

Dreams and Defiance in Foxconn City

An Interview with Jenny Chan

Mark Levinson

The rise of China as a dominant economic and political power is a central fact of our age. That rise is premised, in part, on a relentless repression of labor. These developments take place in a period of globalization, the model of which is embodied in the World Trade Organization (WTO), which protects property rights, enforces contracts, and secures investment, but is silent on labor rights.

Jenny Chan, an assistant professor of sociology at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, has done pathbreaking work exploring the emergence of a new working class in China. This is a working class of young migrant laborers from the countryside. They work long hours in low-wage jobs and live in atrocious conditions. Chan's recent book with co-authors Mark Selden and Pun Ngai is *Dying for an iPhone*. I spoke to her in January. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Mark Levinson: Despite repression, there is a long history of labor politics in China. Can you start by giving us a brief history of the last several decades of workers' attempts to better their lives?

Jenny Chan: For a century in modern China there have been struggles over who controls the fruits of industrial and agricultural labor. First it was a struggle with the state; today it is a struggle with a mixed or hybrid regime that includes the state and private capital.

There is widespread frustration and resistance among workers. Why? Because they work twelve hours a day, and the long working hours don't provide them with a living wage. This new working class is huge; 300 million migrant workers have moved from the countryside, most of them young people who have high hopes about making a better life in the city. They don't want to farm like their parents. They want to enjoy urban consumption and technology. But they end up living in factory dormitories, or in other low-cost residences where it is difficult for them to even think of having a family or to sink their roots in the city. Research finds that staff turnover in

electronics factories is high, and yet management is primarily concerned about manufacturing productivity and product quality. What about workers' well-being?

Levinson: Did labor struggles become more prevalent after China joined the WTO in 2001?

Chan: Yes. As China became more integrated into transnational production and global commerce, the provinces started to mobilize even more rural workers to meet the massive demand for service, construction, and factory work in cities. Over the past two decades, there has been high mobility of both capital and labor. Asian, U.S., and European direct investment reshaped China's growth model and expanded it, drawing more workers into the market.

Levinson: Let's talk about your book, *Dying for an iPhone*, which I found to be a staggering account of the lives and working conditions of the young



Workers in the Foxconn factory in Shenzhen (STR/AFP/GettyImages)

people who work at Foxconn, a company that produces products for Apple. First of all, what led you to study workers at Foxconn?

Chan: Foxconn is the largest contract electronics manufacturer in the world. At one point Foxconn’s total workforce was 1.3 million people, with the vast majority in China’s forty factories. But its headquarters is in Taipei, and it also has large factories in Vietnam, India, and the Czech Republic. Foxconn claimed it was planning to open a really big LCD factory in Wisconsin, although now it is very unclear if that will happen. China remains the main source of Foxconn’s profitability. Over the past ten years or so, Foxconn has been moving into the central and southwestern parts of China, forming the major industrial hub for China to connect with the Middle East and Europe as part of the “New Silk Road.”

All the contradictions of the global economy are visible at Foxconn. They make products for Apple, the iconic company of our age. In the context of a neoliberal trade regime, structured by the U.S. and Chinese governments, this company has developed a brutally exploitative system of production. While the world marvels at the latest Apple gadget, we thought it would be worthwhile to look at the workers who make the product.

And the fact is, when worker rights are suppressed at a global behemoth like Foxconn, it makes it difficult for workers in the United States, Mexico, Brazil, or Vietnam to improve their wages and working conditions. Worker struggles around the world are more linked than many people realize.

Levinson: What did you discover at Foxconn?

Chan: It was shocking. In 2010, eighteen young migrant workers attempted suicide, one after the other. Four survived with crippling injuries. One of the survivors was seventeen years old and had worked for Foxconn for about a month. Due to some clerical error, she didn’t get a wage. No one was there for her. Remember, these are young migrants who are away from home for the first time. These workers, in the prime of youth, arrive at Foxconn very hopeful; they’re landing in a Fortune Global 500 company, and everyone’s been picturing this air-conditioned high-tech environment, but it turns out to be very different from that. They’re assembling iPhones on the line for twelve hours a shift.

The shifts, day and night, are so long because of the high volume and quick turnaround times for these commodities. It is inconceivable that a consumer should have to wait for a month for a new iPhone model! On the shop floor, industrial engineers are measuring output—just like Taylorist “scientific” managers. The workers, the humans, have their bodies and minds subsumed by the capitalist machine. They feel terribly desperate.

The turnaround times get shorter and shorter, because time is money. Our beloved iPhones are designed to quickly become obsolete. In the

factories, there isn't much hope for assembly workers to climb the ladder, to get a promotion. And many of these Foxconn workers are student interns from vocational schools who are likewise very exploited.

Levinson: What happened in response to the suicides? In the book there is a picture of nets put up outside the dormitories to catch people who were trying to kill themselves. Was that the entire response of Apple and Foxconn?

Chan: Those “anti-suicide nets” or “safety nets” are still up in many Foxconn factories. That tells us that the problems, the pressure, and the hopelessness are still there. If there have been any changes over the past ten years, they have been very minimal. Based on our understanding, Apple has tried to tighten the audit system to send more people to the factories and dormitories to conduct worker interviews. But that is merely a self-protective measure. Fundamentally, Apple and other tech firms are highly dependent on Foxconn and its downstream suppliers as well as other manufacturers in the global production network. The outsourcing of labor is meant to shift the risks while maximizing profits.

If Foxconn workers, including interning students, could organize their collective voice within a trade union, I believe things would be very different, because workers would have the power to demand what's really important to them.

Levinson: Say more about how Foxconn uses interns.

Chan: First, the scale is enormous. We're talking hundreds of thousands of students for whom working for Foxconn is part of their high school education. Local governments impose a student quota in direct response to company plans; the vocational schools under their jurisdiction are required to provide the number of interns needed by Foxconn and other companies.

These internships are a massive source of labor for Foxconn. In the summer of 2010, Foxconn had 150,000 interns, who are sixteen, seventeen, or eighteen years old. These young people are paid less than other workers for doing the same job on the line. Under Chinese law, they're classified as students; they are not recognized as employees. The legal distinction is very important. Foxconn's aim is short-term, flexible labor that can be disposed of easily. Because of their student status, they are not eligible for any social insurance payments, including healthcare and pensions. If they get injured, no one is responsible for them.

It's important to note that the future for what we call “student workers” is very uncertain. They are on the vocational track, and due to intense competition in the educational market, they are not aiming at world-class colleges or universities oriented to academic research. These interns hope

to get useful vocational skills and a competitive edge in the labor market. But they all end up on assembly lines during their internships, which are often extended to meet the production needs. If they don't work hard, they won't graduate on time. In this sense, student labor is forced labor, a modern form of slavery.

Levinson: How long can workers put up with the pace, intensity, and pressure at Foxconn?

Chan: It varies. The workers and interns are creative. They engage in different tactics of resistance. Sometimes, they just pretend that they are sick and play video games in the dormitory. But of course, they are discovered after one or two days; then they are brought back to the assembly line. At other times, they deliberately make defective products, which slows down the pace of production.

Levinson: Apple tries to cultivate an image of a progressive company. What's Apple's complicity in the situation in China?

Chan: The most "progressive" thing about Apple is its public relations work. It is very good at creating an image that covers up the reality of its supply chain. In 2017 Apple's CEO Tim Cook, in his commencement address at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said, "Apple's mission is to serve humanity. It was just that simple: serve humanity." And in Apple's *Supplier Responsibility Progress Report* it says, "There's a right way to make products. It starts with the rights of people who make them." Our book is a several-hundred page exposé of the lie of that statement. The truth is that Apple creates horrible working conditions by pitting suppliers against each other. Apple squeezes Foxconn, Foxconn squeezes workers.

In 2010, amid the spate of worker suicides, Foxconn was the exclusive final-assembler of the iPhone and a major contractor for a wide array of electronics products for Dell, HP, and other global brands. We learned that about 60 percent of the market price of the iPhone 4 went into Apple's pockets. Chinese assembly workers, meanwhile, got only 1.8 percent of the gross profit. This tells us almost everything we need to know about the uneven global division of labor.

Levinson: You've mentioned that Foxconn workers need a union. China has, on paper, the largest trade union in the world, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU). But it's not an independent union; it's controlled by the state and the companies. How do workers see the ACFTU?

Chan: The chairwoman of the Foxconn union is the special assistant to the CEO, Terry Gou! How can workers have confidence in the company union?

The workers want to reclaim their trade union rights by having open and democratic elections.

Levinson: In the book you write that the ACFTU actually prevents the development of independent trade unions.

Chan: That's correct. The ACFTU is a state apparatus. It serves the political and economic goals of the state. It is not accountable to its members. At best local union officials mediate conflicts between management and workers in times of crisis to restore order and social stability while leaving the authoritarian structure of governance intact.

Levinson: How do workers at Foxconn protest, or express their dissatisfaction?

Chan: Most of the time, workers bypass the trade unions and organize independently. When the production deadline is fast approaching, they paralyze the assembly lines. They stop the flow of production. That is crucial. Foxconn is the world's largest electronics producer. It has a tightly integrated production system, so when one factory is not working, key components will not be supplied to another part of the assembly line.

Workers will sometimes get some support from university students or labor-rights groups on the community level. But these groups are very vulnerable to state crackdown. We have seen waves of government repression, from shutting down worker support organizations to detaining worker-activists and arresting protesters.

Labor unrest has shown mixed results. On the one hand, the authorities have increased surveillance. On the other hand, they have raised wages and benefits to stimulate domestic spending.

During our fieldwork, we talked to workers not just about strategizing to demand higher wages or better benefits—though that is really important—but also about their political demands. They need more external support to change the social, economic, and legal systems, not just to empower workers in terms of enhancing employment rights, but also to improve education, housing, and healthcare so life could be better in the long run.

Levinson: Given the recent crackdowns on student-worker alliances, what can supporters of labor rights inside and outside of China do?

Chan: We just have to be more cautious. We have to understand that the costs of large-scale organizing and campaigning can be very high. Core leaders were humiliated and forced to admit that they broke the law by causing disturbances to public order and endangering national security. The government threatened their spouses or their children to silence them.

Despite that, the bright spot in China is that the left-wing university students, labor activists, and community-based organizations have never been completely crushed. Study groups online and offline continue. Social investigations about the impact of COVID on manufacturing and service workers are also in development. That is inspiring.

There is space for grassroots organizing and cross-border solidarity, and for corporate responsibility and consumer campaigns at the international level. Multinational corporations often locate their production in “developing” or poor countries. Their workers don’t earn living wages, and they die or are injured unnecessarily, work extremely long hours, and sacrifice family life, while the profits flow to the companies. Activists around the world need to insist on global trade rules that protect worker rights and consumers need to understand that companies are responsible for the conditions under which their products are produced.

Levinson: Your book includes some really moving poems from the workers.

Chan: Their art is a form of cultural activism. Workers turn to digital spaces to circulate their poetry, songs, and videos. Their poems are lacerating.

There are several very powerful poems by twenty-four-year-old Xu Lizhi. He failed in multiple attempts to find another job that would take him off the assembly line at Foxconn.

Here is one of his poems, “A Screw Fell to the Ground”:

A screw fell to the ground
 In this dark night of overtime
 Plunging vertically, lightly clinking
 It won’t attract anyone’s attention
 Just like last time
 On a night like this
 When someone plunged to the ground.

Nine months after Xu Lizhi wrote this poem, he ended his life.

The utter desperation of so many of the workers we met at Foxconn is best expressed by an anonymous worker’s blog post:

To die is the only way to testify that we ever lived.
 Perhaps for the Foxconn employees and employees like us,
 the use of death is to testify that we were ever alive at all,
 and that while we lived, we had only despair.

Levinson: After that I am not sure what else there is to say. Any last thoughts?

Chan: I hope people read our book. Not just to understand Apple and Foxconn, but to change them, to stand in solidarity with workers in China and around the world.

Mark Levinson is chief economist of the Service Employees International Union and Dissent's book review editor.

Jenny Chan is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and is affiliated with the China Research and Development Network. She is the co-author, with Mark Selden and Pun Ngai, of Dying for an iPhone: Apple, Foxconn, and the Lives of China's Workers (Haymarket Books and Pluto Press, 2020).