

Book Review

Jenny Chan, Mark Selden and Pun Ngai (2020) *Dying for an iPhone: Apple, Foxconn, and the Lives of China's Workers*.

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Reviewed by

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In *Dying for an iPhone*, the authors show that the lives of Foxconn workers are constrained by managerial policies, which persistently emphasise fast production and high product quality. Because it is very difficult to meet these two objectives at the same time, workers at Foxconn often had to work long hours under high labour intensity. This caused heavy physical and psychological stress among the workers, which resulted in worker suicides.

To find more fundamental causes of the workers' toilsome life, the authors go beyond the wall of Foxconn factories. They extend their scope of research from shop-floor politics to the national and global connections among the Chinese state, multinational corporations and customers outside China. In fact, the ultimate purpose of this book is to inform people of labour issues hidden behind the transnational chains that combine production with consumption. By dissecting the buyer-driven business model, this book attempts to inspire transnational activism to oppose labour appropriation wherever it is found.

A Divisive Hiring System

After telling the tearful story of a Foxconn worker who survived her suicide attempt, the authors provide a brief history of Foxconn, focusing on how the corporation has become the "world's largest electronics manufacturer", serving Apple as its major supplier of products. As the historical background to Foxconn's success, the authors point out China's market-oriented reform since the 1980s. The reforms, implemented by the Chinese state under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, have generated groups of workers who differ in their rights, status and benefits. Among the newly classified groups of reform-era workers, this book focuses on the relatively younger ones as they form Foxconn's major workforce. Mostly migrants from poor rural areas, they receive benefits much inferior to those of their urban counterparts. Most of all, migrant workers do tasks similar to those of urban workers, while subject to different conditions of wage payment and social and workplace security. These internal divisions of the domestic labour market, which the authors name as the "divisive hiring system" (197), contribute to low labour costs and high flexibility of labour. Foxconn has been able to lure foreign direct investment from all over the world, by generating highly flexible and cheap Chinese labour.

Student Interns: “New” Migrant Workers?

In China, since the late 1980s, factory managements prefer workers who have migrated from the poor countryside. Managements put rural migrants in factory dormitories and pay lower wages while urging them to engage in the same work tasks as those of their urban counterparts. This practice creates and maintains the “dormitory labour regime” to control workers’ accommodation (Smith and Pun, 2006). Under this labour regime, where their lives are dominated by management, workers are subject to a highly coercive and intensive production system, while management can extend the working day and promptly respond to fluctuations in product demand.

The dire situation of student interns in *Dying for an iPhone* bears the characteristics of work and living under the dormitory labour regime. Foxconn management urges its workers – including student interns – to live in dormitories, which makes the division between work and living virtually collapse. With the collapse, workers are subject to the intensive rhythm of round-the-clock production, which exposes them to high levels of mental and physical stress. It is more devastating because student interns have to live without the care of family. The small “private space”, which consists of a bunk-bed space behind a self-made curtain (pp. 106–108), only worsens the highly stressful work situation.

Just like migrant workers in the past, student interns at Foxconn work ten-hour shifts and two-hour overtime but only receive “intern wages” – just 80 per cent of the minimum income of full-time employees. Management further reduces its production cost, since interns are students and thus receive no corporate payments toward retirement (p. 184). In a worse case, some interns are not even entitled to a 400-yuan-per-month skills subsidy (about US\$58 in 2023), regardless of whether they passed a probationary period (p. 75).

The so-called “advanced production system” at Foxconn further embitters student interns. As each iPhone has more than one hundred parts, every worker specialises in one simple task and performs repetitive motions at high speed. In some cases, managers order interns to do nothing but tighten screws throughout their “internship” (p. 74), which eventually removes human feelings of accomplishment and freshness from the workers. The assembly-line work slowly dehumanises the employees, which makes them feel like “a cog in the machine” (p. 61).

Collaboration between the Global and the Local

Despite Foxconn’s repeated violation of government regulations, how has it successfully moved up the value chain of globalised electronics manufacturing? As the key factor behind Foxconn’s successful rising, the authors of this book point out the intertwined net of interests shared by the company and local governments (p. 75). For many local government officials in China, securing and retaining foreign investment is the key to accelerating local-level economic development. Not only in the coastal provinces but also in the interior regions, local governments have been actively involved in strategic planning and collaboration with multinational corporations (MNCs). In the case of Foxconn, local officials collaborated with the corporation from manufacturing to financial services, funding the building of production complexes and high-rise factory dormitories. As the local governments in China oftentimes stage “bidding wars” to lure foreign investment, they even support labour recruitment assignments by operating their own offices to target students for internships (p. 87). This is why Andrew Ross, cited in the book, argues that the “state’s hand” should be the necessary condition for fostering high-tech industry in China (p. 80).

The Tyranny of the Buyer-driven Business Model

Dying for an iPhone highlights local consequences of the buyer-driven business model. The authors of this book extend their scope of analysis beyond a single country and examine contrasting but intertwined relationships among MNCs, contract factories (“suppliers”) and local workers. The buyer-driven model guarantees MNCs high profitability, while generating precarious working conditions for the workers (p. 197). Key buyers such as Apple should not be free from labour-rights violations at Foxconn, because buyers’ scheduling and purchasing practices are closely related to suppliers’ imposition of compulsory overtime and harsh discipline on workers (p. 33). Besides the competitiveness of the local labour market, order fluctuation and tight delivery schedules greatly increase production pressure (p. 68).

As a local consequence of the buyers’ tyranny, this book illuminates how the buyers’ demand for high-quality product leads to the MNCs’ excessive demands on workers on the shop floor, which eventually reduces the possibility of a “humane management”. For example, following the long-anticipated iPhone 5 debut in 2012, American consumers began to complain about scratches on the phone’s surface. As Apple perceived consumer complaints as real threats to realising its corporate profit, it launched investigations into the final assembly at a Foxconn factory in China. The new precision requirement for phone screens, however, caused painful eyestrain and headaches among workers, which eventually led to quarrels between quality-check team leaders and assembly-line workers (p. 168).

Still a Bleak Future for Workers?

Dying for an iPhone reminds me of Nawon, a South Korean transnational garment factory in China where I conducted my fieldwork during the early 2000s. As a contract factory that received orders from well-known buyers such as Disney, Nike and Umbro, the factory was also vulnerable to the tyranny of the buyer-driven market. Under the “just-in-time” or “quick response” system, the factory management constantly felt pressure to deliver smaller orders in less time to meet tightly planned shipping schedules. For easy labour mobilisation for frequent overtime, the management at Nawon put the workers within easy reach by locating the dormitories on factory premises. Just like the student interns at Foxconn, the workers at Nawon suffered from excessive overtime and low wages, as they were non-local migrants and thus lacked the rights and benefits given to local, Qingdao workers. Local officials regarded the workers as objects of control, and participated in labour control by patrolling the factory dormitories. This epitomised the collaboration between transnational capital and local governments (Kim, 2013).

By comparing Foxconn in the 2010s and Nawon in the early 2000s, I do *not* mean nothing has been changed in China’s factories. Since the 2000s, the Chinese government has emphasised the rule of law. The government, at least officially, reinforced its supervision of factories for protection of worker rights, while establishing official channels for workers to file their grievances. As many cases in *Dying for an iPhone* show, however, many local-level officials still prioritise attracting investment rather than enforcing laws and regulations for workers. This is why the authors argue that “despite efforts by workers to sound the alarm, serious problems such as abuse by management continue and remain unresolved” (p. 186).

How can we bring *real* changes to the shop floor, where workers endlessly conduct toilsome labour for small wages? What are the possible methods to make management fairer and more humane? The authors seem to believe that transnational activism against the tyranny of the buyer-driven market could bring positive changes. “#No More iSlave” of 2017 (p. 200) as well as the

“Clean Up Your Computer” report of the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development of 2004 (p. 32) indicate that researchers, journalists, environmentalists, labour activists and university students can jointly help to improve labour conditions in the export-led Chinese electronic industry. Holding protests outside Apple’s flagship New York store to demand justice for Foxconn workers could be very effective in raising public concern about the poor working conditions (p. 201). The role of journalism is also important, as reports of international news agencies on Foxconn workers’ strikes or “riots” compelled Apple to pledge that it would not make contracts with sweatshops (p. 167). With the transnational shift of manufacturing jobs, consumer awareness of the links between *globalised* manufacturing and the *localised* plight of workers grows every day. Because “no one is free when others are oppressed” (p. 201), we should be aware of the hidden connections among multinationals, contract factories, local governments and workers, and think of possible methods to effectively intervene in the tyranny of the buyer-driven business model.

References

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