*Dying for an iPhone: Apple, Foxconn, and the Lives of China’s Workers*. By Jenny Chan, Mark Seldon, and Pun Ngai. London: Pluto Press, 2020. 304 pp. ISBN 9780745341293. £14.99 (paperback). Also published in 2020 by Haymarket Books (Chicago). 300 pp. ISBN 9781642592252, $50 (hardcover); ISBN 9781642591248, $19.95 (paperback).

*Dying for an iPhone* is based on the long-standing research on Chinese labor and labor rights advocacy work in which the three authors were involved. The English edition of the book is a relative latecomer, as a previous version of the book has been released in other languages including Chinese, Italian, and Spanish. Nevertheless, this version covers new material on more recent developments of the global expansion and upgrading of Foxconn, Apple’s response to labor standards and environmental hazards, as well as the prospect of the labor movement in China.

The primary aim of the book is to present a comprehensive picture of the lives of Chinese migrant workers, especially the relatively younger ones who work in labor-intensive manufacturing industries while still holding aspirations to climb up the social ladder. Foxconn is the leviathan on which the authors focus, but what Foxconn workers experienced in terms of exploitation at work, uncertainty in future career prospects, and the absence of effective voice mechanisms is generally shared by a wider population of migrant workers as well. Therefore, pinpointing iPhone in the book title is more a strategic choice, as Joe Buckley has rightly pointed out in his book review in the *British Journal of Industrial Relations* that this book targets a wider, non-academic readership.

The authors’ decade-long inquiry into the working conditions and production regime of Foxconn began with the series of tragic suicides of Foxconn workers who were working in the same plant in Shenzhen. The book thus opens with the narrative of Tian Yu, who jumped off the roof of the Foxconn plant and survived (although with life-long disabilities) barely a month after she started the job. From her story, readers see a glimpse of her factory life that was filled with exhaustion and frustration, as well as the Kafkaesque episode of pay enquiry that eventually led to her emotional breakdown. This one and many other well-composed vignettes throughout the book enable readers to establish an empathy lens and to consider workers as whole persons who had a life before becoming a Foxconn worker and who had both physical and mental needs to be fulfilled as much as anyone else. The rest of the book touches upon various aspects of the lives of Foxconn workers, including despotic management on the shop floor, living arrangements, leisure activities, family and relationships, occupational and environmental hazards, (the lack of) vocational training, as well as strikes and protests. The examination of a specific segment of the Foxconn workforce, namely student interns sent directly to Foxconn from vocational school as part of their course, also allows the authors to delve into the complex relationship between the state, capital, and labor in organizing the labor market and shaping employment relations in Foxconn.

This book relies on ethnography and interviews to collect workers’ and managers’ accounts of working life in Foxconn, supplemented by document review for the general context of corporate development in Foxconn and Apple. Elements of the book are laid out in a poetic manner. The authors are keen on juxtaposing episodes of “heaven versus hell” to demonstrate the stark contrast between Apple and Foxconn, which enjoy economic success and continuous expansion, and workers who suffer from miseries and injustices. For instance, they illustrate by presenting an incident of workers’ stoppage of work in protest of job evaluation and wage adjustment immediately after mentioning the announcement about the new iPad 2. In another example, they discuss the release of optimistic-sounding media statements from Foxconn, which was directly followed by an account of a deadly explosion on the shop floor. These events make apparent how corporate success is achieved at the expense of the sufferings and sacrifice of workers.

That said, the structure of individual chapters and how the chapters are sequenced are not the easiest to understand, since a general overview of how the themes are laid out is lacking. The book would benefit from an overall framework that connects all dots and dimensions of the global supply chain, workers’ experiences, workplace control, and state coordination of employment practices. In a way, it could be seen as a showcase of findings without in-depth discussion, occasionally intertwined by thought-provoking questions that hint that the findings may lead to some second thoughts. It relies on the readers themselves to disentangle the relationship between the state, capital, and labor and how each of these contributes to shaping the current state of the production regime. For students of labor studies, employment relations, sociology of work, and the like, each chapter (except the two context chapters specifically dedicated to the corporate development of Apple and Foxconn, respectively) could actually be read independently as case studies on each topic.

The timespan of materials covered has also exposed the inconvenient truth about research on Chinese labor in recent years. Ethnographic accounts in this book could be dated back to 2012. As an early career academic in Chinese employment relations whose interest in the discipline could also be traced back to the tragic incidents in Foxconn in 2010, to me this book is reminiscent of the time when conducting fieldwork in China earlier in the decade. There was indeed digital and physical surveillance, but the risk level for labour research was manageable in comparison with how it is nowadays. From the fascinating storytelling of the authors, I recall the time when I and other researchers managed to roam in industrial zones, being immersed in the worker community and initiating random conversations with workers and pedestrians without receiving much backlash. In contrast with the eerie quietness I currently experience during local lockdown, literally thousands of miles away from the Foxconn plant in Shenzhen, every minute detail of life around Foxconn in the book brings back memories of being situated in the lively, noisy (if not also depressingly consumerist) factory area, which, in retrospect, makes me feel really nostalgic.

What happened after 2015 is largely illustrated with either secondary sources, or data for which sources are more discreetly mentioned. This phenomenon corresponds with the emerging “chilling effect” hanging over China labor scholars that Sarosh Kuruvilla described in the *ILR Review* (2018,

71(5): 1025), which makes researching Chinese labor *in situ* more politically sensitive in recent years. Although we still see sporadic media reports and individual narratives about working life in China on social media platforms, the cost and risk of collecting firsthand data from workers in China have been substantially higher. It may be an overly pessimistic view, but I cannot help contemplating the circumstances under which a similarly well-researched and in-depth collection of Chinese workers’ lived experiences could be produced in the foreseeable future.

Fuk Ying Tse

Lecturer in Work and Employment

School of Business, University of Leicester

fyt3@leicester.ac.uk