

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

by Jenny Chan, Mark Selden and Pun Ngai, Chicago, IL, Haymarket Books, 2020, 273 pp., \$19.95 (paperback), ISBN 9781642591248

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Dying for an iPhone: Apple, Foxconn, and the lives of China's workers**, by Jenny Chan, Mark Selden and Pun Ngai, Chicago, IL, Haymarket Books, 2020, 273 pp., \$19.95 (paperback), ISBN 9781642591248

Though fleetingly reported in the English-language news media, a series of worker suicides in 2010 briefly exposed the human cost of high-tech hardware production with Apple at the center of the story. These incidents occurred as the company was ramping up marketing of its now ubiquitous iPhone. Across several hardware assembly factories, all owned by Taiwan-based Foxconn, 18 mostly young workers attempted suicide on Foxconn premises resulting in 14 deaths in just 2010 alone. The loss of these lives, and the precarity experienced by those who survived and continued to work for Foxconn, drove the research of Jenny Chan, Mark Selden and Pun Ngai. They compellingly narrate their findings into a transnational, sociological study of labor, globalization and the state in *Dying for an iPhone* (Haymarket Books, 2020). The researchers find that “a significant cause of the tragedies of 2010, and continued tensions thereafter, was the fact that workers, employed under pressure-cooker conditions, were deprived of the right to leverage their trade unions to collectively challenge enterprise decisions shaping conditions that heightened the risk of employee suicide” (p. 192). However, their narrative suggests a more complex and insidious operation of transnational state, corporate, and even academic complicity in facilitating an ethical distancing between consumers of iPhones and other branded personal electronic devices and the people who assemble them.

Readers of the *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* will find the discussions of Foxconn's founder/CEO, Terry Gou's, approach to “militarized management systems” coupled with a “Care and Love” Program to be of particular interest (pp. 53–54). The pressure to maximize productivity that Foxconn places on its workers, disciplines employees by controlling all aspects of worker-life, including opportunities for intimacy, such as dating and socializing off-the-clock (chapter 7). As feminist scholars of domestic and care work have long pointed out, privacy and an expectation of inner- or psychic- life, has always been the domain of the privileged. Just as women workers are recruited across borders to work in private households, so too are young workers compelled into employment migration that results in a job at Foxconn. In both situations, workers are kept captive through means of employer-control of all aspects of life, including their so-called private lives. Reproductive labor, or the labor of caring for and making new worker-lives, has always been a site of contestation and control, precisely because control and ownership of reproductive labor facilitates accumulation. Such is what the authors point out as a key corporate strategy of labor-management at Foxconn. It is noted that many workers live on company premises, in dormitories where factory-floor rules on worker communications and relationships extend

into the so-called private time of workers. This, the authors suggest, is key to facilitating the inhumane demands of factory-floor productivity, which ultimately led to worker suicides and continued worker protests.

*Dying for an iPhone* is an accessible, teachable and necessary read for those of us who live in communities where consumers of iPhones outnumber workers in high-tech personal electronic device assembly. Apple has been able to evade accountability for Foxconn working-conditions by maintaining distance from their production line, often by arguing that they can only exert influence over, but not control, factory practices. In this same way, consumers of iPhones and other personal electronic devices have the privilege of choosing whether or not to care about the conditions under which their devices are being produced. Chan, Selden and Pun attempt to take away that choice by always reminding the reader of how Foxconn working conditions are never just “local matters.” The authors weave a narrative of the human cost of technological development and anchor it in the symbiotic relationship between China’s Foxconn and the United State’s Apple in order to foreground the transnationality of the technology industry. What remains under-addressed are the politics of production that cross Taiwan (headquarters) and China (factories). The transnationality of the industry is evident throughout the study, for example, the authors continually point to efforts by U.S. institutions like Stanford and the University of Houston to bolster China’s vocational training schools (pp. 62, 182). The authors also continually remind readers that while the ethnographic aspects of the research focus on Foxconn, the practices of the industry extend well beyond a single company. The authors point to the many companies who contract with Foxconn, including Alphabet (Google), Amazon, Blackberry, Cisco, Dell, Fujitsu, Samsung, Sony, GE, HP, LG, Intel, Nintendo, Microsoft, Huawei, Lenovo and many others (p. xii). The implication in the book is that the reach and scope of what is being described—inhumane working conditions that perpetuate the idea that some lives *must be sacrificed* for others to live in comfort—extends far beyond the Foxconn and Apple relationship.

Yet, by focusing on the special relationship between Apple and Foxconn, the authors are able to illustrate just how entwined Apple’s success is to its ability to dictate production terms to Foxconn. This relationship is explored throughout the book by tracing the mirroring egos of Gou and Apple’s Steve Jobs (later Tim Cook). The authors chronicle the concurrent rise of Apple and Foxconn as industry leaders, and contextualize the American and Chinese national circumstances that enable access to vulnerable worker-populations. The lives of corporate actors like Jobs and Gou are also contrasted with the lives of Foxconn workers, who provide not only ethnographic detail, but personal narratives and poetry at the core of the book. Interviews with workers highlight the very material stakes of Chan, Selden and Pun’s research, and are treated with reverence and respect. Working outwards from the life of one former Foxconn worker, the book nests this individual story in a broader political, transnational context of accumulation pressures for “just in time” production.

The book’s 12 chapters, preface and epilogue are accompanied by appendices that detail the research team’s methodology and scope, alongside other

appendices that illustrate Foxconn's reach, both in China and beyond (Eastern Europe, Brazil, India, Wisconsin). Given the scope of the study, the book leaves open multiple spaces of further analysis, research and conversation. For example, while there is no explicit feminist analysis of labor, several chapters of the book recount the gendered shift in the Foxconn labor force, which defies industry expectation and historical practice by tending to employ men workers more and more over time. The authors note that this is in part because men at Foxconn have more opportunities for advancement, and that an androcentric work culture (for example, not supporting workers who might become pregnant) coupled with sexual harassment have made turn-over higher for women workers (p. 124). In another moment, the authors note in passing, that Foxconn's operations in Mexico take place in border cities that historically supported other global manufacturing and technology industries (p. 202). For example, one Mexican Foxconn factory is located in Juarez, infamous for decades of femicide and disappearances that feminist researchers have tied to the convergence of multiple structural conditions. This notably includes the practice of hiring young, migrant women workers who commute long distances or live far away from family and friends. While such details are offered by the authors, they are not the focus of analysis, but rather remain one of many facets of the story. Thus, the book provides rich opportunities for discussion and further analysis, especially for those looking to assign this book in the classroom.

A final example of the book's scope, which might be of particular interest to university readers, is the discussion of China's vocational education efforts. These practices prop up companies like Foxconn by giving them easy access to young, temporary, and therefore, vulnerable worker populations. Partnerships between vocational schools and Foxconn to provide internship opportunities, which former participants describe as conscripted low-wage, rote factory assembly work, bring up "a cruel irony that internships are not performed for the benefit of the intern" (p. 92). As universities and educational institutions face growing pressure to provide pathways into the workforce, internships have become increasingly marketed to students as ways to blend their academic experience with job opportunities. In the United States, as the cost of post-secondary education grows, these pressures limit how the value of education is understood. Rather than education for the growth of informed, critical citizenry, which benefits society, education is expected to show evidence of economic productivity at the cost, rather than benefit, of students. Here Chan, Selden and Pun's narrative of Foxconn's exploitation of educational pathways converges with on-going conversations about the role of education under capitalism.


"Suicide involves an intensely personal, and social, struggle on the part of the individual" (p. 186): This statement captures the project of Chan, Selden and Pun's almost decade-long field work. Opening with the personal story of a Foxconn worker and suicide survivor, Tian Yu, and ending with the poetry of another Foxconn worker, the late Xu Lizhi. *Dying for an iPhone* reminds readers of the fullness of the lives of all Foxconn workers, whose economic conditions place them in peril. The book ultimately shows that its subjects nonetheless

persist and insist that their lives be more than the part of them captured by the global electronics production and consumption machine.

### Notes on contributor

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