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Be creative for the state: Creative workers in Chinese state-owned cultural enterprises

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Abstract

This article studies creative labour in Chinese state-owned cultural enterprises (SOCEs). Based on the empirical analysis of fieldwork data, it analyses the governmentality of creative labour in Chinese SOCEs through an investigation of the condition of autonomy and the discourse of self-realization within selected Chinese media companies. The autonomy of creative work within the system is made contingent by the party state's ideological concern, while since the commercialization reform of SOCEs, creative workers are also expected to 'be creative for the state' under the discourse of self-realization. In practice, as the case of loafing on the job illustrates, the system causes marked contradictions that furnish creative individuals with possibilities to distance themselves from the expected subjectivity of 'being creative for the state'. This article offers an exemplary case study of how the governance of creativity and creative labour works in Chinese SOCEs, and of how it distinguishes itself from the creativity *dispositif* in the West. It suggests that the theorization of creative labour needs to go beyond the western neoliberal perspective and take into account the diversity of socio-political contexts across the world.

Keywords

autonomy, China, Chinese media, Chinese state-owned cultural enterprises (SOCEs), creative labour, governmentality, self-realization

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The state-owned cultural enterprises are the vital forces for developing cultural industries and constructing socialist advanced culture. We must endeavour to build up a modern corporate system with cultural characteristics, so as to show the demonstration effect of uniting the social benefits with the economic benefits.
(Central Committee of the CCP and State Council, 2015)¹

When I was interviewing creative workers employed by Chinese state-owned cultural firms, I could often sense their ambivalence towards their jobs and companies. They frequently referred to a sentence from the novel *Fortress Besieged* (Qian, 2006): ‘Like in a city under siege, people who are living inside always want to get out, while those on the outside still hope to come in.’ These state companies, by virtue of the ‘iron rice bowl’² (*tie fanwan*) provided by the system (*tizhi*), are still attractive for those working in the precarious cultural industries. For insiders, however, the system has its own drawbacks, which frustrate them on a daily basis.

This raises important questions concerning labour and creative labour in the state-owned media companies of China. Following Mark Banks (2007) and David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker (2011), I use the term ‘creative labour’ to refer to the act of labour within the contemporary industrial process of cultural production. It has been argued that the real situation of creative work in this globalized society is not as autonomous, self-expressive and fulfilling as imagined by creative-industry policies and scholars such as Richard Florida (2002) and John Howkins (2002). Instead, creative workers have become a creative precariat, suffering under precarious working conditions and surrounded by problems such as short-term contracts, unequal earnings and a lack of unions (Curtin and Sanson, 2016; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; McRobbie, 2016). Discourses surrounding creativity, as Angela McRobbie accentuates, function as elements connected by the ‘creativity *dispositif*’, which, following Foucault, refers to the specific function of ‘creativity’ in the current neoliberal economy:

Creativity is designated by current modes of biopolitical power, as the site for implementing job creation and, more significantly, labour reform; it is a matter of managing a key sector of the youthful population by turning culture into an instrument of both competition and labour discipline. (McRobbie, 2016: 38)

However, most of these claims are elaborated from the perspective of western, ‘neoliberal’ creative industries. In contemporary China, the ‘creativity *dispositif*’ might have a different form and connotation. First, as Jing Wang stresses, there is always a ‘state question’ in China’s cultural industries and popular cultural studies (Wang, 2001: 35–52). Culture in contemporary China is not simply commercial, but a tool for wielding ‘soft power’ (Nye, 2004) and propagating the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Yiu Fai Chow’s studies on Diana Zhu and Hong Kong creative workers in Mainland China offer an illustrative example of China’s incorporation of creativity into its political governance of culture and cultural workers (Chow, 2011, 2017).

Second, in the cultural industries of China, a special form of work organization exists in the form of state-owned cultural enterprises (SOCEs). According to official statistics, by 2014 there were 1.29 million employees in Chinese SOCEs (Ministry of Finance, 2015). Transformed from state-controlled cultural work units,³ these state-owned

companies are the most powerful players in the Chinese cultural industries. In the few existing studies on Chinese SOCEs, scholars have provided an ethnography of news publishing and broadcasting agencies during the marketization reform of state media since the 1990s (Wang, 2006), an organization study of China Central Television (Wang, 2011; Zhu, 2012) as well as a production study of a local television programme (Fung and Zhang, 2011). What remains underexplored are questions concerning the power relations governing creative labour and their impact on creative workers' subjectivities in Chinese SOCEs.

Third, SOCEs are required by the Chinese government to shoulder a double 'responsibility': to achieve both social and economic benefits (Central Committee of the CCP and State Council, 2015; Ministry of Finance, 2015). As Ying Zhu states in her study of CCTV, 'the pressures of generating revenue alongside conforming politically are frequently at odds with media practitioners' sense of duty associated with watchdog journalism and cultural enlightenment' (Zhu, 2012: 9). The need to balance the political and the commercial in cultural production causes a basic paradox that troubles creative workers in Chinese SOCEs.

Against this background, if creative workers in Anglo-American society are subjectified by a neoliberal governmentality constructed by the creativity *dispositif*, how are cultural workers governed in Chinese SOCEs? What kind of subjectivity is expected and produced through the governance of creativity and labour in Chinese SOCEs? And, finally, how does the governance of creative labour and its subjectivity found in Chinese SOCEs distinguish itself from the western 'neoliberal' mode of creative labour? To study these questions, I choose as points of departure two key conceptions: 'autonomy' and 'self-realization'.

Autonomy, self-realization and the creativity *dispositif*

In current discussions on creative industries and creative labour, autonomy has at least two connotations: 'creative autonomy' and 'workplace autonomy' (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011: 40; Holt and Lapenta, 2010). Creative autonomy refers to the independence of art from other social forces like religion and politics, an aesthetic idealism that originated from Kant's distinction between aesthetic, moral, and rational judgement. In the creative industries, this form of autonomy is arguably threatened by the demands of capital and its embedded instrumental rationality: 'reducing all value to exchange value by applying market principles to everything in a global cultural economy' (McGuigan, 2004: 53). As for workplace autonomy, it refers to 'the degree of self-determination that individual workers or groups of workers have within a work situation' (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011: 40). The development of creative industries and the post-Fordism it represented on the one hand provides a large market for artists and cultural workers, who now have more opportunities to obtain financing through artistic production. The proliferation of deregulation in cultural companies also endows cultural workers with more 'responsible autonomy', which 'attempts to harness the adaptability of labour power by giving workers leeway and encouraging them to adapt to changing situations in a manner beneficial to the firm' (cited in Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011: 41; see also Friedman, 1977: 78).

Self-realization, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, refers to ‘the fulfilment by one’s own efforts of the possibilities of development of the self’ (cited in Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011: 33). Compared to other forms of labour such as factory labour, it seems that creative labour, ‘at least according to creative workers, offers genuine possibilities for self-realization’ (2011: 141). Various creative-industry policies issued by governments also tout the great potential for self-realization in the creative industries. As one of them claims:

just imagine how good it feels to wake up every morning and really look forward to work. Imagine how good it feels to use your creativity, your skills, [and] your talent to produce a film.... Are you there? Does it feel good? (quoted in Nixon and Crewe, 2004: 129)

In reality, as Nixon and Crewe (2004) recognize, not all those working ‘there’ have been feeling good and nor can they always realize their creative potentials. Yet, just as both Ursell and McRobbie argue, it is the passion and love for creative work that motivates those who choose creative professions as their career (McRobbie, 2002; Ursell, 2000). All the drawbacks concerning pay, working time and security could be ignored in view of the alluring potential of creative work to help them realize their creative potential, or, in McRobbie’s words, to ‘find the meaning of life in work’ (2002: 110). Rather than celebrating such happiness and the possibility of self-realization, Ursell and McRobbie recognize the articulation of ‘passion in work’ in the governmental discourses of creative work (McRobbie, 2002: 109; Ursell, 2000: 810).

In short, in the current neoliberal creative economy, creative labour may not be as autonomous and fulfilling as it claims to be. Furthermore, the discourses of autonomy and self-realization constitute core elements of the ‘creativity dispositif’ (McRobbie, 2016). The managerial setting of ‘responsible autonomy’ fosters creative workers’ aspiration to self-realization, which is at the same time circumscribed and orchestrated to produce the desired creative subjectivity.

Given the ‘state question’ haunting Chinese cultural production, as well as the special managerial structure of Chinese state-owned media, the condition of autonomy and the role of self-realization might manifest differently, leading to different questions. First, to what extent is autonomy (im)possible in an authoritarian cultural system where censorship and propaganda are indispensable? Second, under this condition of autonomy, how do the connotations and (dis)functionality of the self-realization discourse appear in the everyday work of creative workers at Chinese SOCEs? The aim of this study is not simply to examine the extent to which creative workers can achieve autonomy and self-realization, but to illuminate the role notions of autonomy and self-realization play in governing the subjectivity of creative workers in Chinese state media. This offers an opportunity to see how the governance of creativity and creative labour works in Chinese SOCEs, and how it distinguishes itself from the creativity *dispositif* in the West.

As part of a larger project on creative labour in the cultural industries of China, this article is based on fieldwork in Beijing and Shanghai from July to October 2016, during which I conducted ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews with creative workers from the television, film and new media industries, including employees of state media and private cultural companies, as well as freelancers. This article addresses the

questions raised above mainly by analysing the 10 in-depth interviews with state-employed creative workers and observations in their companies. As a point of comparison, it also refers to interviews with creative workers in private cultural companies and freelancers. In addition, I examined other sources, including cultural industry policy documents, selected news reports and online discussions about working in Chinese SOCEs. The SOCEs studied include three national and three provincial media companies involved in business genres ranging from film and television to news publishers. The names of informants have been pseudonymized for security and privacy reasons. Given the diversity of Chinese SOCEs, this article does not claim to present a comprehensive ethnography of creative production in SOCEs. Instead, it outlines some common situations faced by creative workers in Chinese SOCEs that shed light on the question of how creativity discourses function in the governance of cultural workers in Chinese SOCEs.

Before moving into the discussion of autonomy and self-realization, the article will first introduce the historical background of China's cultural system reform and Chinese SOCEs. It is suggested that the autonomy of creative labour within state media companies is quite contested and contingent as a result of the problematic managerial setting of the system. Meanwhile, the various working benefits offered by the system still attract creative workers to be creative for the state, especially those who have aspirations to self-realization. By exploring the prevalent phenomenon of loafing on the job, this study attributes the dysfunction of the self-realization discourse to the contradictory nature of the system itself. On this basis, I suggest a lack of concern for contextuality in existing studies of creative labour and argue that more attention should be paid to different socio-political localities, so as to facilitate a more differentiated theorization of creative labour and of how the politics of creative workplaces might be reimaged.

From *ganbu* to employees: cultural system reform and Chinese SOCEs

Before 1978, all Chinese cultural organizations, usually called cultural work units (*danwei*), were financed by and considered as part of the government apparatus. Their only responsibility was to serve the ideological propaganda of the CCP. Propelled by the economic reform starting in 1978, China also launched a reform of the cultural system from the late 1990s. With the aim of reducing the financial burden and competing with foreign cultural enterprises, some of these *danwei* were gradually transformed into commercial enterprises under the name 'industrialization' and 'conglomeration' in China's cultural policy (Keane, 2013: 23; State Council, 2003, 2014). The commercialized cultural *danwei* include book and news publishers, film studios and television stations. To achieve the so-called 'economies of scale', formerly small cultural institutions with similar businesses were merged into large state-owned cultural conglomerates, such as China Film Group Company and Shanghai Century Publishing Group Corporation. Supported by Chinese government, these SOCEs hold a very privileged and powerful position in Chinese cultural industries. Facilitated by their close relationship with the government, they can exert great influence on policy-making and industrial administration.

Nevertheless, this reform has never completely relieved these state enterprises of their ideological duty of propaganda and education. Rather, Chinese SOCEs now are supposed to have a dual function: ‘cultural institution’ (*wenhua shiye*) and ‘cultural industry’ (*wenhua chanye*). As cultural institution, they must produce ‘good social benefits’ (*shehui xiaoyi*) that contribute to the construction of a harmonious society. As players in the cultural industry, they should achieve commercial success in the domestic as well as the global market, thus enhancing China’s soft power. In the context of Chinese cultural industry policy, however, ‘social benefit’ has always been given priority over commercial profits. The core of the cultural system reform, as the government claims:

is to enforce and improve cultural economic policy and strengthen regulation on state-owned cultural assets; it is to construct a mechanism which can ensure the priority of the pursuit of state-owned cultural enterprises for social benefits, while unite the social benefits with economic benefits... so as to advance the great development and great prosperity of socialist culture. (Central Committee of the CCP and State Council, 2015)

The cultural system reform also transformed the personnel system. In the pre-reform era, cultural workers were deemed cultural cadres (*ganbu*), enjoying permanent contracts and decent welfare. They worked and lived within *danwei*, which for them was not merely a workplace but also offered a home-like and solidary unity providing a panoply of welfare benefits such as health care, housing and education (Xing, 1995). In return, *danwei* exercised a form of social control, ‘securing individual compliance, maintain[ing] collective order and normative consistency and deal[ing] with problematic and deviant situations’ (Shaw, 1996: xii). Since the launch of the cultural system reform, the *danwei* has gradually morphed into an enterprise institution. Apart from the minority of senior staff who still have tenure (*bianzhi*), most workers are now on temporary contracts and are regulated under the so-called ‘enterprise managerial system’.

This transition from *danwei* to enterprise is still in process and has caused many ambiguities. As Fu Caiwu (2014) indicates, a common route of Chinese State-Owned Enterprise (SOE) reform is to replace the supervisor-oriented system with the sponsor-oriented system. In the supervisor-oriented system, central and local governments directly intervene in the management of companies under strict plans formulated by the authorities. In the sponsor-oriented model, government authorities only retain ownership while returning executive power to the companies. The SOEs thus enjoy more autonomy and flexibility in management and market competition. The key problem for cultural SOEs is, however, that one of the central mandates they receive from the state is to serve the ideological agenda of the party. Government officials in charge of cultural and propaganda affairs are wary of losing control of the SOCEs. Deregulation might cause ‘political mistakes’ in cultural production and thus a potential threat to their political careers. To counter this threat, a strict regulatory and censorship system is set up within these companies. Thus, the reluctance to deregulate results in a managerial system in which the so-called ‘modern enterprise system’ is articulated with a rigid bureaucracy teeming with hierarchy, rent-seeking and corruption. As I will specify in the following, this restricts the autonomy and self-realization of state employees.

The crippled system and contested autonomy

In their study of creative labour, Hesmondhalgh and Baker define autonomy as self-determination and not simply ‘freedom from all others’ and adopt it as a key standard of good cultural work (2011: 40). As explained at the beginning, it is arguable that in a capitalist art–commerce relation ‘responsible autonomy’ is possible and even necessary, for only the survival of autonomous cultural work can maintain the continuous supply of ‘originality’ and ‘authenticity’ demanded by consumers (Banks, 2010: 260). In Chinese creative industries, such responsible autonomy has also been quite relevant and introduced into commercial private companies. For instance, according to my informants in conglomerates like Tencent and Alibaba, and small production companies like Canxing Production and Miwei Media, most of these companies have set up a quite efficient managerial structure through well-designed recruiting, incentive and evaluation systems. Cao Jun, born in the early 1990s, is an executive editor of Miwei Media, which produced one of the most successful online series, *U Can U Bibi (Qipa shuo)*. Before joining Miwei, Cao worked on the production of a local television show at Shanghai Media Group (SMG), a large SOCE in Shanghai. Compared to his previous experience, Cao was amazed by the autonomy he is able to enjoy at Miwei. All the employees have shares in the company and the friendly relationship between the boss and staff members creates an enjoyable, home-like workplace. During the interview, Cao mentioned one of his colleagues, who was designated as one of the editors-in-chief of *Qipa shuo* when he was still a college student. The youngest chief director of Miwei was born in 1994, while those holding the same position in state media usually have more than 10 years of experience. It seems that, for private companies like Miwei, it is the employee’s creativity rather than their age or social experience that matters. ‘We trust young people! Because they’re creative and understand the audience’ (Cao Jun, Miwei Media, editor).

Chinese SOCEs have also been trying to introduce such responsible autonomy. In 1993, CCTV launched an institutional reform called ‘Producer Responsibility System (PRS)’. Under PRS, producers are entitled to more autonomy in terms of ‘personnel, finance and production management within their own teams’ (Wang, 2006: 60). They can hire contracted employees and organize production by themselves. As a result, CCTV produced several successful news programs like *Horizon (Dongfang Shikong)* and *Focus (Jiaodian Fangtan)*, the first Chinese TV programmes conducting investigative reports on current affairs with a watchdog nature. Local provincial media later also adopted the PRS, which was less a measure deliberately promoting autonomy, more an expedient response to the tension between employment quota restrictions and the increasing demand for manpower caused by rapid business expansion.

A similar reform can be traced in other state cultural enterprises, usually under the name of ‘cultural system reform’.⁴ Company A,⁵ the official news publisher of the CCP, shoulders an important responsibility of political propaganda for the party state. This means there are specific rules and disciplines imposed on news production. As a journalist and editor at Company A, Jiang Tao summarizes these regulations as having two components: value orientation (*jiazhi daoxiang*) and professionalism (*zhuanye zhuyi*). By ‘value orientation’, he means that the media reports should be consistent with ‘mainstream values’, be they ‘patriotism’, ‘the party’s leadership’ or the ‘Chinese value system’. Professionalism

denotes that the news production should follow the normal procedure and professional ethics of news gathering and editing, so fake news or paid news is unacceptable. Under these two principles, journalists like Jiang Tao can enjoy certain spaces of autonomy and be creative in their work; sometimes they are even encouraged by their leaders to be creative so as to meet the 'trend of new media development'. Speaking of autonomy, Jiang Tao gave me the following example:

I once interviewed an artist. His artworks are very famous in China, while he always keeps a low profile. Originally I was sent to report on his artistic contribution. Yet after the interview I decided to move the focus to his devotion to art and his indifference to fame and wealth. But I was afraid that the moral judgement might offend others and this would also bring more work to my colleagues. But my supervisor approved my request and said, 'under the premise of respecting the facts, it is quite necessary to offer journalist enough creative space to make his works more special.' (Jiang Tao, Company A, journalist)

Arguably, since the introduction of cultural system reform, Chinese SOCEs have developed such 'responsible autonomy' for their creative employees as exemplified by the above cases. The term 'responsible', however, refers to at least two levels of connotation: conforming to the party-state ideology and contributing to market success. As long as he sticks to the 'bottom line' of value orientation, Jiang Tao is allowed and even encouraged to enjoy autonomy and make his work more creative to achieve a better effect of propaganda. Ideally, together with the relatively generous welfare system (which will be examined in the next section), such responsible autonomy helps to make these state media a desirable workplace for young creative workers.

However, the balance between ideology and commerce can be quite difficult to achieve in practice, especially because of the bureaucratic management of the SOCEs. Although in the new system the majority of staff members in SOCEs are on temporary contracts, the most powerful are still the few senior staff who hold lifetime positions. Contrary to the hierarchy of western creative workplaces (Holt and Lapenta, 2010: 225-226), those who hold power in China's SOCEs are usually professional bureaucrats appointed by the government; they have little knowledge about and respect for cultural production and creative producers. As observed by Lingjie Wang, there are actually two levels of management within CCTV, the 'inner circle', which comprises the upper and middle management classes, and the 'outside circle', which comprises various short-term contracted employees in production teams (Wang, 2006: 74). The programme producers, although they are usually the leaders of their production teams, are often situated at the middle or even the lower level of the hierarchy. Such a hierarchical 'dual-track' system (*shuanggui zhi*) can easily stifle the creative ideas of producers. Simon, an experienced television producer working at Anhui Television, a provincial television station in south China, comments on the problems of the system (*tizhi*) and its ongoing reform:

Our wage is calculated according to our rank in the company. For example, ideally the salary of producers like me should have dividends from the project we conducted. But if this really happened, my salary would exceed our leaders'. How could that be possible? Such a system is made more rigid due to the current anti-corruption movement. It usually takes a month after

submitting a proposal for it to go through the whole approval procedure. When some leaders are on leave, you have to wait, sometimes for months! (Simon, Anhui Television, producer)

Similarly, according to my informant Chew Fei, who works for a local newspaper publishing company in Guizhou Province, most employees are now on temporary contracts. In terms of job promotion, however, those without connections to high leaders of the company have very few opportunities, regardless of their ability or work performance (Chew Fei, Guiyang Daily Corporation, Journalist).

Since President Xi Jinping initiated the anti-corruption movement in 2012, SOCE leaders have become even more conservative and vigilant about innovation and change, as it might put them at risk politically. As a result, the regulation of companies is becoming more authoritarian and rigid, and creative autonomy seems even more unattainable than in the 1990s and the 2000s. Simon Wong even complained that some employees are now required to write work logs every day. It has also been noted that the new head of CCTV, Nie Chenxi, enjoys spell-checking reports and even conducting sanitation inspections of staff offices (Carl, CCTV, senior manager). When the high-level bureaucrats lack expertise as well as the courage to stand up for innovative cultural production, the ideological concern, as the stories about working at CCTV and Anhui TV reflect, is translated into a stringent regulative system.

With regard to Chinese SOCEs, however, the party state adds a third dimension to this ‘art–commerce relation’ – making it an ‘art–commerce–politics relation’. Creative labour, then, is not only absorbed by capital, but should also serve the party. This ternary relationship makes ‘responsible autonomy’ more provisional and contingent than in the neoliberal scenario.

Given that SOCEs provide such a problematic setting for ‘responsible autonomy’, the following questions arise: Why do creative workers still choose to work for Chinese SOCEs? What does self-realization mean for them? And what does the (dis)functionality of self-realization discourse mean for the governing of creative workers in Chinese SOCEs?

Being creative for the state: benefiting from the system and self-realization

Susan works as a ‘commercial director’ for Canxing Production, a leading Chinese TV production company whose major business partners are state-owned television companies including Shanghai Oriental Television, Zhejiang Television and CCTV. As ‘commercial director’, Susan is responsible for advertising design, which should meet the expectations of both the commercial sponsors and the state television companies. Being asked about the motivation for work, she emphasized the sense of fulfilment that is produced:

It’s like playing a game. My job requires me to deal with lots of parties: different types of work, people and creativity. You need to beat off one challenge after another. When the expected commercial effects are finally achieved, it will bring huge sense of fulfilment, which gives me a feeling of self-realization. (Susan, Canxing Production, director)

Most of my informants in the private cultural industries share a similar motivation, whatever their job titles might be: photographer, screenwriter, editor or director in publishing, film or television, etc. This largely resonates with the critiques of the ‘self-realization’ discourse that I referred to earlier: it exposes ‘self-realization’ as a key aspiration for creative labour and its role as a governmental discourse that mobilizes the creative workforce in the creative economy (Hesmondhalgh, 2010; McRobbie, 2016). But, given the bureaucracy and the contingent autonomy, the question is how creative workers in Chinese SOCEs understand ‘self-realization’? To what extent does the discourse of ‘self-realization’ succeed or fail in producing a certain subjectivity in creative workers employed by the state?

I still remember the day when Jiang Tao warmly treated me at Company A. We toured the park in a guarded area not open to the public, where the company is located. Jiang Tao invited me for a dinner at their canteen: the dishes were tasty and not pricey. ‘That’s one of our welfare benefits, plus a meal allowance around CNY 1000 (€140) per month.’ Indeed, apart from various subsidies, reimbursement and social insurance, staff members like Jiang Tao can also have a free single room in the staff dormitory. Central state media like Company A and CCTV can also solve the *hukou* (residence permit) problem for their formal employees. Given the exorbitant living costs and the strict *hukou* policy (Chan and Buckingham, 2008) in Beijing, these benefits are really attractive for young graduates. As Liana explains, her reason for working at the Chinese Film Library, another SOCE, is that ‘they can solve my *hukou* problem!’ (Liana, Chinese Film Library, curation officer).

Apart from the welfare system, what also attracts cultural workers to work in Chinese SOCEs are the so-called ‘career benefits’. The privileged position of SOCEs in Chinese cultural industries gives employees more career opportunities, such as networking and skills training. As in the British television industry (Lee, 2011), networking plays a key role in Chinese creative workers’ career development. Thanks to the close relationship with the government, state employees are more likely to develop a powerful social network. As tactfully suggested by Wang, even junior employees of CCTV are treated as a ‘grandpa’⁶ by their business partners from outside, although within CCTV they often have to behave like a ‘grandson’ (2006: 161–2). The same goes for local provincial SOCEs. As Robin told me, a key advantage of his work is his affiliation to Anhui TV: ‘When my business partners know I’m from Anhui TV, they would usually say: Ah! You’re from Anhui TV. Good! I trust you. Let’s make a deal!’ (Robin, Anhui Television, administrative assistant). Moreover, large SOCEs usually have skills training programmes for employees. These activities are reported by many informants to be helpful. For example, SMG has a special annual programme called ‘British Class’, a 42-day training programme in the UK for selected promising employees (around 15 per year) (mediaplus, 2016). It seems that these advantages can create more possibilities for creative workers employed by the state to ‘realize themselves’.

Judie Deng is a senior producer at SMG. Born in the late 1970s, she has worked in the television industry for more than 13 years. As a talented television producer and strongly motivated to realize her creativity, Judie chose to move to Shanghai from Sichuan TV, another provincial TV station based in Sichuan Province. The new workplace seems to have offered her some opportunities because of its training programme and open-minded high leadership. After being at SMG for just half a year, she was selected out of thousands of employees to be one of fifteen people to participate in the company’s ‘British

Class' program. The trip to London seems have deeply inspired Judie, not only teaching her more creative know-how, but also increasing her passion for her work. During the interview, she repeatedly stated her aspiration to work with like-minded people, such as a member of a British film crew she met:

You can see in his eyes the deep and persistent love for work. I really like these kinds of people and their working atmosphere. I wish my colleagues could be like him. (Judie, SMG, producer)

To realize her career goal, however, she has to continue obeying the rules, conducting self-censorship:

I will do it [self-censoring] spontaneously. After graduating from university, I worked in a newspaper office. From the very beginning, I have known what the 'correct value orientation' is.

Intriguingly, during the interviews, most of my informants appeared quite understanding about censorship. What bothers them is the bureaucracy involved in the practice of censorship and everyday regulation, rather than the fact of censorship itself. As Jiang Tao summarizes: 'all forms of mass media have their own value orientation, which reflects in what you called censorship. Now that we chose to join the company, we should adhere to its shared values.'

For these motivated employees like Judie and Jiang Tao, the various working benefits make the state system an ideal workplace for creative labour; in the private industries such jobs are usually quite precarious and lacking in employment protections. In return these state-employed creatives need to wittingly conduct self-censorship. The motivation for realizing her career goals prompts Judie to resign from Sichuan TV and join SMG, as well as to censor her creativity in line with the ideology of the party. Echoing Yiu Fai Chow's analysis of 'hope' in his study of Diana Zhu, creative workers' aspiration to self-realization in Chinese state media is also 'constructed, circulated and transformed to serve the interests of the state and the capital' (Chow, 2011: 787). Importantly, this aspiration to self-realization becomes a motivation for self-censorship and thus self-governance, which conforms to the party state's expectation of cooperative, creative subjectivities: being creative for the state. With the introduction of the market-oriented system reform, Chinese SOCEs have developed a form of governance of creative workers through bio-power, exercised through the various welfare provisions that attract those aspiring to 'self-realization'.

However, not everyone within the system is as motivated as Judie. As I will show in the following section, the discourse of self-realization can easily lose its attractiveness for creative workers because of the bureaucracy and autonomy problems discussed previously.

The dysfunction of self-realization and the geographical concern of creative labour studies

As an executive assistant to the CEO of a subsidiary company of Anhui Television Group, Robin's work includes both administrative work and creative planning

for television production. Before being employed by Anhui TV, he worked at another provincial state-owned media firm. When asked to compare the two companies, he asserted: 'Now I think, to be honest, they're not so different. For example, if we have 100 employees in each company, the previous one may have 75 members loafing on the job, while my current company maybe 70.'

It seems to be a common problem in Chinese SOCEs that employees' '*hun rizi*', a Chinese term that literally means 'dawdling the day away' and that is used to describe employees who are unmotivated and loaf on the job. This phenomenon has been reported significantly more in SOCEs than in private companies. For instance, Wang Hai, a former senior HR manager for a leading Chinese private internet company Tencent, shares that they have a very rationally designed recruiting and evaluating system, in which job applicants and employees are evaluated not only based on their professional skills and performance but also on their own moral standards, including loyalty to work and the company (Wang Hai, Tencent, HR manager).

The problem of loafing on the job in SOCEs is seemingly related to their mind-set. As Judie also noted about her colleagues:

A very serious problem is their attitude. Because we are in a state-owned company, their favoured manner of working is 'nine-to-five' schedule.... They have no passion for work. Not at all!

Among these unmotivated, some are older employees who have worked at a company for many years and reached the 'glass-ceiling' of their career. Given their age and the hierarchy within the system, they can see very few opportunities for promotion. The favourable welfare system and the restrictions on autonomy also deter them from self-expression and learning new skills. Another group of unmotivated employees is comprised of *guanxi hu*, a Chinese phrase referring to those who have strong connections with the high leaders in the company or the government. They are employed for their closeness to the high leadership, regardless of their personal abilities and skills. Although self-realization means self-censorship and self-governance for Judie, it has little attraction for these 'unmotivated cultural workers'. They are cynical about the meaning of work and the aspiration to self-expression and creativity. Significantly, nobody will overtly acknowledge that he/she is loafing on the job. During the interviews, this phenomenon was always described by my respondents as 'a defect of others', a misbehaviour that is bad, irresponsible, and shameful within the current 'work culture'.

Loafing on the job, therefore, represents a way for unmotivated cultural workers to disengage, at least mentally, from their everyday work. In doing so, they also distance themselves, maybe unwittingly, from the subjectivity of 'being creative for the state'. The presence of a high number of these 'loafers' has a direct impact on the productivity of Chinese SOCEs: it circumscribes their capacity to produce creative cultural content, further exacerbates the problem of bureaucracy, and thus restricts the propaganda effects. As a result, Chinese state media have to seek collaboration with private production companies and change their business model. For example, in the television industries, most state television companies have developed a 'commissioning system' that outsources their content production to private companies like Canxing Production (Sun, 2011). In

doing so, their previous role as the omnipotent supplier of mass culture is transformed into a role as media platform and financial investor in Chinese cultural industries.

The phenomenon of loafing on the job reflects the dysfunction of the self-realization discourse and reveals a contradiction inherent in the state-sponsored cultural system. From the above analyses of autonomy and self-realization, it is clear that the creativity *dispositif* in the case of Chinese SOCEs consists of both repressive, disciplinary settings, such as rigid censorship, hierarchy and bureaucracy, and a biopolitical discourse of self-realization. The demand for ‘double responsibility’ on the one hand makes the autonomy of creative labour within the system quite contingent, while, on the other, it expects its creative workers to ‘be creative for the state’ under the discourse of self-realization. In practice, however, as the case of loafing on the job illustrates, it causes a marked contradiction that disturbs the function of the ‘self-realization’ discourse and furnishes creative individuals with the possibility of distancing themselves from the expected subjectivity of ‘being creative for the state’.

This brings up questions concerning the contextuality of creative labour issues. Among current attempts to theorize creative labour, most studies are based in a ‘western’ ‘neoliberal’ context. The critical language used by western scholars often directs all discussion of ‘inequality’, ‘precarity’ and ‘self-exploitation’ of creative labour towards a critique of ‘neoliberalism’. In doing so, they in fact postulate the globalization of neoliberalism (Harvey, 2007) and the neoliberal creative economy. Theorizing creative labour, therefore, runs the risk of becoming either a study of ‘neoliberal creative labour’ or a sub-project of ‘anti-neoliberalism’. In countries like China, it is arguable that in some social areas, Chinese party state has been adopting neoliberal governmentality (Yan, 2003). As the examples of private cultural companies I have referred to show, these critiques of ‘neoliberalism’ might still be relevant. However, we cannot simply say that neoliberalism has become a dominant ideology/discourse of governance (Nonini, 2008) in Chinese SOCEs.

Based on a similar concern, Banks et al. argue that there is a marked absence of historical perspectives in the current critical literature on creative labour. By ‘consider[ing] the specificities of socio-historic locations’, they hope to:

bring into question the often-assumed neat boundaries and interchangeable referentialities of ‘cultural work’ as an object of inquiry, opening the possibility of multiple presents and a plethora of possible futures for both the work and the workers. (Banks et al., 2013: 6)

In addition to this ahistorical perspective, I suggest that in the current literature there remains a lack of concern for different socio-political contexts. In his study of creative labour in the video game industry across Asia, Anthony Fung offers a valuable alternative perspective on creative labour to the Hollywood model, which has been taken for granted as underlying the global proliferation of creative industries (Fung, 2016: 200–14). The specific politico-economic diversity of and within Asia produces different modes of creative labour relations. As demonstrated in Fung’s analysis of three modes of creative labour in Asia, the global hierarchy of creative industries and the national political atmosphere together affect the condition of creative labour and make the discourse of creativity function in different ways (Fung, 2016).

Following Fung's alternative perspective on creative labour, this study of Chinese SOCEs further underlines the necessity of considering the geopolitical diversity of creative labour. First, as the case of creative labour in Chinese SOCEs has shown, the governance of creativity and creative labour is not only conducted through neoliberal techniques such as the discourse of 'self-realization' and an autonomous managerial setting. The Chinese state's concerns about ideology and cultural control also require repressive and disciplinary regulation, as exemplified by the censorship and problematic autonomy in SOCEs.

Second, this managerial arrangement in return limits the functionality of the discourse of autonomy and self-realization, thus creating a contradiction within the system. Echoing Rose et al, 'governmentality may be eternally optimistic, but government is a congenitally failing operation' (2006: 98). At least in the case of Chinese state-owned media, the governing system is not as always as successful as scholars have suggested in their critiques of neoliberal creative industries (Banks, 2007; McRobbie, 2002).

Finally, thanks to the various working benefits provided, creative labour in Chinese SOCEs may not be as precarious as it is in the western context, where the fetishization of individual creativity 'corroded efforts to unionize and collectivize in order to offset inequalities and exploitation' (Banks, 2007). If precarity of labour is a factor that leads to 'bad cultural work' (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2013) can we suggest that the not-so-precarious work in Chinese SOCEs is a form of good cultural work? If the elaboration of concepts of self-realization, autonomy and creativity can produce a normative framework for defining 'good cultural work' (Hesmondhalgh, 2010) and engender any potential for what McRobbie calls 'reimagining notions of creative workplace politics' (2016), it might be necessary to take into account different socio-political specialities and perceive creative labour 'as an historically and geographically situated process, or processes, that can challenge more affirmative and proselytizing industry and academic perspectives' (Banks et al., 2013: 6).

Conclusion

This study has interrogated creative labour issues in a different context from the Anglo-American 'neoliberal' creative economy, namely that of Chinese SOCEs. Based on fieldwork in China, it has presented an empirical analysis of the problematic condition of autonomy and the (dys)functionality of the self-realization discourse in Chinese SOCEs. In doing so, it offers an exemplary case study of how the governance of creativity and creative labour works in Chinese SOCEs, and of how it distinguishes from the neoliberal creativity *dispositif* scholars have interrogated in the West.

The article has shown that, in Chinese SOCEs, creative labour is not only governed through neoliberal techniques such as the discourses of 'self-realization' and 'responsible autonomy', but also through repressive and disciplinary regulations, resulting in a bureaucratic everyday management system. At the same time, the ubiquitous phenomenon of loafing on the job exemplifies the dysfunction of the self-realization discourse and the inherent contradictions of the system that could limit the governance and productivity of Chinese SOCEs. It furnishes creative individuals with possibilities to distance themselves from the expected subjectivity of 'being creative for the state'.

Finally, echoing Anthony Fung's study of creative labour in Asia, the study suggests that creative labour studies needs to take into account the different social-political contexts across the world. These contexts may produce diverse modes of creative labour relations, which requires the normative study of good cultural work and the reimagining of notions of creative workplace politics to go beyond the 'neoliberal', 'Hollywood-style' framework and perceive creative labour as an historically and geographically situated process.

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Notes

1. All the quotations from interviews and media reports and policy documents cited in this article are originally in Chinese and are translated by the author.
2. The Chinese phrase *tie fanwan* refers to the permanent job that used to be a basic welfare benefit for those working in state-owned institutions. Most state-controlled companies gradually abolished this tenure employment system after the launch of 'market economy reform' in the 1990s, although in many cases they retain various welfare benefits. See Hay et al. (1994), Benson and Zhu (1999).
3. For Chinese work units, see Li and Wang (1996).
4. See the previous section for discussion on cultural system reform.
5. As requested by the informant, I pseudonymized the name of this company, which is a very influential SOCE in China.
6. In China, this hierarchical familial relation is often used to describe a socially unequal power relationship. 'Grandpa' refers to the powerful party, while 'grandson' stands for the weak, often bullied side.

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