



*Schizoid Creators: Creative Work and Subjectivity in the Chinese Cultural Economies*

J. Lin

## Summary

---

### **Schizoid Creators: Creative Work and Subjectivity in the Chinese Cultural Economies**

This study investigates creative labour conditions and the formation of creative subjectivities in China in terms of the precariousness these conditions generate, but also of the opportunities creative labour offers subjects from diverse social backgrounds. Based on my empirical fieldwork in China (mostly Beijing and Shanghai) and archival research (e.g. policy documents and industrial reports), this study combines a political economy of cultural production in contemporary China with four empirical case studies focusing on creative workers in state-owned cultural enterprises, independent filmmakers, international creative workers in Beijing and the newly emerged digital creative class on social media. By investigating the subjectivation of creative workers in relation to the complex and diversified labour conditions of cultural production in contemporary China, this study engages with three questions concerning governance, precarity and subjectivity: 1) How are cultural production and creative labour organised and regulated in the contemporary Chinese cultural economy (governance)? 2) What are the working and living conditions of creative workers in this specific political economy of the Chinese cultural industries (precarity)? 3) How do individual creative workers navigate the politico-economic system of cultural production in China? (subjectivity)?

I start from two basic premises. First, that there is a lack of concern with contextuality in current scholarship on creative labour and that we urgently need to take into consideration the different politico-cultural-economic circumstances in the societies where creative labour flourishes. My aim is ‘not to reverse the binary relationships – west and east or north and south, coloniser and colonised, centre and periphery’ – but to displace or interrupt the ‘taken-for-grantedness of congealed knowledge claims’ (Alacovska and Gill 2019, 3) in extant attempts to theorise cultural work. Second, in claiming creative work as aspirational, I refuse to view these aspirations as merely false consciousness. The recognition that aspirational creative workers may overlook or be willing to tolerate the precarious conditions under which they work does not necessarily mean that their aspirations or positive experiences of creative work are simply illusory or founded in misleading ideology (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011).

While unveiling how politico-economic inequalities are concealed by the production of creative aspirations in the Chinese cultural industries, I also seek to affirm the experiences and agency of individuals working in a wide range of cultural sectors, including television, film, design, journalism and social media. These creative subjects, I argue, are far from docile bodies that are

simply manipulated by (state) capitalist ideologies. China's specific cultural economy produces space for individual agency as well as precariousness, leaving open the possibility for cultural workers to become what I term 'schizoid creators' – a concept borrowed and developed from Deleuze and Guattari's schizoanalysis of contemporary capitalism (1983). The vibrant network of cultural production in China both pushes and limits individuals' aspirations to creativity and self-realisation. Expected by the state and market to always 'be creative' in particular ways, cultural workers also find possibilities to resist this imperative, developing a schizoid subjectivity that serves the governing system but challenges it at the same time.

Chapter 1 investigates the policy and institutional context of commercial cultural production in contemporary China. Based on a genealogical overview of Chinese cultural economy policies, it shows how the discourse of 'cultural industries' was introduced and incorporated by the Chinese Party-State in the post-Mao era. The Party-State adopts a functionalist, top-down approach to culture, which is viewed as both an economic asset and a crucial tool for wielding national and international soft power, and maintaining social and political stability. The cultural industries are thus supported and promoted by the Chinese authorities, while also being put under strict surveillance and censorship. Crucially, this top-down approach on the cultural industries and cultural production is imbued with contradictions, as becomes clear when considering the institutional features of the Chinese political system and the process of policy implementation. The fragmented administrative system, the decentralised authoritarian regime and the complicated state-commerce relationship all profoundly affect the actual process of policy-making and implementation in the contemporary Chinese cultural sectors. The uncanny political system ultimately yields as many obstacles as flexibilities for creative producers and other actors in the Chinese cultural sphere. Consequently, the crucial task for cultural producers in China is to find ways to negotiate and 'play' with state power, which is contested, non-unitary and multiple.

Chapter 2 studies creative labour in Chinese state-owned cultural enterprises (SOCEs). Transformed from state-controlled cultural work units, these state-owned companies are the most powerful players in the Chinese cultural industries. Based on the empirical analysis of fieldwork data, this chapter explores the governance of creative labour in Chinese SOCEs through an analysis of the condition of autonomy and the discourse of self-realisation within selected Chinese state-controlled media companies. The autonomy of creative work within the system is made contingent by the Party-State's ideological regulation, which results in a highly bureaucratic management system. Nevertheless, the various welfare benefits and career opportunities provided by the SOCEs also motivate state-employed creative workers, through the discourse of self-realisation, to 'be creative for the state'. In practice, however, as cases of loafing on the job and the 'resignation wave' illustrate, the state-sponsored system is permeated with contradictions that can enable creative individuals to distance themselves from the expected subjectivity of 'being creative for the state'.

Chapter 3 studies Chinese independent filmmaking as a form of creative labour. My ethnography shows that independent filmmaking is often chosen due to the filmmakers' expectation that it will allow them to balance their aspirations to career success and their 'discontent' with their previous lives and the state of society. Once having become practitioners in the industry, however, these filmmakers soon find that their creative labour is precarised in the existing production system: the stringent film censorship and the thriving state-supported domestic cinema industry prompt filmmakers to accept 'co-optation' and 'depoliticisation' in production; certain international film festivals and institutions, at the same time, encourage these Chinese filmmakers to identify themselves as 'dissent/artistic independents'. This process of precarisation steers Chinese independent cinema towards a depoliticised 'art cinema', while filmmakers have to deploy forms of self-governance such as multi-tasking, networking and emotional management. But this precarity and precarisation also produces an informal mutual-caring community among independent filmmakers to combat their career precarity. Animated by common aspirations to 'independence' and 'freedom', this community triggers a more open understanding of 'independence' and 'independent filmmaking'. They are becoming what I have termed 'schizoid creators' in the sense that their creative labour on the one hand is integrated into the larger governing system of cultural production in China. On the other hand, such a more inclusive and fluid conception of independence in turn allows for differences between the community's members, who are no longer circumscribed by rigid identities such as 'politically dissent' or 'non-commercial'.

Chapter 4 shifts the research focus from local Chinese creators to international creative subjects in China. The emerging Chinese cultural industries and the existing gap between China's cultural economy and its western competitors have translated into a thirst on the part of Chinese authorities and companies for 'creative know-how', fostering job opportunities for international cultural workers. However, the career opportunities brought by the emerging Chinese creative economy are also accompanied by risks and precarity; China's limitations on migration, precarious working conditions, political restrictions and social-environmental problems all call for effective self-governance among transnational creative workers in China. At the same time, the precarious life produced by the mobility and flexibility demanded of international creative workers in Beijing fuels interaction and mutual understanding between local and global subjects, providing the conditions for a cosmopolitan subjectivity. This subjectivation of international cultural workers may transcend the Chinese authorities' expectation of a conforming and profitable creative workforce. In this way, the transnational mobility of creative labour in Beijing epitomises the process of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation, and exemplifies what Isabel Lorey (2015) terms the 'incalculable' consequences of precarisation and self-governance.

Chapter 5 studies an 'unlikely' group of creative workers enabled by the emerging platformisation of cultural production in China – short video makers on the social media platform

Kuaishou. It examines the contingent relationship between Kuaishou and the state governance of culture and economy, and shows how this relationship is embedded in the digital algorithmic system of the platform. It is this state-platform contingency that distinguishes the functioning ecology of Chinese media platforms from those in the west. The platform economy provides opportunities for ‘grassroots individuals’ from diverse backgrounds to become creative workers, pandering to the state’s goal of restructuring the economy while also enabling a new form of social class mobility. The grassroots digital entrepreneurship fostered by Kuaishou transcends the passive ‘digital labour’ and ‘prosumer’ model some critical political economists have identified (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Fuchs, 2010). In parallel with the institutional regulation and censorship of the internet, Kuaishou creators actively participate in Chinese platform creative economy, appropriating the algorithmic digital system and negotiating with the state/platform governance to achieve their own creative and financial aims. Within their experiences of creation and monetisation, we can find moments of play, if not resistance – moments in which the official narrative of the ‘China Dream’ is juxtaposed to multiple dreams from actors that hardly ever get a face or a voice in mainstream media in China.