and his family encountered several difficulties in defending their legal rights. I still remember the difficult situation when I met Zhang Tingzhen at the courts of Shenzhen to attest to his labour relations. For a disabled person who cannot speak due to brain damage, going to court frequently to defend his rights is definitely a secondary injury. Typically, when in dispute with Foxconn, migrant workers are always disadvantaged, as the factory often abuses the lawful procedures as workers become trapped in the lengthy process of labour arbitration and court judgments, which greatly increases workers' time and expense cost.

The authors argue that Apple has created a sweatshop labour regime at Foxconn, since the company is in a dominant position in the global value chain, having a decisive impact

on Foxconn's behaviour. By far, Apple is the largest customer of Foxconn, and 'they are inextricably linked in product development, engineering research, manufacturing processes, logistics, sales, and after-sale services' (Preface). Due to the high reliance on Apple's outsourcing orders, Foxconn must maintain low costs to guarantee Apple's profitability, that is to say, the level of migrant workers' wages is always suppressed. In this sense, Apple has to take responsibility for improving the labour rights and workers' lived experiences in its manufacturers' plants. It is also the internal logic of a transnational boomerang campaign that the authors emphasise in this book, and they want to engage the corporations in the discussion of labour responsibility through anti-sweatshop campaigns all around the world.

The boomerang effect occurs when claimants come up against blockages when seeking redress for their grievances within a domestic context, and then seek help from the transnational advocacy network which is composed of international trade unions, NGOs, action-oriented scholars and students (Xu, 2012). The external organisations and activists then mobilise 'name and shame' campaigns to pressurise the transnational corporations to respond to workers' appeals. In this book, the three authors repeatedly introduce the anti-sweatshop campaigns mobilised by the Hong Kong-based Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misbehaviour (SACOM).

Generally speaking, SACOM plays the role of organising campaigns to raise Chinese workers' appeals within the transnational advocacy network. In practice, SACOM works closely with labour organisations and media all around the world to disseminate Foxconn workers' voices and put pressure on Apple to improve labour rights among its suppliers. In this sense, the multilingual writings of this book in Chinese, Italian, Spanish, and English is regarded as a part of this campaign to broadly approach Apple's consumers for public education. These worldwide endeavours by labour activists in various countries, to some extent, have effectively sparked Apple's responses to establish an academic advisory board for its Supplier Responsibility programme mentioned in the epilogue part of this book.

However, Foxconn workers' lives have not been changing for the better in reality. In May 2011, I published an article titled 'Selling Student Interns' in the *Southern Weekly*, the prestigious newspaper concentrating on investigative journalism in Guangzhou, to elicit this issue. This article is based on my 2-month participant-observer investigation as an ordinary worker in the Foxconn plant in Chongqing, a province in Western China. I found that most of my colleagues on the assembly lines were younger vocational school students, some of whom were only 15-year old. During my investigation period, I interviewed dozens of student interns, and then recounted my findings in media and academic reports after I quit the job.

Furthermore, this book solidly exposes the rampant misuse of student interns in Foxconn's plants in chapter five. During the summer of 2010, Foxconn had recruited 150,000 student interns which accounted for 15% of the total 1 million workforces. For Foxconn, student interns are cheaper and more manageable, because they are not enrolled in the social insurance system and are compulsory for the internship. In accordance with the rules of China's vocational education, the practice internship is a required course that students must take for graduation. In this regard, students cannot refuse the internship arranged by vocational schools.

On the contrary, the student interns' labour rights are always violated in terms of overtime work and wage arrears. According to the 2007 Administrative Measures for Internships at Secondary Vocational Schools and the 2010 Education Circular, student interns 'shall not work overtime beyond the 8-h workday'. But the reality is they were treated in a similar way to the regular workers with 10–12 h workdays and 6–7 days a week during peak seasons. What is worse, the student interns doing the same work as the regular workers cannot get equal pay.

For instance, in 2011, student interns in Chengdu were paid the same 950 yuan per month as other minimum-wage workers, but they were not entitled to a 400-yuan-per-month skills subsidy. Plus, Foxconn does not enrol them in social security (p. 76).

In such poor labour conditions, student interns are too disadvantaged to resist, because, in the name of the school-business partnership, student interns are 'in a dual managerial system subject to the authority of both school teachers and company managers' (p. 78). In Foxconn's student intern project, vocational schools also dispatch their teachers to help manage the student interns, and in doing so, these teachers can get an additional salary from Foxconn for their supervisory service during the internship period. Specifically, the teachers' roles include: (1) to ensure students follow factory rules; (2) to help students deal with feelings of dejection at their work situation and prevent them from returning home. Moreover, these teachers have the authority to evaluate student interns' performance in Foxconn, including their presence and compliance, which will be graded with marks. If students fail the internship, they will not get a graduation degree. In this regard, the student interns are normally afraid of resisting and/or quitting, as the teachers can wield their authority to persuade and pressurise them to stay to complete the internship.

Furthermore, the authors also disclose that it is local governments' administrative decisions that force secondary and higher vocational schools to dispatch student interns to Foxconn's plants. With the intense regional competition to attract manufacturing investment and relocation, the inland provincial and municipal governments commonly promise to secure the huge labour recruitment by targeting students and fresh graduates for internships and jobs, to serve the development of Foxconn. For example, 'all vocational schools under the jurisdiction of Sichuan province were required to participate in the Foxconn student internship programme' (p. 83). As a result, no matter what they study in vocational schools, they are all dispatched to work on Foxconn's assembly lines.

For instance, a student I interviewed was studying hotel management in the vocational school, therefore, she should have had work experience in the hotel industry, but instead, she was working on assembly lines to make screws in Foxconn. The authors also give several similar examples in this book, such as Li Wei, a 17-year-old student studying automotive repair, who complained about his exhausting work on iPhones which he said was a waste of time. In his opinion, 'we haven't even completed the core classes in our specialisation, nor have we grasped the basic skills of automotive repair... We students have not attained sufficient knowledge in our education, and come time for employment, we'll have no competitive advantage' (p. 81).

Moreover, to maintain a competitive advantage in the cost of manufacturing, China has promoted the relocation of manufacturing industries to the inland provinces in the last 10 years. Indeed, inland governments usually promise to guarantee a stable workforce supply to attract the investments of manufacturing giants. For example, Foxconn had built its new plants to make laptops, iPad and iPhone in Chongqing, Chengdu and Zhengzhou, respectively. Different to the fluid migrant workers who are attracted to the areas along the east coast, the factories in the central and western areas mainly attract local people, which are limited in number with a high turnover rate. For instance, in the Foxconn Wuhan plant, which is located in central China, the turnover rate is more than 20% per month. This is a real challenge for Foxconn management so that in the peak season of producing a new iPhone, the Foxconn Zhengzhou plant usually pays higher allowances to recruit workers.

To ensure a stable labour supply, companies will rely on the government's administrative orders for recruitment. For example, in Chengdu, a portion of the civil servants have to be

responsible for some of the recruitment quota for the Foxconn iPad factory, and if they fail, then they have to go and work in the factory. Due to the rapid demographic changes in China's labour market, precarious employment is contagious, and student internships are one of the most notorious ways colluded by both companies and governments. As the education departments have to take the recruitment quota for Foxconn as well, they then demand that vocational schools send their students as interns at Foxconn or they would not be able to graduate.

Enmeshed in the highly exploitative factory regime in Foxconn, workers do not passively accept the brutal work conditions. Rather, Chapter 11 presents variegated accounts of activism, including work slowdowns, wildcat strikes and riots. As grassroots trade unions at the workshops are controlled by the management, they are not allowed to mobilise workers for struggle. That is why migrant workers in China always stage strikes spontaneously, without visible leading structures. Just like the strike in the Zhengzhou factory in 2012 noted in chapter eleven, although it caused dozens of parts-processing lines to be paralysed, the authors actually have not found out who organised this strike.

The authors also contend that the suicide threat is also an extreme strategy of resistance that some Foxconn workers adopt. That also indicates individual workers' febleness due to their limited associational power resource to organise independent unions. Instead, the three authors are optimistic that the global counter-movement against the despotic labour regime is infested by transnational capital. For instance, the United Students Against Sweatshops sent an open letter urging Apple CEO Steve Jobs to 'address the problems in Shenzhen by ensuring payment of living wages, legal working hours, and democratic union elections in Foxconn supplier factories'.

Since this book is concerned with the brand and manufacturing companies and working conditions at Apple and Foxconn, the interested readers may ask why Chinese governments indulge in the contagion of an exploitative labour regime in a self-claimed socialist country? In this case, what is not well elaborated in this book is that China's economic miracle over the last four decades is deeply embedded in the labour exploitation system, so that migrant workers' legal and political rights are intentionally constrained. China's exploitative labour regime is highly institutionalised, therefore, it is not enough to campaign against Apple-Foxconn. Instead, it is also imperative to appeal to Chinese central and local governments to adjust public policies to protect migrant workers' rights and interests.

On the other hand, in light of political sensitivity, it is pragmatic to accuse Apple-Foxconn, rather than Chinese governments, of labour rights violations. As any direct critique against the Chinese government will incur state security investigations and even political crackdowns. For instance, any endeavours to organise and mobilise migrant workers by labour rights activists had incurred a tyrannical crackdown since 2015, of which, some activists engaged in the Foxconn research group were detained in jail for several months. Plus, the workers centre founded by Professor Pun Ngai near Foxconn's plant in Shenzhen, which provided social services to workers, has been shut down when the political space tightened in 2019.

Compared to the many academic books and articles on Chinese migrant workers, the three authors courageously choose a nonacademic and more accessible way to present the findings from their decade-long ethnographic study, which demonstrates their activist-orientation to practice the principles of public sociology. The transborder sociological intervention in Foxconn led by Professor Pun Ngai significantly shows how the Organic Intellectuals function to forge worker-intellectual unity (Gramsci, 2005). In this sense, it is arguable that the main purpose of writing this book is to back up the global campaign against the Apple-Foxconn labour regime.

All in all, *Dying for an iPhone* coagulates the efforts of labour activists and scholars under an increasing authoritarian state over the past decade, which is truly inspiring. It is a must-read for academics and also wider audiences.

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