



China, the Asian Studies Profession and *Asia-Pacific Journal*

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Abstract: This Online Exclusive is part of an ongoing series showcasing perspectives on Critical Asian Scholarship in a Time of Global Crisis.

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For a quarter of a century, Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus (APJF) has crafted a space for researchers to analyze historical and contemporary developments in the Asia-Pacific and the world. I learned from APJF writers with growing interest in the deepening integration of China into the global economy and the far-reaching impact of incorporation on the successive generations of Chinese rural migrant workers. Among the mentors who guided me during graduate school (2009 and 2014), I am deeply grateful to Mark Selden, a founding editor and long-term contributor to APJF. I have come to salute him as Mark laoshi, conveying respect and affection for a teacher in Chinese, after he gently nudged me not to address him as Professor Selden every time in the email.

APJF upholds the values of truth and justice. In 2010, when a spate of 18 young workers attempted suicides at Foxconn facilities in the Chinese Mainland, resulting in 14 deaths, the state media quickly stepped in to manage the production and dissemination of “news.” The installation of the so-called anti-suicide safety nets surrounding worker dormitories, the provision of clinical psychological services, and even the requirement of passing a newly-administered psychological test on work stress in job screening, to name only a few immediate corporate responses, were acclaimed by the government and

Foxconn’s clients. But why did the tragedy happen in the first place? Who bore responsibility? How can employee suicides at the workplace level be prevented? When freedom of the press is severely restricted in an environment wherein the state and corporations share their primary interests in restoring production and “stability,” APJF serves as an indispensable forum for the people to share their voice.

In the skillful hands of the APJF editorial board, my co-authored essay entitled “Suicide as Protest for the New Generation of Chinese Migrant Workers: Foxconn, Global Capital, and the State” was published in September 2010. We ([Chan and Pun 2010](#)) argued that the concentration of suicide cases points to something new and important, which begs for an explanation in the context of the company, the industry and the wider society. Between 2010 and the outbreak of the coronavirus at the end of 2019, I engaged with Foxconn workers through first-hand interviews as well as their shared poems, songs, open letters, photos and videos, supplemented by meetings with managers and government officials during multiple research trips to coastal and inland China. Thanks to the trust of Foxconn suicide survivors and their fellow workmates, our book, *Dying for an iPhone: Apple, Foxconn, and the Lives of China’s Workers* came out amid the global COVID-19 pandemic ([Chan, Selden and Pun 2020](#)). This was particularly important in 2020, when a Beijing-based academic publisher abruptly stopped the Chinese-language publication of our book in a blatant case of political censorship.

APJF strives to present its readership with informed

analyses. In an era of GenAI, reviewers and journal editors might fail to detect non-existent references, fake AI citations or ghost DOIs, a phenomenon labelled as AI hallucinations (see, for example, [John 2025](#)). Under these circumstances, an ethic of authorship, responsibility, morality and academic integrity is more fundamental than ever to knowledge production. I must extend my gratitude to the tireless efforts, insightful feedback and effective communications of APJF to the professional community of Chinese and international studies in these fraught times.

APJF offers the opportunity to authors to utilize theoretical and methodological rigor to challenge Beijing and global tech corporations to fulfill their responsibilities to protect workers in the context of transnational production. In my dissertation, I combined multi-sited ethnography with the analysis of documentary sources to provide an analytical framework of a “global factory regime” to explain the buyer–supplier power dynamic in transnational manufacturing. Big buyers (such as Apple) and big suppliers (such as Foxconn) are interdependent in outsourced electronics production, at a time when production pressure is shifting from global tech firms to contract manufacturers. From this perspective, the management systems on factory floors in China are not only shaped by authoritarian governance but also by the boom-and-bust purchasing practices of multinational corporations in global supply chains. The dialectics of domination and resistance are interwoven in the life and death struggles of Chinese migrant workers who produce our iPhones.

I study China’s rural-to-urban migration and changing state–society relations through the lens of globalization. On the ground, the proportion of temporary workers such as student interns (from vocational schools) and agency laborers (from staffing firms) in the manufacturing sector has exploded, creating a huge swath of “low-skilled” workers cum second-class citizens bereft of labor rights. For employers, hiring temporary workers can increase human

resources flexibility and lower costs by reducing payments for job training and myriad benefits. In the last decade, tens of millions of manufacturing workers have fled factory jobs to enter the fast-growing gig labor market by delivering food and parcels.



Caption: “Teacher Mark: your encouragement, generosity, openness and inclusiveness have sustained me in a career initially at the University of Oxford and currently at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University.” (Photo by Ellen, December 2019.)

From one-click ordering to super-fast doorstep delivery, a new logistical world of human labor is in the making. The informalization of labor—in which digital platform workers are (mis)classified as “independent contractors”—is a cause for concern. Outside of the formal employment system, a precarious group of gig workers is rendered ever more dependent on family and friends for support, if they are available. Presently, platform corporations and their “scientific” algorithmic metrics presume male workers as the ideal workers, who, in desperate efforts to survive, will readily login to the apps anytime, stay online and continue to work for much of the day without caring for their children or other family members.

One manifestation of this gendered substructure of staff appraisal is that women workers are invariably presumed to be inferior to their male counterparts and therefore less likely be recruited and retained. As algorithmic control intensifies, I contend that APJF provides fertile ground for debate and progressive change.

How do we build an alternative, human-centered development underpinned by democratic governance and technological innovation? APJF envisions interdisciplinary approaches and strong connectivity with academics and reformers seeking to eliminate class, gender and other forms of inequality. As a relatively new editorial board member, I endeavor to work with both early-career and experienced researchers in a spirit of mutual learning and co-creation of knowledge in the face of deep-seated geopolitical conflicts and local crises.

About the Author:

Jenny Chan is an associate professor of sociology at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and a vice president (2018–2023) of the International Sociological Association’s Research Committee on Labor Movements. She researches labor and state-society relations in China’s global transformation, with a focus on political economy, rural-urban migration, and informalization of workforce. She is the co-author, with Mark Selden and Pun Ngai, of *Dying for an iPhone* (Haymarket Books and Pluto Press, 2020), which was translated into Korean (Narumbooks, 2021) and received CHOICE’s awards for Outstanding Academic Title on China and Outstanding Academic Title in Work and Labour in 2022. With Chris Rhomberg and Nair Manjusha, she recently co-edited the special issue of *Critical Sociology* on ‘Precarization and Labor Resistance’ (2019). She is also an APJF editorial board member.