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Reinventing Confucian Education in Contemporary
China: New Ethnographic Explorations

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*Dying for an iPhone: Apple, Foxconn, and the Lives of
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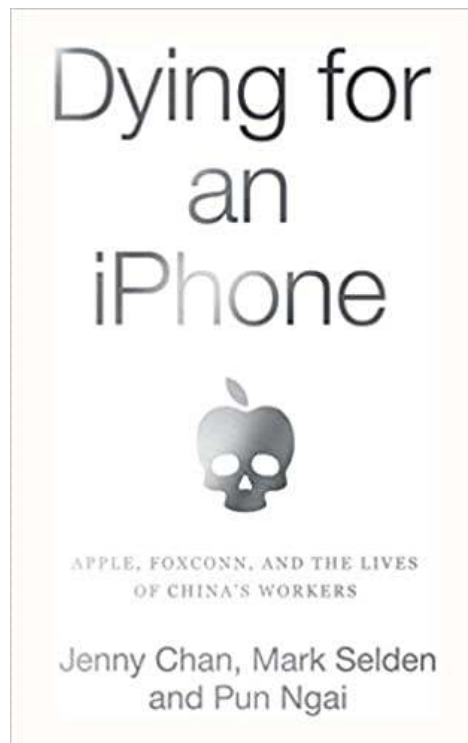
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- 1 This volume on the Foxconn-Apple-state nexus and the lives of rural workers originates from a remarkable initial cross-border collaboration in the summer of 2010 between researchers from mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Together, these researchers investigated the plight of rural workers in Foxconn's major production sites in nine Chinese cities following an unprecedented spate of suicides among youthful rural workers at Foxconn, the Taiwanese electronics-manufacturing corporation and major provider for Apple. Within this single year of 2010, 18 workers reportedly attempted suicide, with four surviving but permanently crippled. *Dying for an iPhone: Apple, Foxconn, and the Lives of China's Workers* rests on a decade of research and engagement by the three authors. This volume provides an invaluable testimony to rural workers' agency, on the one hand, and to the persistent capacity of global corporations – focusing here chiefly on Foxconn and its main client company Apple – to relentlessly transform the very power



configurations that have enabled companies to capture workers' labour power at minimal cost. On the side of workers' capacity to resist exploitative regimes of production, the volume documents workers' struggles and ability at organising and at making visible their conditions and their claims.

- 2 The three authors manage to document these two facets by constantly engaging a polyphony of workers' experiences (materialised through interviews, workers' songs, poems, social media postings, etc.). They relate their longing for social mobility, their struggles for decent labour conditions and wages, their suffering and, in some instances, their injuries and their deaths, against the narratives, development strategies, and policies of global corporations and Party-state institutions. Doing so enables the authors to track the pressures applied on suppliers, buyers, and the state by a constellation of actors (workers, social scientists, activists, the media and social media, lawyers, anti-sweatshop campaigners, etc.). It also exposes the capacity of the former to show flexible responsiveness to these demands while also limiting their reach so that the very mechanisms that have been so efficient at generating profit remain untouched. This contrast is made most vividly and powerfully as the authors start the volume with the tale of Tian Yu, a 17-year-old female worker who on 17 March 2010, one month after she entered the Foxconn production site, jumped from the fourth floor of a Foxconn dormitory building in Shenzhen, and was left crippled (Chapter One). This chapter takes the reader through a whole range of procedures that Tian Yu has to go through and that inserts workers' bodies into a grid of valuation and measurement (fingerprints via digital reader, blood sampling, health check, cultural indoctrination around the importance of nurturing a spirit of hard work, dreams and aspirations, etc.) before being transferred by bus to the production site. The articulation between Tian Yu's fate and the pressure imposed on workers' bodies and souls by the relentless quest for "speed and precision in producing iPhones and other high-tech products" (p. xiii) is made in this initial chapter by stressing that at the very moment Tian Yu tried to commit suicide, consumers all around the world and in China were queuing to acquire the latest model of iPhone 4 and first-generation iPad (p. 1). This volume does indeed describe a ruthless and formidably efficient "buyer-profit-maximizing global production system" and how workers are endeavouring to resist and sometimes disrupt this system (p. 68).
- 3 Chapters Two to Five focus chiefly on the workings of the production regimes enabled by the corporate-state nexus. These chapters, along with Chapter Twelve, constitute the backbone of the book. They show how Foxconn went from a rather small company based in Shenzhen and hiring about 150 workers in 1988, to employing 1,300,000 workers and staff in 2012 before dropping to 863,000 in 2018 because of increasing recourse to outsourcing (p. 12-5). Chapter Three shows how the "corporate-state nexus" – i.e., the various forms of alliances between local governments and international corporations – has turned into a formidable force generating immense profits driven by the demand for Apple products. One of the most convincing examples of this nexus can be found in the process of hiring student-interns. In addition to the intensification of production, from 2010 onwards with the production of iPads, Foxconn turned to a new strategy of reducing production costs through a spatial extension of its production complexes towards central and southwest China and via the concomitant hiring of student-interns. In 2010, more than 150,000 student-interns were working in Foxconn sites. Chapter Five provides a wealth of detail into how, in order to achieve

this politico-institutional creation of new pools of workers, all departments at the provincial, municipal, district, and township levels (from human resources and social security, transportation, public security, to financial departments) were required to mobilise in full-gear in order to reach employment assignments of student-interns for the Foxconn plants. Top leaders at the provincial level-led work teams from vocational schools required to reach hiring quotas of student-interns for the Foxconn sites in Sichuan and Henan provinces. Between August and September 2010, Zhengzhou Municipality recruited more than 20,000 student-interns in 23 cities and townships and raised some 16 million RMB (p. 84-8). We see here a longstanding pattern of central state policies and laws that, despite their aim of better protecting workers, also aim at providing enticing conditions for investment (Gallagher 2005). The role of states in facilitating labour appropriation via building or subsidising infrastructure such as roads, bus lines, housing, production sites, dormitories, etc. are not entirely new when considering the history of global capitalism around the world. But the magnitude and the responsiveness – the speed of these processes – by the Party-state (provincial, municipal, and local) in bringing about new sites of production and helping to shape new pools of labour is probably unprecedented. Somehow, a related singular feature of the narrow alliance between the state and global corporations hints at the very nature of the CCP as a mobilisational organisation (Perry 2021) to assist Foxconn in its thirst for more flexible labour in times of labour market contraction and increasing demand for electronic devices by consumers around the world.

- 4 Chapters Six to Eleven are on the whole rather brief and delve into the conditions of rural workers, their life in the cities, the various predicaments and work hazards they are facing (such as overtime, environmental degradation, intoxication through aluminium dust, fires, etc.), and how they have been struggling collectively and individually for fairer labour conditions, decent wages, and social insurance benefits.
- 5 *Dying for an iPhone* is an important addition to a substantive body of scholarship on the politics of labour in post-socialist China, much of this literature having been produced by Hong Kong-based scholars over the last three decades. It will be of great interest both for teaching purposes and for scholars, journalists, and social activists interested in global labour and issues of sustainability of consumer-driven production systems.

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