Dying for an iPhone

APPLE, FOXCONN, AND THE LIVES OF CHINA'S WORKERS

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Preface

> 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.
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> —A Chinese worker's blog, May 27, 2010[1]

It was in January 2010 that we first heard about the suicides of workers at the Foxconn electronics plant in the Chinese city of Shenzhen, adjacent to Hong Kong. In subsequent months, we closely followed reports—dubbed the "suicide express" in the media. After "the 9th Foxconn jumper" committed suicide on May 11, several university researchers and students, including the authors, discussed what might be done to prevent more suicides. One week later, we joined others to issue a public statement calling on Foxconn, the Chinese government, and the All-China Federation of Trade Unions to act decisively to end the "chain of suicides." The statement read:

> From the moment the new generation of rural migrant workers step beyond the doors of their houses, they never think of going back to farming like their parents. The moment they see there is little possibility of building a home in the city through hard work, the very meaning of their work collapses. The path ahead is blocked, and the road to retreat is closed. Trapped in this situation, the workers face a serious identity crisis and this magnifies psychological and emotional problems. Digging into this deeper level of societal and structural conditions, we come

closer to understanding the "no way back" mentality of these Foxconn employees.[2]

By December 2010, eighteen workers were known to have attempted suicide at Foxconn facilities. Fourteen were dead. Four survived with crippling injuries. They ranged in age from seventeen to twenty-five—all were rural migrants in the prime of youth, emblematic of the new Chinese working class.[3]

The large banner on the ground reads, "What is the price of flesh and blood?" The banner on the top right says, "Dreams shattered." Demonstrators in Taipei placed flowers to commemorate the Foxconn worker victims on May 28, 2010.

Foxconn's parent company, the Hon Hai Precision Industry Company, was established by Terry Gou in Taiwan in February 1974. The trade name Foxconn alludes to the corporation's claim to produce connectors at fox-like speed. Within four decades, Foxconn would evolve from a small processing factory to become the world leader in high-end electronics manufacturing with plants extending throughout China and, subsequently, throughout the world. Foxconn has more than two hundred subsidiaries and branch offices in Asia, the Americas, and Europe.

As Foxconn strives to dominate global electronics manufacturing and advanced technology, its aspirations align with China's goal to

become the world's economic and technological superpower. Foxconn has achieved stunning growth through a combination of shrewd business practices, mergers and acquisitions, patent acquisition, and astute cultivation of relations with the Chinese government.

The company's claims go beyond its technology: "Hon Hai / Foxconn's commitment to continual education, investing in its people long term and localization globally not only leads to the deep collaborating relationships with leading institutions of higher learning, but also helps to make Hon Hai / Foxconn the largest exporter in Greater China and the second-largest exporter in the Czech Republic."[4] Foxconn, with nearly one million workers—the vast majority of them in mainland China—is the world's largest industrial employer.[5] But what precisely are Foxconn's priorities, and is a "commitment to continual education, investing in its people long term" among them?

China remains the heart of Foxconn's global corporate empire and its profitability. In 2018, Foxconn accounted for 4.1 percent of China's total imports and exports,[6] with revenues topping US$175 billion—or, in the currency of the New Taiwan dollar, TWD 5.2 trillion.[7] The company's claims are grandiose: "Foxconn is a global industry-leading manufacturer of Computer, Communications and Consumer Electronics (3C) components." Focusing on "Cloud Computing, Mobile Devices, Internet of Things, Big Data, Artificial Intelligence, Smart Networks, Robotics/Automation, Foxconn has built sophisticated capabilities around key Industrial Internet technologies."[8] Indeed, Foxconn has striven to move from low value-added processing and manufacturing to more profitable businesses and services, harnessing the power of intellectual property and technical invention. Where others have focused on these issues, we repeatedly return to gauging the corporation's rise as it affects its one million employees, the great majority of them rural migrant workers.

Apple, Foxconn, and Chinese Workers

Foxconn's largest customer by far is Apple. But its clients are a Who's Who of global electronics corporations, among them Alphabet (formerly Google), Amazon, BlackBerry, Cisco, Dell, Fujitsu, GE, HP, IBM, Intel, LG, Microsoft, Nintendo, Panasonic, Philips, Samsung, Sony, and Toshiba, as well as such leading Chinese firms as Lenovo, Huawei, ZTE, and Xiaomi. Foxconn assembles iPhones, iPads, iPods, Macs, TVs, Xboxes, PlayStations, Wii U's, Kindles, printers, and myriad digital devices. While primarily contracting for global electronics firms, Foxconn also produces a variety of products under its own name. The company looks to a future in which its major growth areas center on Foxconn brands operating at cutting-edge technological frontiers led by robotics and artificial intelligence. It is a future with profound implications for its labor force, the world economy, and geopolitics.

Apple and Foxconn are independent companies, but they are inextricably linked in product development, engineering research, manufacturing processes, logistics, sales, and after-sales services. By the end of the 1990s, Apple had exported all of its US-based manufacturing jobs and some of its research facilities overseas.[9] Apple only retained a small number of workers and staff at its Macintosh computer factory in Ireland. This outsourcing means that Apple's success is inseparable from the contributions of its international suppliers and their workers, above all Foxconn and its Chinese employees.

The Apple mystique has centered on its rapid rise to a hegemonic position in the design and marketing of a range of electronics products led in recent years by the iPhone, and the aura surrounding Steve Jobs (1955–2011), its cofounder and for decades its dominant presence. Tim Cook, who succeeded the late Steve Jobs as Apple CEO in August 2011, is hailed by journalist Leander Kahney as "the genius who took Apple to the next level."[10] Overshadowed in that American success story are the lives and welfare of the mainly Chinese workers who produce the products

of the global megabrand that so many long to possess, and the relationship between Apple and Foxconn that sets the parameters of factory life.

Dying for an iPhone

Dying for an iPhone has a double meaning. A new generation of workers is struggling to meet corporate requirements for speed and precision in producing iPhones and other high-tech products precisely at a time when consumers around the globe are queuing up to buy the newest models. Apple's success is intimately bound up with the production of quality products at high speed. Given its control of the commanding heights of hardware, software, and design, Apple has remained in the driver's seat in setting the terms and conditions for Foxconn and, in turn, for its workers. As of 2010, Foxconn was the exclusive final manufacturer not only of iPhones for Apple, but also a major contractor of a wide array of electronics products for many other technology giants.

The suicide-prevention nets strung around Foxconn's China-based facilities and the barred dormitory windows in late May 2010—appearing at the peak of the suicide clusters and remaining ever since—serve to refresh collective memories about the despair that drove young workers to kill themselves, the companies' responsibilities for this tragedy, and collective efforts by workers and their supporters to create a more humane workplace.

A Collective Investigation in China

In summer 2010, we collaborated with researchers from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong to conduct undercover research at Foxconn's major manufacturing sites in nine Chinese cities, mainly in southern, eastern, and northern regions: Shenzhen, Shanghai, Kunshan, Hangzhou, Nanjing, Tianjin, Langfang, Taiyuan, and Wuhan. Our goal was not just to look into the hidden abode of

Foxconn production on the ground, but also to assess the extent to which the Chinese state and global tech corporations fulfilled their responsibilities to protect workers in the context of transnational production.

In spring 2011, we returned to Foxconn's manufacturing bases in Shenzhen, where half a million employees were toiling day and night to make our smartphones, tablets, and many other electronics products. We also visited two emerging "Apple cities"—Zhengzhou in Henan province and Chengdu in Sichuan province—where Foxconn's new megafactories assembled iPhones and iPads, respectively, at wages well below those in the coastal areas that were the sites of older plants. Following capital movements and through multisited research, we witnessed Foxconn's rapid expansion across provinces with strong support by local governments, thereby creating a 24-hour, high-speed production network with more than forty industrial parks in China alone.

In December 2013, we wrote to Terry Gou, Foxconn founder and CEO, and Tim Cook, the CEO of Apple, describing the conditions our research had uncovered and expressing concerns about the well-being of Foxconn workers. In addition, we contacted the Foxconn Global Social and Environmental Responsibility Committee, the Apple Supplier Responsibility Program, and the Fair Labor Association (Apple was a member from January 2012 to October 2016). Our purpose was to gain corporate perspectives on issues that our research had uncovered: low wages and benefits, compulsory overtime, lack of fundamental health and safety precautions, abusive treatment of teenage student interns, and managerial repression of workers' attempts to press demands for securing rights guaranteed by employment contracts and national labor laws. While Apple and Foxconn paid close attention to the public relations challenges posed by strikes, fires and explosions, and worker suicides, our effort to engage the corporations in discussion of labor responsibility produced only corporate rationalizations and platitudes.[11]

By contrast, workers would be far more responsive to our attempts to understand their lives. Our multiyear fieldwork, which continued to the outbreak of new coronavirus in the end of 2019, is based on interviews with Foxconn workers, student interns, teachers (who monitor the internship programs of their students), managers, and government officials, supplemented with field observations and extensive documentary research. Through interviews, poems, songs, open letters, photos, and videos shared with us, this book presents firsthand portraits of workers and teenage student interns—their hopes, dreams, and struggles to survive.[12]

Challenges to a Global Labor Regime

Foxconn is the king of the "electronics workshop of the world." While the company has achieved enormous wealth, it remains subordinate to the global brands, above all Apple, which sets the price and the volume of the orders placed with Foxconn and rival producers. In this competitive terrain, Foxconn is vulnerable to sweatshop charges as it seeks to meet the demands for quality and speed set by Apple and other brands. Not only Foxconn but also Apple and other brands may be named and shamed through labor strikes and walkouts as well as press criticism, undermining the corporate image with economic and reputational loss. In these circumstances, workers and their supporters may succeed in exploiting corporate social responsibility discourse to win public support for worker rights, at times appealing for consumer support at home and abroad, and force corporate compliance with legal and moral norms.[13] In particular, we recognize that universities—their students and faculties—are open to learning about and acting upon information about corporate abuses as many have taken part in social movements involving sneakers, sweatshirts, and other products that particularly catered to students and universities.

With the reintroduction of capitalist production methods since reform and opening-up, China in recent decades has been the

site of high levels of contentious politics with numerous worker strikes and protests. In key nodes of globalized electronics production, particularly in periods in which sales leaps are expected, such as the launch of new models, large-scale labor actions can send important messages to the state, to Foxconn, and to global brands, including Apple, sometimes contributing to worker gains. Officials, in the interest of maintaining social and political stability, serve as brokers to pressure companies into compromising with workers. However, workers who confront management, and, on occasion, the government and police, risk being charged with disrupting the social order and being fired and/or imprisoned.

Chinese labor relations remain unstable, prompting legal reforms that have meant to improve the lot of workers and to preserve the corporate-state nexus of power that demobilizes workers. Aggrieved workers oscillate between legal and extralegal tactics for resolving conflicts in order to draw attention and responses from the government, media, and the concerned public. Under the leadership of Xi Jinping from 2013, defiant workers, including Foxconn employees, have continued to protest abuses and fight to secure fundamental rights. Despite crackdown on nongovernmental organizations and human rights lawyers, they have persisted, at times with support from students and citizens. Should workers at Foxconn and elsewhere succeed in organizing and mobilizing effectively, they would inspire many more to strive to make a better future together.

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A Suicide Survivor

I was so desperate that my mind went blank.

—Tian Yu, a 17-year-old suicide survivor[1]

At about eight in the morning on March 17, 2010, Tian Yu threw herself from the fourth floor of a Foxconn factory dormitory. Just a little over a month earlier, she had come to Shenzhen city, the fast-rising megalopolis adjacent to Hong Kong that has become the cutting edge of development in China's electronics industry. While still a predominantly rural area when it was designated as China's first Special Economic Zone in 1980, Shenzhen experienced extraordinary economic and population growth in the following decades to become a major metropolis with a population exceeding 10 million by 2010, with nearly 8 million internal migrants from within Guangdong and other provices (who were also known as the "floating" population).[2]

Yu, who hailed from a farming village in the central province of Hubei, landed a job at Foxconn in Shenzhen. At the moment that she attempted to take her life, global consumers were impatiently waiting for the revamped iPhone 4 and the first-generation iPad. Working on an Apple product line of Foxconn's integrated Digital Product Business Group (iDPBG), Yu was responsible for spot inspections of glass screens to see whether they were scratched. An ever-shorter production cycle, accelerated finishing time, and heavy overtime requirements placed intense pressures on Yu and her coworkers.

Miraculously, Yu survived the fall, but suffered three spinal fractures and four hip fractures. She was left paralyzed from the waist down. Her job at the factory, her first, will probably be her last.

Tian Yu, half-paralyzed after jumping from the Foxconn Longhua factory dormitory, received treatment in the Shenzhen Longhua People's Hospital in Guangdong province.

Surviving Foxconn

Our first meeting with Yu took place in July 2010 at the Shenzhen Longhua People's Hospital, where she was recovering from the injuries sustained in her suicide attempt. Aware of her fragile physical and psychological state, the researchers were fearful that their presence might cause Yu and her family further pain. However, both Yu's parents at her bedside, and Yu herself when she awoke, put them at ease by welcoming their presence.

Over the following weeks, as Yu established bonds of trust with the researchers, she talked about her family background, the circumstances that led to her employment at Foxconn, and her experiences working on the assembly line and living in the factory

dormitory. During interviews with Yu and her family, it became clear that her story had much in common with that of many Foxconn employees, comprised predominantly of the new generation of Chinese rural migrant workers.

"I was born into a farming family in February 1993 in a village," Yu related. What was recently a village is now part of Laohekou (Old River Mouth) city, which has a population of 530,000. Located on the Han River close to the Henan provincial border, it was liberated in the course of the anti-Japanese resistance of the 1940s. Following a redistributive land reform, in the mid-1950s, agricultural production was organized along collective lines. During the late 1970s, with the establishment of a household responsibility system in agriculture, followed in 1982 by the dismantling of the people's communes, farmland was contracted to individual households.

"At best my family could earn about 15,000 yuan on the land in a year, hardly enough to sustain six people. Growing corn and wheat on tiny parcels of land and keeping a few pigs and chickens might not leave us hungry," Yu said, "but making a better life is challenging if one seeks to eke out a living on the small family plot."

Yu belonged to the generation of "left-behind children" as both parents joined the early out-migration wave that enveloped China's countryside. Yu's grandmother brought her up while her parents were far from home supporting the family as migrant factory workers. Like many of the 61 million children who were left behind, she spent her early childhood playing with other neighborhood children.[3] There was little parental guidance. Eventually, her parents returned home to resume farming having earned just enough money to renovate the house. Yu, the eldest child, has a sister and a brother. She hoped, in the future, to be able to help look after her brother, who was born deaf.[4]

From Farm to Factory

China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 brought about great challenges to villagers, who faced a flood of cheap subsidized crops imported from overseas even as export-driven industrialization expanded. Despite gains associated with the elimination of agricultural taxes in 2005 and the subsequent establishment of a social insurance scheme under the new socialist countryside campaign, as most young people departed for the cities and industrial jobs, the prospects for household-based agriculture and rural development generally darkened. Sporadic efforts toward cooperative rural construction and alternative development initiatives aside, opportunities for sustainable farming and lucrative nonfarm work in remote villages remained scarce.

After graduating from junior secondary school and completing a short course at the local vocational school, Yu decided to leave home to find a job. For her cohort of rural youth, the future, the only hope, lay in the cities. By 2010, TV and especially internet technology and mobile communications had opened a window on the real and imagined city lifestyle. "Almost all the young people of my age had gone off to work, and I was excited to see the world outside, too," Yu explained.

Soon after the Spring Festival, the Chinese New Year, in early February 2010, Yu's father gave her 500 yuan to tide her over while searching for work. He also provided a secondhand cell phone so that she could call home. He asked her to stay safe.

In the morning, "my cousin brought me to the long-distance bus station," Yu recalled of her departure for the city. "For the first time in my life I was far away from home. Getting off the bus, my first impression of the industrial town was that Shenzhen was nothing like what I had seen on TV."

On February 8, at the company recruitment center, "I queued up for the whole morning, filled out the job application form, pressed my fingertips onto the electronic reader, scanned my identity card, and took a blood test to complete the health check procedures."