Schizoid creators

Creative work and subjectivity in the Chinese cultural economies

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This study investigates creative labour conditions and the formation of creative subjectivities in China. It 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 and social media creators. The study engages with questions concerning governance, precarity and subjectivity in analysing labour conditions of cultural production in contemporary China. While unveiling how specific politico-economic inequalities are concealed by the production of creative aspirations, I also attempt to affirm the experiences and agency of individuals working in a wide range of Chinese cultural sectors. This 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’. 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 ‘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.

Jian Lin is a PhD candidate at the University of Amsterdam and Western Sydney University (joint-degree).
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Creative Work and Subjectivity in the
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Chapter 5 The Unlikely Creative Class

Co-authored with Jeroen de Kloet (JdK)

Both authors discussed the research topic and relevant academic literature. Jian Lin (JL) developed the research outline and collected interview and online data through fieldwork, with JdK’s advice. Both JdK and JL analysed the empirical data and JL prepared the first draft. JdK commented on and revised the manuscript.
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Introduction

A good cultural product should put social benefits first and at the same time should be a work that integrates social benefits and economic profits. Literature and art cannot become slaves of the market and must not be stained with the stink of money. Excellent literature and art works, at best, can gain ideological and artistic successes and can receive applause on the market.

Xi Jinping (Xi 2014)

What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. That art is something which is specialised, or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art?

Michel Foucault (1997, 261)

‘Who wants an easy life? It’s boring!’ In December 2018 Judie posted this statement by Jane Birkin on her Wechat after she resigned from Shanghai Media Group (SMG), one of the biggest Chinese state-owned television companies. Working as television producer at SMG meant a stable income and life, yet Judie was not happy about the working environment: she felt that the excessive bureaucracy circumscribed her creative autonomy and thus curtailed her TV career.

1 All quotations in this dissertation from Chinese policy documents, media reports and Chinese informants were originally in Chinese and have been translated by the author.
Two years earlier, when still at SMG, she had already expressed her discontent with her job in our interview and talked about the possibility of ‘chuangye’ (创业, entrepreneurship, starting her own business):

I think *chuangye* is a very good option in today’s China, very good! The [state media] system is too slow. When you have some creative ideas, it takes too long to realise them, and then someone else will take them. Personally, especially for creative workers, spending one’s whole life in the system is like … living in vain. I am someone who will get anxious if I’m not going forward.

Though always imbued with uncertainties and precarity, *chuangye* seems to be a popular choice for Chinese creative workers due to its promise of greater ‘autonomy’ and ‘independence’. Significantly, this was not Judie’s first resignation. In 2014, she quit her job at Sichuan Television Station and joined SMG because of a similar idea that Shanghai might provide better career opportunities. As Chow Yiu-Fai also finds in his ethnography, these creative workers seem to love ‘*zheteng*’ (折腾) – which literally means ‘tossing from side to side, and figuratively refer[s] to suffering physical and mental agitation’ (Chow 2019, 15). People like Judie are motivated by the emerging Chinese cultural economy, despite all the uncertainties and risks, to chase their aspirations for creativity. These aspirations drive individuals from diverse backgrounds to become Chinese creative workers and to live a precarious instead of a stable life. But what makes creativity so rewarding that it is worth embracing precarity for? And how exactly is this creative precarity lived in the Chinese context? In other words, what does it mean to ‘be creative’ in the contemporary Chinese cultural economies?

This study addresses these questions by engaging with individuals’ experiences of doing creative work in China, their hopes, joys, struggles, frustrations and anxieties. 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 study of creative labour conditions and the formation of creative subjectivities is based on ethnographic data collected in contemporary China (mostly in Beijing and Shanghai). My aim is not to replace the current Euro-American centric approach with a ‘Chinese-centric’ or ‘Asian-centric’ perspective. By engaging with specificity of the creative labour conditions in contemporary China, this study questions the prevailing scholarly and policy assumptions about creative labour, which is predominantly studied and theorised in contemporary Euro-American contexts (Fung 2016; Alacovska and Gill 2019). The claim that labour conditions in contemporary cultural economies are becoming increasingly precarious (Gill and Pratt 2008; Curtin and Sanson 2016), for example, needs to be contextualised and nuanced by looking at the specific politico-economic conditions that induce such precarity and the form it takes in non-Euro-American contexts such as China. As Anthony Fung points out, ‘in non-free markets and non-democratic states, many other factors [besides market and economic forces] shape, foster, or dictate the conditions of how cultural labour is produced, trained, and socialised’ (2016, 206). The organisation and governance of cultural production and creative labour must have their own shape in non-western societies. To comprehensively theorise creative labour, therefore, we need to include more diverse political-economic contexts.

Second, in claiming creative work as aspirational, I refuse to view these aspirations as merely false consciousness or totally illusionary. As Nixon and Crewe (2004) observe, not all cultural workers feel satisfied with their work or are able to realise their full creative potential. A passion for artistic or cultural creation often allows creative workers like Judie to ignore the drawbacks concerning pay, working time and job security. In this sense, the discourse of the creative industries and self-realisation acts as a mechanism of governance for cultural workers, leading to self-exploitation and self-blame (Ursell 2000; McRobbie 2002, 2016). However, 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 illusionary or founded in misleading ideology. As Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011, 221) note with regard to cultural work in the British cultural industries:

> It is worth recalling that jobs, occupations and careers in the cultural industries rarely involve gruelling physical demands or tasks that endanger the person undertaking them. They hardly ever involve work of a kind that many others will find disgusting or disdainful (such as a nurse who has to care for incontinent patients, or a toilet attendant). In fact, cultural-industry jobs are often thought of as desirable and intriguing, even glamorous. They involve expressive and communicative forms of endeavour which are highly valued by many people in modern societies.

This study, therefore, investigates creative labour conditions 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 six months of fieldwork in China 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. While unveiling how politico-economic inequalities are concealed by the production of creative aspirations in the Chinese cultural industries, I also attempt 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 will 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). Such schizoid creators are working both for and against the system. As I will make clear in the following, 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.

In the remainder of this introduction, I will first ground my research questions in the existing scholarship on cultural work and subjectivity, placing an emphasis on the need to contextualise creative labour studies. I continue by detailing the conceptual frameworks that inform this study and clarifying what I mean by ‘schizoid creators’. Finally, I present my research methodology and chapter outline.

**Creative labour and China**

According to Jim McGuigan, all human labour is endowed with creativity (2010, 326). In the past two decades, however, the circulation of capital has delimited creativity as a distinguishing feature of particular occupations in the so-called creative industries. Policymakers around the globe, following the 1990s British government, have embraced the ‘creative industries’ discourse and trumpet cultural work for its bohemian spirit, autonomy and playfulness. Cultural workers, often dubbed the ‘creative class’ – most notably in Florida’s *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002) – have been assigned a critical position in creative city construction and are considered a crucial force for boosting the creative economy (Howkins 2002). Unlike the capitalist sweatshops of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, present-day cultural production is usually organised in the form of micro and small and medium enterprises (SMEs). It is characterised by a flexible managerial structure, a creativity-driving growth pattern and, especially, a ‘neo-bohemian’ entrepreneurial character, which, as some scholars indicate, has the potential to combine an avant-garde artistic lifestyle with entrepreneurship (O’Connor 2010; Lloyd 2010). In this view, cultural workers can enjoy autonomy, independency and playfulness in the labour process. Instead of being exploited and
suppressed, they often work for themselves and become both artistically creative
and entrepreneurial, reconciling work and life, as well as arts and economy
(Leadbeater and Oakley 1999).

This celebration of creative labour has sparked a myriad of criticism, most
notably from scholars examining the working conditions and the formation of the
worker’s subjectivity within the cultural and creative arena (Gill and Pratt 2008;
McGuigan 2010). Critical creative industries research argues that creative labour is
not so much an ideal occupation as a new precarious condition in which creative
workers suffer from problems including short-term contracts, uncertain career paths,
inadequate insurance and pension provisions, unequal earnings and a lack of unions
(Deuze 2009; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011; Curtin and Sanson 2016). According
to some cultural studies researchers, cultural work in the west is now governed by
the creative industries discourse, which should be viewed as a typical example of
neoliberal governmentality (Ursell 2000; McRobbie 2016). Discourses surrounding
creativity function as elements connected by the ‘creativity dispositif’ to implement
job creation while also disciplining youthful populations into being creative
(McRobbie 2016; Reckwitz 2017). As these critics indicate, the absence of
responses to these problems in current creative industry policies constitutes an
intentional governmental tactic of neoliberalism, which has become a cult among
European and North American governments, rendering creative practices and
institutions governable within the doctrine of the free market economy (Banks and
Hesmondhalgh 2009). This ‘creativity dispositif’, moreover, produces vast
inequalities within global creative workplaces. Gender, intersecting with
race/ethnicity, age, (dis)ability and sexuality, results in various forms of
occupational segregation and unequal access to creative work and its reward system
(Banks 2017). According to triumphalist claims about the ‘creative class’ and the
‘creative city’, the tolerance of cultural diversity and individual differences is
crucial to cultivating creativity and a creative economy (Florida 2002). Yet the
actual practices of the creative industries reinforce the marginalisation of minorities
and reproduce existing power relations and inequalities (Alacovska 2017; Finkel et
A number of individuals reap significant rewards from their creative labour, but a significant proportion of the population, for example non-white workers and women, cannot gain access to the most prestigious sectors of the cultural industries (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011, 232). Even Florida himself, in the second edition of *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2012), admits that ‘a social safety net for the creative economy’ is needed to compensate the risks brought by ‘the flexible, hyper-individualised and contingent nature of work’ in creative economy (Florida 2012, 392).

At the same time, contemporary capitalism values individuals’ commitment to work and prioritises work as the primary source for self-realisation, while downplaying other aspects such as family, friendship and community that are of equal importance for human well-being. As Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011, 228) stress:

For many people raising families, the demands of combining work and home life can feel close to impossible for much of the time. Societies need to recognise that such differences are always likely to exist and should not punish or reward these groups disproportionately.

Creative justice (Banks 2017) thus lies in equally distributing access and rewards among diverse creative workers, who not only aspire to work, but also to live life itself. Creative labour studies, following Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011, 229), needs to address the prevailing issue of inequality in the contemporary cultural industries and to explore ‘what might constitute good work’ and how cultural work can be made better in modern societies.

The abovementioned studies on creative labour provide important references for my study on cultural work in contemporary China. However, one of the problems of even the more critical ones is that most of them are conducted in the contemporary western Euro-American context. Consequently, a ‘neoliberal’ economy and social-democratic institutions are taken for granted in their analysis of labour and subjectivity. As Alacovska and Gill (2019, 2) note, ‘creative labour
studies are notoriously centred on Euro-American metropolitan ‘creative hubs’ and hence the creative worker they theorise is frequently white, middle-class, male and urban’. The critical language of creative labour studies often directs all discussions of ‘inequality’, ‘precarity’ and the ‘self-exploitation’ of creative labour towards a critique of ‘neoliberalism’ – arguing that the informal economy and flexible employment are replacing the previous stable and unionised work patterns of the ‘western’ welfare state. This account of the neoliberalisation and precarisation of the social (Lorey 2015) may not be pertinent to describing politico-economic conditions in non-western contexts such as Asia, Africa and Latin America. Different social realities give rise to variations in the discursive formation of cultural industries policy (Cunningham 2009; Flew 2013) and, consequently, in the actual labour conditions.

Based on a similar concern, Banks et al. (2013, 6) argue that there is a salient ‘historical missing’ 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.

In addition to this historical lack, I suggest that ‘theorising creative labour’ requires a geographically diverse approach that can complement and indeed contest the ethnocentrism of existing studies by taking into account 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 often serves as a universal model underlying the global proliferation of creative industries (Fung 2016, 200-214). According to Fung, the specific politico-economic diversity of and within Asia produces different modes of creative labour relations: progressive artists in South Korea, skilled conformers in Southeast Asia and a contented bourgeoisie in China. As demonstrated by Fung’s
analysis, the global hierarchy of creative industries and the specific national political situation in different Asian countries together distinguish the labour conditions and creative worker subjectivity there from those in the western neoliberal model (Fung 2016). As indicated by Fung (2016, 212), cultural workers in Chinese game companies ‘resemble industrial workers in their tastes, aesthetics, and lifestyles’, despite the ‘creative’ nature of their work. The exploitative system and the strict content regulation drive individual creators to focus more on the financial rewards of their work than on pursuing a bohemian lifestyle.

Likewise, in his study of single women doing creative work in Shanghai, Chow Yiu-Fai (2019, 17) also accentuate that the Chinese political context distinguishes the politics surrounding creative workers and women in China from those in western social-democratic societies. Severe state control and rampant capitalism dilute possibilities for effective activism or revolution. Whereas politics and individual resistance never stop emerging, they are trivialised and internalised into everyday work and life. Instead of only being marginalised and stigmatised, creative single women in the eyes of Chow (2019, 18) are individuals ‘who refuse to be pressurised into a life that is expected of them, with the seductions of security and predictability, and trepidations of contingency and precarity if lived otherwise’. To do creative work for these single women is to refuse ‘the advice by the state and by the parents to get married before it is too late, or the prospect of earning more money with jobs that are more lucrative than the creative ones’ (Chow 2019, 18). The commitment to creative work in this sense is an affirmation of the self and its capacity to refuse and to care. Chow’s analysis of the politics of care among single women in Shanghai demonstrates the need for creative labour studies to diversify and complement the dominant Euro-American centric approach to labour subjectivity and politics through careful contextualisation.

It is this concern with contextualisation that informs this study on creative workers in contemporary Mainland China. Although China has set a goal of developing the market economy, the socio-economic transformation it has undergone since the 1970s cannot merely be read as the result of the
implementation of neoliberal ideology. In effect, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) never embraced a complete market-oriented model. The Party-State still holds a very powerful position in the distribution of economic resources (Liew 2005). In the cultural sectors, although since 2000 the authorities have released many policies to promote the cultural industries and to justify the entry of private capital into cultural sectors, the Party-State has remained vigilant about foreign cultural goods and highly ideological sectors like the media industry (Keane 2001; Wang 2003). According to Jing Wang (2001, 37), China’s epochal transition in the post-Mao era should not only be accounted for in terms of economy (from state to market economy) and culture (from high to pop, from national to transnational), but also ‘in terms of the restructuring of the state ruling technology and the changing stock of its ideological practices’. This ‘state question’ can be demonstrated through the frequent endorsement of ‘soft power’ and ‘national cultural security’ discourses in China’s cultural industry policies (Keane 2013), as well as through the enduring controversies around the terms ‘creative industries’ and ‘creativity’ (O’Connor and Gu 2006; Keane 2009).  

In *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Richard Florida identifies three elements for evaluating and constructing the creative city, the famous ‘3T’s’: technology, talent and tolerance. Florida argues that for the real sustainable success of a creative city each ‘T’ is necessary yet by itself insufficient (2002, 228-265). It is the third T, for tolerance, which calls for diversity and openness in terms of ideas, values, sexuality and people, that is most problematic in China, given the notorious censorship, China’s legal prohibition of homosexuality and the CCP’s long-standing functionalist approach to culture.

More specifically, in China, creative labour as an occupation has experienced a profound transformation in terms of its discourse and institutions. Before 1978, employed by the state-owned *wenhua danwei* (文化单位 cultural

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2 As I will illustrate in Chapter 1, Chinese conservative officials and cultural traditionalists are suspicious of the ‘individualism, ‘change’ and ‘creative destruction’ promised by the ‘creativity’ discourse and thus the central government prefers to use the term ‘cultural industries’ in its policy documents.
units), artists, writers, actors and media workers, labelled as *wenyi gongzuozhe* (文艺工作者, literary and artistic workers), enjoyed permanent contracts and relatively good welfare while being obliged to promote Maoist ideology. The tenet of their work was to serve ‘the broadest masses of people’, which, defined by Helmsman Mao, were workers, peasants and soldiers (Mao 1967). Cultural work at this time was politically oriented and under strict surveillance. Since the launch of the reform and opening up policy in 1978, this coercive system has gradually changed and, to some extent, disappeared. Decades after, cultural units have been transformed into state-owned commercial enterprises and private capital is allowed to enter certain cultural sectors. Apart from those minorities who still have a *bianzhi* (编制, tenure position) in state-owned cultural companies, increasing numbers of cultural workers have only short-term contracts and make a living by competing with others in the market.

This marketisation reform has created space for individual creativity and autonomy in the state-sponsored cultural production, while the introduction of contracted employment and market competition has simultaneously rendered cultural work increasingly precarious. Moreover, the aforementioned ‘state question’ further complicates creative labour precarity in China. If in the western neoliberal context flexible employment and the growth of the informal economy have led to the self-exploitation and self-governance of cultural workers, Chinese creators not only need to ‘be creative’ for the market, but also to ‘be creative for the state’ and to deal with the pervasive censorship and state regulatory regime in their everyday work life. Cultural producers now have the freedom to decide what and how to produce within certain parameters, determined conjointly by government censorship and market selection. This allows the state to govern cultural production with some neoliberal technologies without totally giving up its authoritarian regulations. As Jeffreys and Sigley (2009, 2) summarise:

China’s adoption of market-based economic reforms has resulted in the emergence of a hybrid socialist-neoliberal (or perhaps ‘neoleninist’) form of
This distinctive system of cultural production and governance is what prompts me to study creative labour conditions and creative worker subjectivity in today’s Mainland China. Following his call for ‘deimperialisation’ in knowledge production and more specifically to ‘de-westernise creative labour studies’ (Alacovska and Gill 2019), I echo Kuan-Hsing Chen’s *Asia as method* (2010) and adopt an ‘ex-centric perspective’ to study creative labour in China. 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. The primary objective is to open up a dialogue between, on the one hand, the existing scholarly concepts, and, on the other, theories and the empirical specificities of creative labour relations discovered during my fieldwork in China.

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 questions of governance, precarity and subjectivity. The main questions it asks are:

1) How are cultural production and creative labour organised and regulated in 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)?

To explore these issues, I start from the experiences of creative individuals in the Chinese cultural economies: their aspirations, struggles and negotiations. Without
overlooking the power relations and inequalities in the Chinese politico-economic context, this study underscores the complexity of the contemporary cultural production system and to affirm the productive aspect of governance and the often trivialised politics³ that characterise the everyday work and life of the heterogeneous group of individuals called ‘Chinese creative workers’.

**Schizoid creators**

The main focus of this study is on the subjectivity of creative workers. As I discussed in the previous section, the authoritarian regime in conjunction with a neoliberal market economy produces a new form of governmentality for creative workers in China. The collusion between the Party-State and capital affords cultural workers, who are often motivated by their passion for art and creativity, the sense of autonomy and freedom associated with the market economy. At the same time, flexible work arrangements start replacing the socialist labour protection system, imposing a need for self-governance on creative subjects. Creative work in China becomes a typical form of aspirational labour (Duffy 2016; McRobbie 2016): the promise of social, cultural and economic capital attracts individuals to creative work, while the expected autonomy is also compromised by precarious employment, an uneven reward system and pervasive cultural censorship.

My critical perspective on creative labour does not suggest that contemporary cultural workers, in western and non-western contexts, are docile subjects and victims of ‘false consciousness’ produced by the creative industries discourses. The subjectivity of creative workers, I will argue in this section, is always situated and contested in the vibrant interaction between them and the wider socio-economic network, constituted of state institutions, global/local markets, forms of organisation and technology. The governance of cultural production and creative labour is not only repressive, but also productive and processive, leaving

³ According to Chow (2019), these trivialised politics often unfold in the form of recognition (of individual difference), refusal (to socio-cultural-political arrangements) and care (for self and others).
space for individual agency and negotiation. This dynamic system of cultural production both promotes and limits individuals’ aspirations to creativity and self-realisation, turning creative workers into what I call ‘schizoid creators’, a term inspired by Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis of contemporary capitalism (1983, 1987). The operation of the Chinese cultural economy subsumes and hinges on the vast energy and diversity of creative workers. Creators’ agency and diverse work and life practices have become the crucial resource for market production, while also threatening the established political, cultural and social order. These schizoid creators, then, work both for and against the existing governance system. In what follows, I will show more specifically how China’s governance of cultural production contributes to the production of a schizoid subjectivity among creative workers.

First, it can be argued that in post-socialist China, the Party-State has adopted a new form of governmentality that comprises both neoliberal tactics (a partial market economy) and disciplinary institutions (state censorship and surveillance). To achieve a ‘good’ government of the population, the market economy is deployed as a desirable mechanism for the post-Mao Party-State. Individuals and collectives are reorganised into various institutions through the system of the market economy. Diverse research projects over the last decade have identified this governmentality-oriented approach in various social fields, including college students’ choice of profession (Hoffman 2006), population control (Powell and Cook 2000), tobacco control (Kohrman 2004), civic training in high schools (Culp 2006) and the disciplining of Olympic volunteers (Pak Lei Chong 2011). Creative workers as individuals are also reorganised and made into ‘active subjects’ by the market economy system. Unlike their predecessors of the Maoist era, who

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4 As I will explain in the following, capitalism according to Deleuze and Guattari operates in a schizophrenic way. It liberates (or ‘decodes’) various social subjects (the flows) from ‘other social formations coded and overcoded’, while also creating a new system of codes (‘axiomatic’) ‘that maintains the energy of the flows in a bound state’ (Deleuze and Guattarri 1983, 246).
were forced to be docile servants of the propaganda machine, creative workers in the post socialist epoch have become self-governing subjects who have to achieve a balance between market value and cultural value. In this process, the identities of artist and entrepreneur are mixed as they are interiorised. It is the cultural workers themselves who take charge of and responsibility for what to produce and its consequences (being successful, being marginal, being banned, etc.).

This does not suggest a complete retreat of state power and sovereignty. Through marketisation, the Chinese Communist Party has regained and renewed its ruling legitimacy, while continuing to regulate and surveil the flows of culture and capital. This is how the Party-State can claim that ‘poverty is not socialism’ while also trumpeting their striving for a ‘harmonious society’ and ‘equality’ in the official ideology (Brown 2012). There are many more and less prominent examples in contemporary China of the exercise of disciplinary state power, such as the repression of social dissidents, ideologised education and cultural censorship. Through bans and censorship, cultural workers whose products the authorities deem harmful to the social are deprived of their right to free expression. The existence of censorship and banning, moreover, serves as an omnipresent warning for all cultural workers, imposing a disciplinary effect by which creative practitioners may preemptively adjust their creative products in acts of so-called self-censorship.

At the same time, the concept of governmentality does not refer to a static situation. Rather, it is always in process and its results are not always as expected. As Rose et al. suggest, ‘governmentality may be eternally optimistic, but government is a congenitally failing operation’ (2006, 98). In practice, China’s governance of cultural production is not always successful and government bodies need to constant reform their techniques to fit the changing socio-economic conditions. As I will explain in Chapter 1, although the state-market discursive formation of Chinese cultural industries policy reflects the Party-State’s instrumentalist configuration of culture and creativity, the Chinese state is not a unitary, static entity (Saich 2011; Pieke 2012). The bureaucratically fragmented administrative system and vested state interests in the economy significantly
complicate the actual process of policy-making and implementation (Gong 2006; Saich 2009), creating space for deviation, flexibility and other forms of agency. The state, furthermore, has to constantly change and reform its policies and institutions to achieve an effective governance of cultural production. Chinese creator subjectivity, in this sense, is produced in the constant interaction between creative individuals and the state/market power regime.

This contested system of governance, through both neoliberal and disciplinary institutions, has engendered increasingly precarious labour conditions in the Chinese creative economy. However, as an analytical concept, precarity is always characterised by multiplicity and division (Neilson and Rossiter 2008, 55) between labour subjects from diverse social backgrounds in heterogeneous politico-economic contexts. For Chinese independent filmmakers, for instance, precarity refers to the insecure working and living conditions imposed by the Party-State’s regulation of film production and market competition. For transnational creative workers in Beijing, in contrast, their precarity derives predominantly from the mobile, unstable life generated by the global/local creative industries.

Moreover, these precarious conditions are productive in terms of subjectivation, as their precarious circumstances require subjects to constantly adjust their living strategies. This self-governance, Lorey states, ‘not only implies subjugation but is also incalculable and potentially empowering’ (2015, 111). For example, I will argue in Chapter 3 and 4 that the diverse aspects of precarity have created the potential for a caring community among indie filmmakers and for a situated cosmopolitanism among international creative subjects. The precarisation of these creative workers thus not only leads to the governance of creativity and labour, but also produces a creator creative subjectivity that is incalculable and refuses the subsumption of the state-capital collusion.

Processive governmentality and productive precarity together make subjectivity always contested, multiple and relational. Consequently, this study takes the cultural workplace as a realm of difference, in which individuals from
various backgrounds actualise their creative and personal potential in constant interaction with the techno-politico-economic system of the cultural industries. Cultural work, with its promised ‘cultural value’ and potential for self-realisation, no matter how difficult to achieve in actuality, seems to provide a contingent ‘alternative solution’ for diverse individuals seeking to ‘survive’ in the face of various social risks. For instance, in Chapter 2, I show how cultural workers in Chinese state-owned media companies frustrated by the omnipresent bureaucracy and limited autonomy have aspired to the non-state cultural economy as an imagined better workplace. In Chapter 3, the discontent with certain aspects of their previous lives (such as a lack of education, an unequal society and the requirements of commercial production) is seen to have motivated some young Chinese individuals to choose filmmaking as a career and to claim ‘independence’ in its production and aesthetics. In Chapter 4, I outline how the thriving Chinese economy has propelled the transnational mobility of creative labour, making Beijing attractive for international creators confronted with precarious and competitive job markets in their home countries. Finally, in Chapter 5, I show how thousands of migrant workers and young people from China’s rural areas are giving up the tedious manual labour common there to become an ‘unlikely’ new creative class, enabled by the emerging platform cultural economy, which promises more fun, better pay and class mobility. Becoming a (Chinese) creative worker requires what Deleuze and Guattari would call a ‘movement of deterritorialisation’ on the part of these individuals from diverse backgrounds, consisting of ‘freeing desire from the social and religious codes which have been placed on it, and liberating it from the territorial and national boundaries which have enclosed it’ (Hickey-Moody and Malins 2007, 15). The marketisation reform in Chinese cultural sectors has partly freed individuals and their creativity from the grid of the state propaganda machine. Cultural work in the market economy has granted individuals (in this study, state employees, indie filmmakers, international cultural workers and video makers on
Kuaishou\(^5\) the possibility to de-territorialise from their previous lives and work, and to pursue their desire for creativity, self-realisation and a better career.

At the same time, becoming a creative worker also encompasses a process of ‘re-territorialisation’, which re-fixes the subject into a new set of power relations. The movement of de-territorialisation and the process of re-territorialisation, according to Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 258), always exist simultaneously, being relative, connected and caught up in one another:

[T]he movement of de-territorialisation that goes from the centre to the periphery is accompanied by a peripheral re-territorialisation, a kind of economic and political self-centring of the periphery, either in the modernistic forms of a State socialism or capitalism, or in the archaic form of local despots. It may be all but impossible to distinguish de-territorialisation from re-territorialisation, since they are mutually enmeshed, or like opposite faces of one and the same process.

The desire for autonomy, self-realisation and better career drives individuals to pursue creative jobs, yet the flows of these aspirations (or desires) are also captured by the flows of money and profit in the capitalist production system. This system, as I have already discussed, normalises the precariousness and inequality of the creative workplace and generates new forms of organisation to re-territorialise the creative subject. For instance, in Chapter 4, the coming of international creative workers to China on the one hand de-territorialises the ‘Chinese cultural industries’, while the life and work of these transnational creators are also re-territorialised as part of the ‘Chinese creative workforce’ and subject to the distinct precarity underlying the political economy of Chinese cultural production.

The interaction of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation continues throughout the never-ending process of individuals’ ‘becoming creative’. In A

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\(^5\) Kuaishou is a popular Chinese social media platform on which users make, post and monetise short videos.
Thousand Plateaus (1987, 472), Deleuze and Guattari write that ‘the deepest law of capitalism’ is that ‘it continually sets and then repels its own limits, but in so doing gives rise to numerous flows in all directions that escape its axiomatic’. Capitalism, in this sense, not only decodes the flows of desire and re-territorialises them according to the market rule, but also produces flows of desire that escape or go against the rule (extreme examples could be terrorism, drug use and madness) (Hickey-Moody and Malins 2007, 15–16). It is in this sense that ‘schizophrenia’ is both the limit and logic of capitalism. As Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 34) explain:

Capitalism, through its process of production, produces an awesome schizophrenic accumulation of energy or charge, against which it brings all its vast powers of repression to bear, but which nonetheless continues to act as capitalism’s limit. For capitalism constantly counteracts, constantly inhibits this inherent tendency while at the same time allowing it free rein; it continually seeks to avoid reaching its limit while simultaneously tending toward that limit. Capitalism institutes or restores all sorts of residual and artificial, imaginary, or symbolic territorialities, thereby attempting, as best it can, to recode, to rechannel persons who have been defined in terms of abstract quantities. Everything returns or recurs: States, nations, families.

To achieve the maximum accumulation of capital requires capitalism to push and pull various movements of de-territorialisation, which in turn unleashes flows of desire and energy that may challenge the existing system (thus reaching the ‘limit of capitalism’). To avoid reaching the ‘limit’ (the breakdown of the system), capitalism needs to constantly restore the power and apparatus of the ‘state, nations, families’ that it de-territorialises at the same time, to re-capture the escaping flows of desire: ‘turning revolutionaries into the criminal, the disorderly, the social outcast, the insane’ (Hickey-Moody and Malins 2007, 16).

In post-socialist China, the entanglement of market economy and state intervention reproduces and complicates this schizophrenic capitalism. The market economy gives legitimacy to the rule of the Communist Party, while also constantly
de-territorialising authoritarian social relations. Various regulatory policies, apparatuses and institutions are set up to counteract this de-territorialising effect of capitalism. The state and capital constantly support, collaborate and also struggle against each other. This constant push and pull of schizophrenic state capitalism create abundant space for individuals to navigate. To make cultural commodities valuable and marketable, for example, the system encourages creative subjects to experiment with diverse creative ideas and individual lifestyles. Simultaneously, these experiments contain the energy that can challenge the social order and thus need to be monitored and regulated by state apparatuses. This push and pull process never succeeds in precipitating a static ‘creative being’ or ‘creative identity’, capable of consolidating an existing lifestyle and work culture (in the Chinese context, this ‘being’ could be phrased as ‘being creative for the state’, as explained in Chapter 2). Within it, cultural workers thus become ‘schizoid creators’, whose agentic work and life practices become valuable and marketable, while the flows of desire they release also threaten and challenge the established social order and ruling system. Schizoid creators are, then, working for and against the system at the same time. Chinese independent filmmakers, as I will show in Chapter 3, could be seen as typical schizoid creators. They chose independent filmmaking because they hoped that it would allow them to balance their aspirations to career success and their discontent with their previous lives and the state of society. Becoming ‘independent’ in this sense refers to the active process through which these creative subjects actualise their experiences of discontent in a complicated network constituted by state regulation, domestic and global cinema, as well as various filmic devices (camera, tripod, recorder, etc.). On the one hand, the thriving domestic cinema economy and strict film censorship and licensing have precarised the lives and work of these filmmakers, pushing Chinese independent cinema towards a depoliticised ‘art cinema’. On the other hand, these filmmakers’ insistence on ‘independence’ and ‘difference’, reflected in the production, distribution and aesthetics of their films, distinguishes their work from and challenges the value system of Chinese mainstream cinema.
By claiming the production of a schizoid creative subjectivity, I do not want to suggest that every cultural worker in contemporary China is ‘being’ a schizoid creator. Instead, by probing the everyday practice of creative labour, this study seeks to identify the moments and the possibilities of cultural workers ‘becoming’ schizoid, not only in how they are incorporated by the governance but also in how they escape and challenge the system (of capitalism, neoliberalism, or post-socialism). My aim is to affirm the differences embodied by individuals labelled ‘Chinese creative workers’ and their active agency, without overlooking the larger power relations or reducing individual efforts to a result of ‘false consciousness’ imposed by the capitalist or state ideology.

**Methodology**

This study focuses on the impact of the governance and precarisation of creative labour in China on the formation of creative subjectivities. To answer its main questions, listed above, it combines analyses of the political economy of Chinese cultural production, to illuminate the governing and organising system of creative production and labour in China, with an intensive empirical ethnography of various production sites and workplaces, to explore how individual creators act in such a system of governance and production.

Using political economy to study cultural production, as Aeron Davis notes, links ‘cultural outputs to the economic, industrial and political factors that shape the organisations and industries which then produce culture’ (Davis 2008, 53). It shows how different ways of financing and organising can impact various representations and behaviours in the field of cultural production (Murdock and Golding 2005; Hesmondhalgh 2019). In using this approach to study Chinese cultural production and creative labour, my aim is thus to investigate the complicated labour relations and governing system in which cultural production and cultural work are mobilised and organised.
My main research data for this political economic analysis are the various policy documents publicly issued by various Chinese authorities (see Appendix II), and the industrial reports and statistics collected through interviews with practitioners and through secondary sources (such as companies’ financial reports, media reports and other empirical academic literature). Chapter 1 specifically analyses the genesis, development and specificity of the policy and administrative institution of the Chinese cultural economy in the post-Mao era. It not only introduces the specificity of the Chinese Party-State’s approach to cultural production but also underscores the potential contradictions that open up space for agency and negotiation on the part of cultural producers. In the case studies that follow, political economy is also adopted as an important method to illuminate the nuanced socio-economic conditions and employment relations in creative workspaces such as state-owned cultural enterprises, the film industry and the digital platform economy.

At the same time, if political economy sheds light upon the ‘structures, external factors and high-level decision-makers which come to influence and shape’ cultural production (Davis 2008, 54), it is also essential to explore cultural production and cultural work from the perspective of those engaged in it in terms of their experiences in producing culture and their relations to the large politico-economic structures. To incorporate this perspective, I conducted ethnographical fieldwork in the sites where Chinese cultural workers live and work, from their physical work and living spaces to the online spaces in which they communicate with each other. I did this with the aim to ‘investigate some aspect of the lives of the

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6 Including both central and local provincial administrative bodies such as the State Council, the Ministry of Culture, the National Radio and Television Administration, the Cyberspace Administration of China, the Ministry of Finance, etc. The documents are publicly accessible through the official database Chinese Cultural Policy Library (http://e.cacanet.cn/cpll/index.aspx), established and maintained by the Chinese Central Academy of Culture and Tourism Administration. Most of them are also available on government websites.
people who are being studied [that is the ‘Chinese cultural workers’], which includes finding out how these people view the situations they face, how they regard one another, and also how they see themselves’ (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, 3).

Between July 2016 and April 2018, I made three fieldwork trips to China with a duration of approximately six months in total: from July to September 2016 (6 weeks in Beijing, 3 weeks in Shanghai and 3 weeks in Hefei), from July to September 2017 (8 weeks in Beijing) and in April 2018 (3 weeks in Beijing and 1 week in Shanghai). During these trips, I conducted 79 semi-structured interviews (see appendix I) with a wide range of practitioners in the Chinese cultural industries. From these, I chose four groups of creative workers to serve as case studies: cultural workers in state-owned cultural enterprises (SOCEs), independent filmmakers, international creative workers in Beijing and the newly emerged digital creative class.

These four case studies were selected to investigate the process by which individuals from diverse organisational, ethnic and class backgrounds, and of different genders and ages, become creative workers in contemporary China. Following George and Bennett (2004, 5), each of these cases provides ‘the detailed examination of an aspect of a historical episode to develop or test historical explanations that may be generalizable to other events’. The above-mentioned three

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7 Beijing and Shanghai were chosen as the major cities for my fieldwork, since as the political capital and as the largest Chinese city they are the two centres of China’s cultural industries, where most creative workers are located. Hefei is a second-tier inland city and was chosen as a comparison site for certain case studies, such as that of creative work in state-owned cultural companies.

8 In the semi-structured interviews, I presented several broad themes related to each case study in a consistent and systematic manner as a guidance to elicit more elaborate responses from the participants (cf. Qu and Dumay 2011, 246). See Appendix I for a full list of interviewees and their pseudonyms. Pseudonyms were used in all cases, unless research participants explicitly asked me to use their real name.
research questions are addressed in these empirical case studies, which exemplify the production of schizoid creator subjectivity in contemporary China in four creative work scenarios with different characteristics. First, as the most powerful players in the Chinese cultural industries, state-owned companies play a crucial role in the cultural labour market: their bureaucratic managerial system alleviates job precarity but also limits autonomy. Second, independent filmmaking represents an ‘alternative’ form of creative labour and production in China that is supposedly low-budget, politically sensitive, artistically avant-garde, and capable of providing autonomy and facilitating critical thinking (Berry and Rofel 2010). In practice, however, it is still associated with and precarised by the thriving Chinese commercial cinema sector. Third, the booming economy has also made people from overseas view China as an aspirational place capable of fostering a creative career. The life and work experiences of international creative workers in Beijing epitomise the global dimension of the Chinese creative workforce, while also exemplifying what I described earlier as ‘productive precarity’. Finally, the emerging Chinese digital and platform economy offers opportunities for the low educated, more marginal population to participate as producers in the Chinese creative economy. These ‘grassroots creators’ are becoming an ‘unlikely creative class’ through actively using digital technologies and negotiating with platform governance.

While carrying out the interviews, I adopted what Qu and Dumay call ‘a reflexive approach’ in order to recognise ‘the subjectivity of both the interviewer and the interviewee and the socially constructed nature of interview accounts’ (Qu and Dumay 2011, 255). Research participants were recruited through the snowball sampling method and interviews usually took place in informal settings such as restaurants, cafés or the participants’ homes. Before the actual interview, I usually arranged at least one informal meeting (for drinks or dinner), sometimes accompanied by the friend who introduced the interviewee. To gain as much information about my research subjects as possible, I not only interviewed creators, but also other practitioners in the field, such as HR managers, film producers, platform intermediaries, and algorithm engineers. When necessary, return visits and
follow-up interviews were arranged (e.g. with Judie Deng, Chang Biao, Jian Haodong, Wang Hai, He Yang and Even Yong).

While analysing the data, the interview transcript is not treated as a mirror of reality, ‘but rather [as] a text that needs to be subjectively evaluated’ (Qu and Dumay 2011, 256). The research participants’ subjective experiences of work and life in the Chinese cultural industries offer crucial lenses to address the central focus of this study: the formation of subjectivity of cultural workers in contemporary China. I take these subjective experiences seriously in the analysis, while also being aware of the large social structure in which these creative labour subjects work and live. For example, I take ‘independent filmmakers’ not as a fixed concept referring to the specific habitus of certain Chinese filmmakers, but as a discourse that is frequently used by media, scholars and some filmmakers themselves. I am aware of the fact that the claimed ‘independence’ is largely compromised in actual filmmaking practice. However, I still use the concept of independent filmmaking because it is favoured by most of the filmmakers I interviewed and because their persistent identification with ‘independents’ or a ‘spirit of independence’ is by no means mere illusion or deception. Similarly, my claim about the cosmopolitanism arising among transnational creative workers in Beijing is based on my observations and interviews, but I also clarify that this cosmopolitanism is situated and conditioned by certain techno-economic forces.

The analysis of subjectivity is further supported by other ethnographic data. I conducted participant observation in various spaces related to each case study. For example, to study international creative workers in Beijing, I went to art events, hutong bars, galleries, and workplaces that are popular among my research subjects, sometimes by myself and sometimes with interviewees. To gain a more balanced view of Chinese independent filmmakers, I visited Song Zhuang art village, where a number of filmmakers reside, and chatted and had dinner with local

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9 I provide detailed descriptions of the methods used for the case studies in each empirical chapter.
villagers, curators, art dealers, and some media reporters. I visited the headquarters of CCTV (China Central Television) and People’s Daily to explore the working and living environment of creative workers employed by state media. I also followed most of my informants’ Wechat and joined some selected Wechat groups (indie film screenings, Beijing expats, script writers in Shanghai, etc.), to observe their online activities (posts, reposts, comments, conversations, etc.). To study Kuaishou and its creator culture, I combined a digital walk-through method (Light et al. 2018) with multi-sited ethnography10 (Marcus 1995) to illuminate the model of operation and governance on the platform, Kuaishou and its specific creator subjectivity.

**Chapter outline**

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 shift in the CCP’s ideology to economic development in the post-Mao era, the national Opening-up policy and economic globalisation together motivated the Party-State to carry out institutional reforms to provide space for the growth of commercial culture. However, Chinese cultural industries policy is never simply an economic policy that aims to economise cultural and media sectors; the Party-State’s ideological concern for social stability and national rejuvenation, lately translated into Xi Jinping’s Chinese Dream, makes the Chinese cultural industries policy a state discursive formation. 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.

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10 I collected textual and interview data through both online ethnography and semi-structured interviews with content creators, algorithm engineers, and platform intermediary entrepreneurs. See Chapter 5.
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. On an everyday basis, the ‘state question’ identified by Jing Wang (2001) in Chinese cultural production and popular culture thus not only refers to the state’s ideological concern with cultural activities; it also relates to the intricate relationship between administrative power and institutions on the one hand, and various production subjects on the other. 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). According to official statistics, by 2015 there were 1.37 million employees in Chinese SOCEs (Ministry of Finance, 2016). Transformed from state-controlled cultural work units, these state-owned companies are the most powerful players in the Chinese cultural industries. Aside from this privileged market position, Chinese 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). The need to balance the political and the commercial in cultural production causes a basic paradox that troubles creative workers in Chinese SOCEs and distinguishes them from the more autonomous workplaces in the European-American creative economy.

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. This bureaucratic system restricts both creative and workplace autonomy. 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. Chinese independent filmmaking, compared with ‘main melody’ film production and ‘commercial’ film production, is supposed to be low-budget, politically sensitive, artistically avant-garde, and seeking relative autonomy and critical thinking (Berry and Rofel 2010). It is also supposed to occupy a position of high cultural capital in the field of Chinese film production (Nakajima 2016). In characterising Chinese independent film, current studies are apt to generalise, assigning filmmakers to special categories or identities, disregarding their underlying distinctiveness. This explains the terminological ambiguities surrounding the terms ‘independence’, ‘independent film’ and ‘Chinese independents’ (Berry and Rofel 2011; Jiang 2012; Sniadecki 2013), since every given definition runs the risk of overlooking differences among the subjects it designates. Without getting embroiled in this debate, for the purposes of this study I explore ‘independent filmmaking’ as a discourse employed by Chinese creative workers to designate their filmmaking practice.

11 Films made by the state-owned studios for the state’s political propaganda, such as The Founding of a Republic (2009) and The Founding of an Army (2017). Some commercial productions of recent years can also be tagged as main melody movies given that their content is closely related to state ideology; examples are Operation Mekong (2016) and Wolf Warrior 2 (2017) and The Wandering Earth (2019).
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 ‘three-legged’ system: the heavy 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’ by offering funding and screening opportunities. This process of precarisation steers Chinese independent cinema towards a depoliticised ‘art cinema’, while filmmakers have to deploy forms of self-governance such as multitasking, networking and emotional management to maintain optimism about the future.

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 not only helps alleviate living and work pressures by offering skills training and screening opportunities, but also triggers a more open understanding of ‘independence’ and ‘independent filmmaking’. 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. While China was long regarded as an emigration country, the ‘rise of China’ is now also reversing the transnational mobility of labour and migration. The economic opportunities engendered by the flourishing Chinese market attract people from overseas to appreciate China as an aspirational place for work and life. The global proliferation of the creative industries discourse and creative workers’ uneven prosperity around the globe have
propelled the global mobility of creative labour, including into 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. These international professionals are expected to enable the future success of China’s cultural industries and to contribute to the image of Beijing as a global creative city, as well as to China’s hope for an economic transformation ‘from made in China to created in China’. 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, these workers’ presence in Beijing has broadened the geopolitical conception of ‘Chinese creative labour’ and ‘Chinese creativity’. The precarious life produced by the mobility and flexibility demanded of international creative workers in Beijing also 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. As such, it exemplifies what Isabel Lorey (2015) terms the ‘incalculable’ consequences of precarisation and self-governance. The stories of these international cultural workers in Beijing make clear that the precarity caused by the economic globalisation of creative labour should not be seen as exclusively negative.

Chapter 5, finally, 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. When thinking about the creative class one tends to think of an urban elite, an educated group of predominantly young people who work in the cultural industries. Yet the emerging digital and platform economy also offers opportunities for people from lower social classes to participate as producers in China’s creative economy. This new trend in the Chinese
cultural economy has been evidenced by the popularity of Kuaishou, a Chinese short-video platform. Kuaishou attracts hundreds of millions of Chinese from the countryside and the second and third tier cities. Since 2012, it has grown into one of the most popular video-sharing platforms in China, allowing its users not only to watch, make and distribute various genres of short videos, but also to become ‘complementors’ of the platform (Nieborg and Poell, 2018): active participants in the content production and monetisation of the platform business. Under the policy agenda of ‘Internet+’ and ‘Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation’, the Chinese Party-State’s strategy of economic restructuring drives but also shapes the Chinese digital creative economy. The complicated state-corporate relationship renders Kuaishou’s platform business increasingly contingent, due to the state’s concern for economic transformation and cultural regulation and social stability. In the light of this analysis of the political economy, the second part of the chapter uses the ‘walkthrough’ method of Light et al. (2016) to further explore how this state-platform contingency is encoded in the algorithms of Kuaishou. These algorithms allow a maximum of incorporation of creativity from ‘grassroots individuals’, but they also keep the system and its immense database largely invisible to these individuals, contributing to the subsumption of individual vernacular creativity.

This does not make Kuaishou’s new creative subjects passive, exploited ‘prosumers’, or reduce their work to exploited, free ‘platform labour’ as some critical political economists would claim (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Fuchs, 2010; van Doorn, 2017). By actively utilising the digital system of Kuaishou, ‘grassroots’ content producers are also empowered to develop a digital entrepreneurship within which creativity, life and individuality are constantly recalculated according to an accounting of costs and profits. This digital entrepreneurship, in conjunction with the governance and censorship of the internet, on the one hand contributes to the growth of China’s digital economy, as well as to the production of social stability and a conforming digital culture. On the other hand, however, I argue that it engenders a social mobility that de-territorialises the hidden class and urban-rural division. The stories of these digital creators, together with the wide aesthetic range
of videos, constitute a ‘silly archive’ (Berlant 1997) in which the vernacular, the ubiquitous and the banal are articulated. It may well be in such articulations that 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 Chinese media.
Chapter 1 Understanding ‘cultural industries’ in China: History, policies and institutions

Introduction

Before examining the working experiences in Chinese creative industries, the foremost question that needs to be explored is: how are creativity and cultural production configured by the Chinese authorities? Given that in the Maoist era culture and aesthetics served as propaganda tools, and professional cultural production was under strict state surveillance, how was the discourse of ‘creative/cultural industries’ translated into Chinese state policy in the post-Socialist era? And how has this policy been implemented in contemporary China?

As a policy discourse, ‘creative industries’ was first coined by the British Labour Government in 1997 in its attempts to establish a Creative Industries Task Force (CITF) as the central activity of the new Department of Culture, Media and Sports (DCMS) (Flew 2012, 9). Shortly after, the UK DCMS released the Creative Industries Mapping Documents, identifying 13 sectors as components of the creative industries and underscoring their contribution to employment creation, economic growth and national export. In the following decades, this creative-industries discourse, with adjustments and modifications that I will discuss later, continued as a national policy of the United Kingdom and was taken up by many other countries around the world. In the UK context, this discourse signals the ‘New Labour’ government’s top-down approach to cultural economy. It aligns arts and media policies with economic policies, and, more importantly, calls for more engagement of arts and media with intellectual-property-based information technology (Garnham 2005; Flew 2012).

The DCMS ‘creative industries’ approach has generated widespread critique. The conflation of the arts with economic discourse ‘overrides important
public good arguments for state support of culture, subsuming the cultural sector and cultural objectives within an economic agenda to which it is ill-suited’ (Galloway and Dunlop 2007). The marketisation of culture and Richard Florida’s recipe of the ‘creative class’, moreover, run the risk of normalising the precarious and neoliberal paradigm of labour conditions (Ross 2009; McGuigan 2009).

According to Nicolas Garnham (2005, 15), the DCMS’s creative industries approach draws too much from ‘the prestige and economic importance attached to concepts of innovation, information, information workers and the impact of information and communication technologies’. As a result, it strengthens intellectual property protection, which benefits the major media conglomerates in so-called copyright industries such as software, media and entertainment, and shifts the focus from distribution and consumption to creating human capital (promoting and aggregating precarious employment conditions) (Garnham 2005). The creative industries, according to Garnham’s critique, become a ‘Trojan horse’ that secretes ‘the intellectual heritage of the information society and its technocratic baggage into the realm of cultural practice’, and aligns ‘it with inappropriate bedfellows such as business services, telecommunications and calls for increases in generic creativity’ (Cunningham 2009, 375).

Nonetheless, in full awareness of these critiques, it should be acknowledged that the discourse of creative industries has been diversified as it travelled around different countries and regions. As Cunningham (2009, 376) points out, instead of being a ‘Trojan horse’, creative industries have become ‘a Rorschach blot’ as the take-up of creative industries policy varies in different parts of the world – in Europe, the US, Asia or the Global South – and it assembles different interests and explanatory schema. For example, the British top-down approach was not copied in the US and some parts of Europe, where creative industries policies are mostly place-based regional and municipal development strategies (Cunningham 2009; Boix et al. 2016). Moreover, compared to the British government’s emphasis on economic growth and ICT innovation, the European approach to creative industries generally ‘tend[s] to stress a greater degree of communitarian benefit and strategies
of social inclusion’ (Cunningham 2009, 378). Similarly, in poorer countries of the Global South, the approach to the creative economy is often associated with poverty alleviation, cultural heritage and basic infrastructure (Cunningham 2009).

In contemporary China, the discourse of the creative industries has also developed in a particular way. Cultural and media creativity (创意 chuangyi) and information technological innovation (创新 chuangxin) have both been integrated into the national top-down agenda to transform the national economy ‘from made in China to created in China’ (Keane 2007). However, what distinguishes the Chinese creative industries approach from other international ones is that behind the economic and commercialising discourse there is a political agenda that aligns culture and media not only with economic policy, but also with ideological control and social governance. It might be argued that, in most cases of the transnational diffusion of the ‘creative industries’ policy, the ‘Trojan horse’ and the ‘Rorschach blot’ are in fact ‘different sides of the same coin’ – that either the ‘economisation of culture’ or the ‘culturalisation of the economy’ uses market reasoning to dissociate culture and media from socio-political concerns (Hesmondhalgh 2008; Lee 2016). Yet, for Chinese Party-State, creativity, ‘the least problematic in the western context’, becomes the ‘thorniest question’ due to its promise of ‘individualism’ and ‘creative destruction’ (Wang 2004, 13). In China, what accompanies the marketisation of culture is a clear political concern that treats culture and creativity as important tools for achieving social stability as well as for catching up with the west in the exercise of national soft power (O’Connor and Gu 2006; Su 2015).

This chapter delves into the existing literature on the creative industries discourse and its Chinese ramifications, and looks at policy documents and governmental institutions to explore: 1) how the discourse of ‘creative/cultural industries’ was translated into Chinese state policy in the post-Socialist era; 2) how creativity and cultural production were configured in these policies; and 3) the features of the institutions responsible for implementing these policies. To do this, the chapter focuses on the policy and institutional context of commercial cultural
production in contemporary China. I have collected and analysed the policy documents related to ‘cultural industries’ and ‘cultural economy’ issued by the central government since the late 1980s (see Appendix II).

The following sections will give a genealogical overview of Chinese cultural economy policies to show how the discourse of ‘cultural industries’ was introduced and incorporated by the Chinese Party-State in the post-Mao era. Based on this historical review, the second section analyses the Party-State’s approach to the cultural industries. While promoting the commercial cultural sectors, Chinese cultural industries policy distinguishes itself from the western ‘neoliberal approach’ by adding a specific ‘state discursive formation’ to its configuration of cultural production. The mixture of state and market discourses in China’s cultural industries policy epitomises the Party-State’s instrumentalist configuration of culture and creativity. Given the dual role of culture as ideology and commodity, the state deploys the market economy and cultural industries as a new way of social governance. Shifting the focus from state policy to institutions, the final section of the chapter examines the political system in which state policy is translated into concrete policies and implemented. Importantly, I argue that this translation creates space for flexibility, agency and negotiation on the part of diverse actors in the Chinese cultural sphere.

The advent of the ‘cultural industries’ in China

Although it was not until the early 2000s that the terms ‘cultural industries’ and ‘creative industries’ were officially introduced to China, the Chinese authorities had already started endorsing the idea of a cultural economy and commercial cultural production in the late 1980s. In February 1987, the Ministry of Culture, together with the Ministry of Finance and the State Administration of Industry and Commerce, issued a policy document titled Interim Provisions on the Administration of Cultural Institutions Conducting Commercial Service and Activities (MoC 1987). The release of these Provisions was the first time since 1978
that the Party-State officially acknowledged and legalised commercial cultural production in China. As the document asserts (MoC 1987):

To better meet the need of the people for cultural life and to strengthen cultural units’ development, in recent years many cultural units started providing commercial services and have obtained extra financial returns by means of their different expertise and equipment. These commercial activities will be beneficial for transforming our cultural units from non-profit service suppliers to commercial service providers. These activities will benefit our socialist spiritual civilisation, enable cultural units to provide diverse services with high quality and to make our cultural and art undertakings prosper (事业 shiye).

In the media sectors, state endorsement came even earlier. Already in 1979, the Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the CCP authorised Chinese news presses, including newspapers, radio and television, to run commercial advertisements (Chen 2011). In 1988, furthermore, the state allowed newspapers, periodicals and publishing houses to provide commercial services (see below) to the public (SAPP and SACI 1988). These early cultural economy policies initiated a ‘dual-track’ (双轨制 shuangguizhi) reform within state cultural units (单位 danwei) such as performing arts groups, news presses, television and radio stations, cinemas and theatres. Contracted employment was introduced, along with the approval of limited commercial production, without abolishing the pre-existing state-controlled system.¹ This dual-track system allowed cultural units to establish a different personnel system for those hired for commercial business, whose salaries would be paid by the units instead of the state. Although the majority of staff still held tenured positions, the state allowed these units to give temporary labour contracts to a small number of employees.

¹ Since the Maoist era, Chinese cultural and media production had been fully sponsored by the state and all cultural workers, including artists, journalists, writers and musicians, were employed by state-controlled cultural units (单位 danwei). See Chapter 2.
This early approval of marketisation by the state had a limited scope. Only the so-called cultural units (the state-owned public cultural and media entities) were licensed to offer commercial products and services, which were circumscribed to supplemental activities. For example, in the *Provisions* (MoC 1987), theatres, art groups and libraries were allowed to conduct commercial businesses:

**Related cultural business** (*yanshen yewu*): document copying, printing and scanning; art consulting, public lecture, arts education, dancing party, music concert, video screening, calligraphy and painting selling, instrument repairing, theatrical costume renting, hairdressing and beauty service, commercial photography, public performance, and sport games.

**Convenience services** (*bianmin yewu*): convenience stores, canteens and hotels; production and retailing of musical instruments, audio-visual products, stationary, relic copies, advertisements, stage costumes and props.

News presses and publishing houses, under the regulation of the State Administration of Press and Publishing (SAPP) at this time, were allowed to provide commercial advertising, consulting, printing and professional education, etc. (SAPP and SACI 1988). All these activities were so-called ‘supplemental services’ (*buchong fuwu*); core businesses such as content production (news, film, television, art, etc.) and distribution were still protected from commercialisation. Together with this limited authorisation came strict license and content regulation of commercial activities (SAIC 1987). Non-state sponsored forms of cultural production, such as independent film and popular music, were not yet allowed to enter the market and were stigmatised as ‘underground’ and ‘illegal’. Thus, de Kloet (2002) reveals that one of the key reasons for the decline of Chinese rock music in the mid to late 1990s was the strong hold of the state on music production. Although record companies contracted musicians and organised music production,
the distribution of albums needed to go through state-owned publishing houses, which received 60% of the revenue (de Kloet 2002, 97).²

However, the ‘dual-track’ reform did herald far-reaching institutional reform as a result of the Party-State’s response to the profound transformation of the Chinese cultural field since the late 1970s. With the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1978, the ruling ideology of the Chinese Communist Party shifted from Mao’s political experiment with socialism and alternative modernity to Deng Xiaoping’s Reform and Opening Up policy. Economic development, instead of political struggle, became the key objective of the PRC (Brown 2012). This change was welcomed by the Chinese public in the 1980s and facilitated the marketisation reform and growth of non-state sectors. In 1992, the 14th National Congress of the CCP defined the objective of Chinese economic reform as establishing a ‘socialist market economy’, in which the law of value and non-state forms of ownership would play an ever greater role, while state-owned enterprises would remain ‘the leading force’ in the national economy (Jiang 1992).

Although still dominated by state-owned units and not freed from propaganda responsibility, the cultural and media sectors thus started to embrace the market in post-Socialist China, partly out of financial need and partly because of increasing competition from the ‘underground’ cultural market, the influx of western cultural products and the rise of local popular culture (de Kloet 2010). The financial burden of state-owned cultural enterprises on the one hand and the potential contribution to the national economy on the other finally motivated the government to legalise commercial cultural production.

Another factor that influenced China’s cultural reform was the intensification of economic globalisation. The building of special economic zones in

² In the 1990s, record companies in Mainland China were dominated by regional competitors from Hong Kong and Taiwan (e.g. Magic Stone). Only through joint ventures were international record companies allowed to set up office in China. After the late 1990s, local record companies started to grow (e.g. Modern Sky) (de Kloet 2002).
the 1980s not only brought in foreign investments but also global commercial popular culture – pop music, film, television, etc. At the same time, China’s joining of the World Trade Organisation in 2001 required the country to commit to allowing a relatively open market and free trade in many areas, including the cultural and media sectors (Ministry of Commerce 2006). To meet the challenge posed by international competitors, the Chinese government sought to boost the local economy and restructure it from an unsustainable reliance on export-based manufacturing to an innovation-driven, environmentally friendly and high added-value model. At the same time, they also reformed existing economic policies and institutions in line with international standards and practice (与国际接轨, yu guoji jiegui).

It is within this political-economic context that a policy discourse concerning the cultural/creative industries was introduced to China. In August 1998, the Ministry of Culture established its Division of Cultural Industries as the first national administrative office for cultural industries. In 2000, The Tenth Five-year Plan for National Economic and Social Development used the term ‘cultural industries’ (文化产业 wenhua chanye) for the first time, stating that ‘in the coming five years, the government will enact cultural industries policies, propel the construction and effective regulation of the cultural market and promote the cultural industries’ (The State Council 2001).

Developing strategies

After 2000, the Chinese central government officially adopted the cultural industries as one of the national strategies for economic development and promulgated a series of industrial policies to promote as well as regulate the cultural economy. From 2001 to 2017, the Chinese central government issued dozens of promotional and planning policy documents for the cultural industries (see appendix II). In 2003, the Ministry of Culture released Opinions on Supporting and Promoting the Development of Cultural Industries (MoC 2003). This document defines the cultural industries as ‘the commercial sectors that produce cultural products and provide
cultural services’ (MoC 2003). As commercial and market-driven sectors, ‘cultural industries’ (文化产业 wenhua chanye) are distinguished from ‘cultural undertakings’ (文化事业 wenhua shiye), which are non-profit public enterprises mostly financed by the government. Both cultural industries and cultural undertakings are crucial constituents of Chinese socialist cultural development (文化建设 wenhua jianshe). Art and theatre, the film and television industry, the audio-video industry, cultural entertainment, cultural tourism, the internet cultural industry, publishing, art education and the art trade were identified as the primary sectors of the Chinese cultural industries (MoC 2003).

The Chinese government adopts a top-down approach in its development agenda. The first strategy was to incubate competitive market entities. To do so, the state government initiated an enterprise reform within Chinese state-owned cultural units. In 2003, the State Council released Regulations on Supporting Cultural Industries Development and Enterprise Reform of Cultural Units in the Process of the Cultural System Reform, first announced as a 5-year pilot project, which was reformulated and extended in 2008, 2014 and 2018. These documents promote enterprise reform in Chinese state-owned cultural entities, formulating a series of regulatory and preferential policies in asset management, land disposal, financial support, income distribution, tax reduction and exemption, and social welfare (The State Council 2003, 2008, 2014, 2018b). As I will show in more detail in Chapter 2, to achieve the so-called scale economy, the state encourages state-owned cultural enterprises to merge into large cultural corporate entities. Following the logic of the scale economy, the state alsoformulates policies and allocates funds to promote national and creative clusters, or the so-called ‘cultural industrial parks’ (文化产业园区 wenhua chanye yuanqu). By 2015, there were over 2500 cultural industrial parks in China (see figure 1.1); over 350 of these were named ‘national’ and funded
by the central government, while the rest were constructed by regional governments.³

![Figure 1.1 Number of cultural industrial parks in China (CHYXX 2016)](image)

At the same time, the state identified the non-state cultural economy as an indispensable constituent of the Chinese cultural industries. In 2005, the State Council issued a policy document to authorise and regulate non-state capital’s contributions to the cultural and media sectors (The State Council 2005). According to this policy, non-state capital (both local and foreign) can invest in art, museums and libraries, internet cafés, art education and agencies, tourism, animation and the gaming industry, advertising, film and television production, cinema, the retail of books and audio-video products, etc. It is also allowed to have a shareholding of less than 49% in state-owned production and distribution companies in publishing, advertising, film and television. The final objective of this strategy is to fully mobilise the social to participate in the cultural construction and the development of socialist advanced culture; to guide and regulate the entry of non-public capital into the cultural industries; to form a cultural market

³ As I will explain later in this chapter, however, most of these parks are far from profitable due to the complicated administrative system and state-commerce relationship.
structure in which state-owned cultural enterprises play the dominant role with the non-state cultural economy as an important force; to enhance the overall strength and competitiveness of the Chinese cultural industries. (The State Council 2005)

Apart from enterprise reform and ownership diversification, the state also deploys other strategies such as supporting key sectors, promoting media convergence and digital information technology, and ‘cultural going-out’ (export) (文化走出去 wenhua zouchuqu). Special funds and preferential policies were established to support companies in specified ‘key sectors’ (重点行业 zhongdian hangye), including animation, the television and film industry, digital content, publishing, performance and entertainment, and cultural tourism. These sectors, as I will explain in the next section, are the ‘core cultural industries’ that are seen to have high ideological importance. The state believes that the development of these sectors will not only lead to the prosperity of commercial Chinese popular culture, but will also contribute to the accumulation of ‘soft power’ and ‘national cultural security’.

Information and internet technology have been seen as another crucial driving force for the Chinese cultural economy. The new technologies, as one of the policies asserts, will not only transform and upgrade traditional cultural industries, but also give birth to cutting-edge industries such as platform and Artificial Intellectual (AI) economies, which can ‘develop high value-added cultural products that combine world-leading technologies and independent intellectual property with national characteristics’ (MoC 2003; The State Council 2009).

Finally, the state has formulated a series of promotional policies on cultural trade and export, to promote the ‘going-out of Chinese culture’. Local artworks, exhibitions, films, television dramas, animations, internet games, publications, folk music and dance, acrobatics and other cultural products that have ‘national characteristics’ are specifically encouraged and supported for export. Aside from various preferential tax and funding policies, China also launched several
international cultural fairs to function as stages for the Chinese cultural industries ‘going out’, such as the International Cultural Industries Fair (Shenzhen), the China International Film and TV Program Exhibition and the Beijing International Book Fair.

As a result of the promulgation of these policies, the Chinese cultural economy experienced rapid growth in the first two decades of the 2000s. According to official statistics, from 2004 to 2013, the Chinese cultural industries maintained an average growth rate of 20% (See figure 1.2). The economic value added of the cultural industries reached 201 billion RMB in 2013, constituting 3.42% of Chinese National Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Four years later, in 2017, this economic number had risen to 347 billion and 4.2% of the national GDP (NBS 2018). It has been reported that the cultural industries are becoming the new growth engine and pillar industry of the Chinese economy (Zhang 2018).

Figure 1.2 2004-2017 value added of the cultural industries in China (100 million RMB) (created by the author, source: Guangming Daily 2015; Minyinzhiuku 2017; NBS 2018)
From these policy documents and statistics, it is obvious that the Chinese Party-State has developed an aggressive plan to boost the creative economy. The shifting ideology of the CCP to economic development in the post-Mao era, the national Opening-up policy and economy globalisation together motivated the Party-State to carry out institutional reform to give space to the growth of commercial culture. However, this enthusiastic national endorsement does not mean that the Chinese government has embraced the ‘creative industries’ in the same way as many other countries did. As I will demonstrate in the next section, Chinese cultural industries policy is never simply an economic policy that aims to economise cultural and media sectors; rather, the Party-State’s ideological concern with social stability and national rejuvenation, lately translated into Xi Jinping’s Chinese Dream, complicates the discursive formation of the cultural industries and distinguishes them from their counterparts in the rest of the world.

The state discursive formation

Developing the cultural industries is a crucial way in the socialist market economy to meet the diverse spiritual and cultural needs of the people. In doing so, we must adhere to the direction of the socialist advanced culture and always put social benefits first, while uniting the social benefits with economic benefits. We must be in line with the national goal of building a comprehensive, balanced and sustainable economy, to promote leapfrog development of the cultural industries and to make it the new growth engine and pillar industry of the economic restructuring.

The Central Committee of the CPC (2011)

In post-Socialist China, although political struggle and communist ideology were partly abandoned, the State’s instrumentalist interpretation of culture has not fully disappeared. Most importantly, media and art still need to support, or at least be in line with, the absolute rule of the Communist Party (Su 2015: 518). As president Xi
Jinping (2014) has asserted, ‘the Party’s leadership is fundamental to the development of socialist culture and arts’.

Despite the fact that the justification for the ‘cultural industries’ is seen to lie in their potential to contribute to the restructuring of the Chinese national economy, their authorisation is also premised on the Party-State’s configuration of culture as tool for social governance, or, in the official language, ‘socialist advanced culture’ or ‘social benefits’. This equivocal stance is evidenced by the state’s reluctance to use terms like ‘creativity’ and ‘creative industries’ – as developed by the British Blair government in 1997. In 2005, when the ‘creative industries’ (创意产业 chuangyi chanye) discourse travelled to China, the central government insisted on using the older term ‘cultural industries’ (文化产业 wenhua chanye) in policy documents. One crucial reason for not using ‘creative industries’ was, according to Wang Yongzhang, the former director of the Cultural Industries Division at the Ministry of Culture, that the cultural industries in China not only refer to economy and commodity, but also have an ideological character (意识形态属性 yishixingtaishuxing):

‘creative industries’ mainly focus on design and individual creativity… if we use ‘creative industries’ in our policy documents, there would be a risk that certain cultural sectors would fall out of the state’s ideological control. (Wang 2007)

Chinese conservative officials and cultural traditionalists are suspicious of the ‘individualism’, ‘change’ and ‘creative destruction’ promised by the ‘creativity’ discourse (Wang 2004; Keane 2009). If in the west debates around the term ‘creative industries’ are mainly about its latent neoliberalism and depoliticising effects on culture and media (Galloway and Dunlop 2007; Lee 2016), ‘depoliticisation’ also troubles the Chinese authorities but in a different way. As Wang Yongzhang’s remark illustrates, the creative industries discourse is thought to overlook the ‘ideological character’ of the cultural industries and to potentially give
rise to the decline of the state’s role in ideological regulation – for social stability, national identity and moral order (Keane 2009; Tong and Hung 2012).

Along with the promotional policies on the cultural economy I have analysed in the previous section, the Chinese authorities thus continued to configure the cultural sectors ‘in terms of what ought to be state-owned and what could involve the private sector, and thus what sorts of content were ‘safe’ and what ‘political’’ (O’Connor and Gu 2006, 276). For example, although in Decisions of the State Council on the entry of non-public capital into the cultural industries (The State Council 2005) non-state investment had been allowed and supported as part of the Chinese cultural and media economy, non-state capital is still not permitted to set up independent news agencies, publishing houses and broadcasting networks for radio and television, or to conduct the import of books, journals, film, television and other audio-video products that are regarded as being of ideological importance (The State Council 2005).

These examples demonstrate that there is a state discursive formation behind China’s marketisation reform in the cultural sectors. Following Jim McGuigan, the state discursive formation emerges from the belief that ‘the modern nation-state should command the whole of society, regulate the economy and cultivate appropriate selves’ (2004: 36). Under this discourse, shared by totalitarian regimes like the former Soviet Union and Maoist China, cultural policy should function to ‘engineer the soul’ of the public (McGuigan 2004: 36). In liberal and socio-democratic societies, it is also used, though to a lesser extent, in relation to the state’s support for and promotion of high national culture (McGuigan 2004, 41). For contemporary China, the promotion of a commercial cultural economy is intertwined with a set of regulatory policies which aim to shape the whole cultural industries in accordance with the role of social governance culture is assigned by the Party-State.

Take, for example, the two perennial discourses of ‘soft power’ (软实力 ruanshili) and ‘cultural security’ (文化安全 wenhua anquan). The Party-State has
been eager to promote its national imagery to wield Chinese ‘soft power’ on the
global stage on the one hand, while expecting a conforming culture that ensures
social stability and national unity on the other. Coined by Joseph Nye (1990), soft
power has been a popular term in international diplomacy, and cultural export has
been touted as its key element. This term was embraced by Chinese government in
the last decade and soft power became one of the prime objectives of developing the
cultural economy – through the ‘going-out of Chinese culture’ (中国文化走出去
zhongguo wenhua zouchuqu) (Keane 2010). According to president Xi Jinping, the
building of Chinese soft power constitutes the Chinese Dream as the great
rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (Xi 2015). At the same time, its joining of the
WTO officially opened up China’s doors to foreign popular culture such as
This cultural globalisation agitates Chinese cultural traditionalists who fear the
cultural invasion of the west and the loss of Chinese identity and traditional culture.
The Chinese Communist Party has also been suspicious of western cultural goods
which purportedly camouflage the threat of ‘peaceful evolution’. As one of the
policy documents claims:

> Opening up should be for our own use. We should not blindly copy the
> western perceptions of culture and development. While learning and
> bringing in the best of foreign cultures, we also need to resist the unhealthy
> thoughts and cultures of the west, protecting national cultural security.
> (CCP and The State Council 2005)

Such concerns urge the Party-State to incubate a competitive domestic cultural
economy – especially in the state-owned cultural sectors – that can effectively

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4 United States Secretary of State John Foster Dulles first formulated the term ‘peaceful
evolution’ in the 1950s during the cold war, referring to the attempt to peacefully transform
the socialist regimes into capitalism and democracy. Since then the Chinese state has
believed that this theory is part of the United States’ foreign policy towards China (ONG
2007).
protect ‘national cultural security’ from the forces of cultural globalisation. To do so, the Chinese government categorises cultural sectors into core cultural sectors and related cultural sectors. The core cultural sectors include six categories of cultural services: news information, content production, creative design, cultural distribution, cultural investment and operation, and cultural entertainment and leisure. The related cultural sectors are supporting services of the core sectors such as stationery manufacturing, copying and printing, cultural agencies and intermediaries, instrument manufacturing, etc. According to the newest *Guidance on foreign investment in Chinese industries* (NDRC and MoC 2017) issued by the Ministry of Commerce and the National Development and Reform Commission, the Party-State only welcomes foreign investment in the related cultural sectors such as the manufacturing of stationery, art supplies and music instruments, film-making, Virtual Reality and 3D printing, sport and performance venues, sport training and intermediary services, etc. The highly ideological core cultural sectors, such as news and information services, publishing and the production and distribution of television, film and digital content, are not open for foreign investment.5

The state discursive formation translates into the strict content regulation of everyday cultural production. From television, film and news to internet culture, a pervasive censorship regime functions to supervise commercial culture, in service of ‘the CCP’s number one political agenda, maintaining social stability, and ... contribut[ing] to the CCP’s cultural agenda – i.e., stabilising and re-energising the dominant moral order’ (Bai 2014, 79). In this way, the thriving cultural market and vibrant commercial culture are made compatible with China’s one-party ruling

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5 According to the *Regulations on the Administration of film* (The State Council 2002) and the *Chinese Film Industry Promotion Law* (2016), foreign individuals and organisation are prohibited from producing film in China independently. But international (including Hong Kong and Taiwan) film companies (neither individuals nor non-commercial organisations) are allowed to participate in film co-production with Chinese film companies that have a special license issued by Chinese government.
system. By assigning culture a dual role as ideology and commodity, the State can deploy the market economy and cultural industries as a new way of social governance.

**Institutional deficiencies and the potential for flexibility and agency**

Governed by this state discursive formation, cultural workers in China thus need to meticulously manage their creativity between market needs and state regulation. However, this does not mean that creative production in China is nothing but a propaganda apparatus. Chinese administrative institutions, I will argue in this section, complicate the process of policy-making and implementation, which is always full of tensions and negotiations.

As Yu Hong (2017a, 10) states in her study of Chinese internet and communication policies, ‘fragmented class interests, incompatible regional experiments, self-serving bureaucratic interests, and competing developmental visions are pulling the rebalancing in different directions’. Although China has often been seen as an authoritarian Party State, its political system is also characterised by resilience and adaptability, which allow for ‘bottom-up’ policy changes and political-economic experiments. Heilmann and Perry (2011, 11), for example, note that ‘China’s vast and bureaucratically fragmented political system is animated by policy processes that allow for far greater bottom-up input than would be predicted from its formal structures’. The state system is characterised by complex and even conflicted relationships to the market and social governance. ‘Competing bureaucratic imperatives and vested state interests in the economy have created and continue to create nonaligned initiatives and diffused commitments’, resulting in the non-unitary nature of the state (Hong 2017a, 15). It is this non-unitary and even contested nature of the state that, I will argue, creates spaces of agency for various actors in the Chinese creative economy.

First, the fragmented government system engenders discrepancies between different administrative departments. As Lieberthal (1992, 8) points out,
China's bureaucratic ranking system combines with the functional division of authority among various bureaucracies to produce a situation in which it is often necessary to achieve agreement among an array of bodies, where no single body has authority over the others.

Termed *fragmented authoritarianism* by some political scientists (Lieberthal and Lampton 1992; Mertha 2009; Yang 2013), the actual process of policy-making and implementing in post-Socialist China involves constant bargaining and competition among government agencies with diverse and even contradict interests. As a typical multi-sector industry, cultural production in China has been regulated by multiple governmental bodies, including the Ministry of Culture (MoC), the State Administration of Press, Publishing, Radio, Television and Film (SAPPRFT), the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), and the Publicity Department of the CPC. The State Administration for Industry and Commerce and the Ministry of Finance also hold administrative power when cultural policies are related to finance and the market. According to the official description, the Ministry of Culture is in charge of heritage, art and tourism; the SAPPRFT is responsible for the media sector; and the CAC controls the internet and digital sector. The Publicity Department of the CPC is the highest authority for all propaganda and cultural affairs and supervises the other cultural governmental bodies. However, with the increasing marketisation and convergence between digital and traditional media, such a bureaucratic division, as I will illustrate below, results in the overlapping of tasks and the blurring of the boundary between different administrative bodies, causing deficiencies in policy implementation and market governance.

On the one hand, cultural and administrative resources are spread over diverse departments, such as those of culture, media, tourism, education, finance and technology, rendering the state’s macro-economic governance inefficient. To launch a new computer game in China, for example, game companies need to first register at the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology according to its *Procedures on Software Product Management*. The second step is to go through content censorship at the Ministry of Culture according to *the Provisions on the*
Administration of Internet Culture. After gaining approval from the MoC, companies still need a special license from the SAPPRFT, as required by the Provisions on the Administration of Electronic Publications. Finally, before computer games can enter the market, companies should register for copyright at the National Copyright Administration (NCA). Within this overcomplicated system, any slight change in an institutional or regulatory policy will have a huge impact on the whole gaming industry. In March 2018, for example, the Chinese government launched a new institutional reform of the cultural sectors.\(^6\) Although the reform was meant to ‘strengthen the Party’s leadership and boost administrative efficiency’ (The State Council 2018a), it exerted a negative impact on the gaming industry. Since both the Ministry of Culture and the SAPPRFT were involved in this reform, the government simply stopped licensing new games. Statistics regarding 2017 (wallstreetcn 2018) show how on average over 770 new games had been licensed each month and over 9000 had been launched in the year. The institution reform of 2018, accordingly, stopped thousands of new games from launching, which directly hurts the financial interests of Chinese game companies, especially small production firms.

As occasionally hindering them, the fragmented governmental system also gives companies leeway when it comes to negotiating state censorship. For example, in 2016, Hunan Television’s popular show Where are we going, dad? was banned by the SAPPRFT for its ‘overuse of children’. In response, Hunan Television chose to move the show to its online platform, Mango TV, since the SAPPRRAFT’s ban only applied to broadcasts on television (Nauta 2018, 182). The discrepancy in

\(^6\) The major changes were that the Ministry of Culture became the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, and that SAPPRFT was divided into three new departments: the State Administration of Press and Publishing (SAPP), the State Administration of Radio and Television (SART) and the State Administration of Film (SAF). The SAPP and the SAF, previously affiliated to the State Council, became divisions of the Publicity Department of the CPC (see The State Council 2018).
regulation between television and digital media thus generates space for television producers to evade censorship and to continue disseminating controversial content.

Besides the fragmented governmental system, the complex central-regional government relationship counts as the second important feature of Chinese political organisation that creates ambiguities. In China, the political administration is not a fully centralised authoritarian regime. As many scholars have noted, the nomenklatura system of personnel management\(^7\) reinforces the authority of the central government and produces national unity (Naughton and Yang 2004; Chan 2004). Yet, regional governments have significant autonomy in governing the sub-national economy. According to Chenggang Xu (2011, 1078),

Regional economies (provinces, municipalities, and counties) are relatively self-contained, and subnational governments have overall responsibility for initiating and coordinating reforms, providing public services, and making and enforcing laws within their jurisdictions. This feature qualitatively differentiates the Chinese economy from a typical centrally planned economy.

This regionally decentralised authoritarian (RDA) regime, a term coined by Xu (2011), is distinct from federalism in that Chinese officials are not accountable to their constituents but to higher-ranked leaders. Simultaneously, it is also distinct from the Maoist command economy. Since Deng Xiaoping embarked on China’s marketisation reform, GDP growth has become the first reference for official promotions. To stand out in the regional GDP competition, local officials have embraced what Heilmann and Perry (2011) conceptualise as a ‘guerrilla policy-making style’. Inherited from the CCP’s wartime tactics, this ‘guerrilla approach’

\(^7\) According to the Chinese nomenklatura system, the central committee of the Communist Party of China (CCP) holds power in the appointment of senior carders to leading positions of the party state’s bureaucratic apparatus, including the CCP high command, Central Party bureaucracy, State advisory organs, National People’s Congress, State Council, state-owned banks, state-owned media, etc. (Chan 2004).
characterises contemporary Chinese policy-making in the sense that the top leadership preserves the power to make decisions on national-wide strategies, while ‘operationalisation and implementation require substantial latitude for local initiative and independence’ (Helman and Perry 2011, 18). As a result, policy-making is always in a process of continual improvisation and adjustment, with pilot efforts and practical experience preferred to abstract theories or models (Helman and Perry 2011, 18). Local guerrilla leaders are sometimes ‘dictatorial, opportunistic and ruthless’, sacrificing political accountability. Yet their approach also contributes to the adaptability, versatility and flexibility of the Party’s rule and policy-making. The RDA regime and the flexible policy style it produces empower subnational governments and officials in the realm of actual policy-making and implementation. Under the supervision of the central government, ‘they initiate, negotiate, implement, divert, and resist reforms, policies, rules, and laws’ (Xu 2011: 1079). In the cultural sectors, for instance, ‘Creative Industries’, later rephrased as ‘Cultural Creative Industries’, as a policy discourse was introduced and embraced by some local governments such Shanghai and Beijing around 2005 (Keane 2009). This terminology was welcomed by local officials precisely because it differed from ‘cultural industries’ as used by the central government. ‘Creative industries’ has often been framed as an economic policy; this avoids the ideological importance of cultural production, thus discursively reducing the resistance to it from conservative parties. The Operational plan of cultural creative industries for Shanghai, 2016-2018 (SACCI 2016), for example, states:

Cultural creative industries are crucial for Shanghai to maintain economic growth and to achieve industrial restructuring…. The goal of our reform is to promote comprehensive innovation in industrial mechanism, capital operation and business model, to stimulate the energy of the market and society, while also maintaining a fair and just cultural market.

In contrast to the central government’s emphasis on the ‘dual character’ of the cultural industries, the ideological importance of cultural and media production is notably absent from this document. Instead, the Shanghai government adopts a
more technocratic discourse in its promotion of the creative industries, stressing the role of technology, capital and creativity in achieving industrial restructuring and economic growth.

Finally, the above-analysed political system also complicates the state-commerce relationship in China. The lack of transparency in regulatory requirements and capricious law enforcement gives authorities flexibility in the governance of the local economy but also creates space for rent-seeking and corruption in state government. Given its non-unitary nature, the state plays multiple roles in the Chinese economy, from promoter and regulator to direct participant. As many research projects have noted, connections to government are ubiquitous in Chinese listed firms (Dickson 2003; Breslin, 2012.; Wang 2016). Personal ties with certain government officials can effectively help companies negotiate with policy makers and dodge potential regulatory obstacles. This is even more common in the media and cultural sectors, as the state imposes even more regulations on the cultural industries because of their ‘dual responsibility’. As the next chapter will show, state-owned cultural enterprises (SOCE) are more privileged than private cultural companies due to their closer relationship to the state. This connection to the state government not only endows them with easier access to financing and the market, but also with more influence on policy-making and economic regulation. For example, in the highly regulated and heavily censored film industry, state-owned film production companies such as the China Film Group Corporation (中影集团) and August First Film Studio (八一电影制片厂) have a greater power to negotiate with the China Film Administration about the licensing and censorship process, and so do private production firms that have personal ties with powerful officials. According to one of my informants, most Chinese big internet and media companies have a department called ‘Government Relations’, which as its name indicates directly deals with the authorities in terms of censorship and business management. A ubiquitous yet unspoken strategy on the part of

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8 Interview, Wang Hai, Sep 1st 2016, Beijing.
China’s largest internet companies is to hire retired influential officials from both central and local governments as ‘consultants’, who can provide insider knowledge on policy as well as mediate between the company and the government.

The fragmented administrative system, the decentralised authoritarian regime and the complicated state-commerce relationship all profoundly affect the process of policy-making and implementation in the contemporary Chinese cultural sectors. Instead of being a unitary entity, the Chinese state in practice functions as a network constituted of different, often conflicting forces emanating from state administrative bodies, local governments and market entities.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has studied the genesis, dominant discourses and institutions of the Chinese cultural industries policy. The shifting ideology of the CCP to economic development in the post-Mao era, the national Opening-up policy and economic globalisation together motivated the Party-State to carry out institutional reform to give space to the growth of commercial culture and to deploy the ‘cultural industries’ as part of a national development strategy. However, this enthusiastic national endorsement does not mean that the Chinese government has embraced the ‘creative industries’ in the same way as many countries did in the west. The state discursive formation of Chinese cultural industries policy reflects the Party-State’s instrumentalist configuration of culture and creativity. Cultural production in contemporary China follows the market rule, while it also needs to promote social stability and reaffirm the dominant moral order.

In practice, China’s political organisation creates abundant space for agency, deviation from official policies and flexibility for diverse actors in the cultural and media sphere. On an everyday basis, Jing Wang’s ‘state question’ in Chinese cultural production and popular culture thus not only refers to the state’s ideological concerns about cultural activities. It also relates to the intricate relationship between administrative power and various production subjects: the crucial task for cultural
producers in China is to negotiate and find ways to ‘play’ with state power, which is contested, non-unitary and multivariate.

Framed by this understanding of the development of Chinese cultural industries policy and its complicated modes of implementation, the following chapters will offer case studies to explicate how the interaction and negotiation between the state, the market and cultural producers actually works in different organisational contexts in contemporary China. The central questions that I am going to explore in the following dissertation are: how do creative individuals actively negotiate with this state-market system in producing notions of creativity? And how does this dynamic process of negotiation impact the formation of a creator subjectivity and render it schizoid? I will start this empirical investigation from the working experiences in the Chinese state-owned cultural companies.
Chapter 2 Being creative for the State: Creative workers in Chinese state-owned cultural enterprises

The State-owned Cultural Enterprises are vital forces for developing the cultural industries and constructing a socialist advanced culture. We must endeavour to build up a modern corporate system with cultural characteristics, so as to show the effects of uniting the social benefits with the economic benefits.

China State Council (2015)

Introduction

China Central Television (CCTV), one of the largest and the most influential Chinese media companies, seems to be losing appeal for its employees. Since 2013, a significant number of renowned hosts\(^2\) have resigned from CCTV in quick succession. This has been called the ‘resignation wave at CCTV’ (央视离职潮 yangshi lizhi chao). Until recently, working at China’s most influential media company would lead to high popularity, social status and successful careers for employees. This raises the question for what reasons these established television stars decide to leave, especially at a time when China’s new media fad and cultural industries are booming. According to media reports, the new jobs of those who left range from high rank managers in new media and investment companies, professors in universities, founders of start-up companies, or housewives/husbands. Why

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1 Chapter 2 presents the text published in *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, with minor edits and endnotes converted to footnotes.

2 Such as Cui Yongyuan, Ma Dong, Li Yong, Chai Jing, Zhang Quanlin, Li Xiaomeng, Lang Yongchun and Ha Wen.
would these cultural workers decide to give up the ‘iron rice bowl’ (铁饭碗, *tie fanwan*)\(^3\) provided by CCTV, which was far more secure and less precarious than what was offered by private companies?

This raises important questions concerning labour and creative labour in the state-owned media companies of China. As I showed in the introduction, the real situation of creative work in this globalised society is not always 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 (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011; McRobbie 2016; Kurtin and Sanson 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, I analysed in the previous chapter, the ‘creativity dispositif’ has a different form and connotations in contemporary China due to its ‘state question’ (Wang 2001, 35-52), which views culture not simply commercial, but as a tool for wielding ‘soft power’ (Nye 2004) and propagating the ideology of the CCP (Chinese Communist Party).

\(^3\) This Chinese phrase refers to a permanent contracted job, which used to be a basic welfare benefit for those working in the state-owned institutions. Most state-controlled companies have gradually abolished this tenure employment system since the launch of ‘market economy reform’ in the 1990s. See: Hay et al. 1994; Benson and Zhu 1999.
Moreover, in the cultural industries of China, a special form of work organisation exists in the form of State-owned Cultural Enterprises (SOCEs). According to official statistics, by 2015 there were 1.37 million employees in Chinese SOCEs (Ministry of Finance 2016). Transformed from state-controlled cultural work units, 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 presses during the marketisation reform of state media since the 1990s (Wang 2006) and an organisation 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 its impact on creative workers’ subjectivities in Chinese SOCEs.

At the same time, SOCEs are required by the Chinese government to shoulder a double ‘responsibility’: to achieve both social and economic benefits (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 troubling creative worker in Chinese SOCEs.

If creative workers in Anglo-American society are subjectified by a neo-liberal governmentality constructed by the creativity dispositif, what are the creative working conditions in Chinese SOCEs? What kind of subjectivity is expected and produced through the governance of creativity and labour in Chinese SOCEs? Can we take the phenomenon of the ‘resignation wave’ as evidence of resistance to this governance and subjectivation? And, finally, are there any forms of resistance to the existing power relations within the workplace of Chinese SOCEs? To study these

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4 On Chinese work units, see Li and Wang (1996).
questions, I choose as my point of departure two key conceptions: those of ‘autonomy’ and ‘self-realisation’.

**Autonomy, self-realisation and the creativity dispositif**

In current discussions on creative industries and creative labour, autonomy has at least two connotations: ‘creative autonomy’ and ‘workplace autonomy’ (Holt and Lapenta 2010; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011, 40). 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 judgment. In the creative industries, this form of autonomy is arguably threatened by the capital demands for 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 represents 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; Friedman 1977, 78).

Self-realisation, 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-realisation’ (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011, 141). Various creative-industry policies issued by governments also tout the great potential for self-realisation 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 recognise, not all those working ‘there’ feel good and can realise their creative potential (2004). Yet, as both Ursell and McRobbie argue, it is the passion and love for creative work that motivates people to choose creative professions as their career (Ursell 2000; McRobbie 2002). All the drawbacks concerning pay, working time and security can be ignored in view of the alluring promise that creative work will help them realise 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-realisation, Ursell and McRobbie recognise the articulation of ‘passion in work’ as part of the governmental discourses of creative work (Ursell 2000, 810; McRobbie 2002, 109).

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-realisation constitute core elements of the ‘creativity dispositif’ (McRobbie 2016). The managerial setting of ‘responsible autonomy’ fosters creative workers’ aspirations to self-realisation, 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-realisation might manifest differently in this context, 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-realisation discourse appear in the everyday work of creative workers at Chinese SOCEs? The aim of this chapter is not simply to examine the extent to which creative workers can achieve autonomy and self-realisation, but to illuminate the role notions of autonomy and self-realisation 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.

This chapter 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. I address the above-raised questions mainly by analysing 10 in-depth interviews with state-employed creative workers and observations made in their companies. As a point of comparison, I also refer to interviews with creative workers in private cultural companies and freelancers. In addition, I examine 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 press. The names of informants have been pseudonymised for security and privacy reasons. Given the diversity of Chinese SOCEs, this chapter 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-realisation, the chapter 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-realisation. By exploring the prevalent phenomenon of loafing on the job and the ‘resignation wave’, this chapter attributes the (dys)function of the self-realisation discourse to the contradictory nature of the system itself. On this basis, it echoes the call in my introduction to
contextualise creative labour studies and devote more attention to different socio-political localities, so as to facilitate a more differentiated theorisation of creative labour and, in turn, of how the politics of creative workplaces might be reimagined.

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

Before 1978 all Chinese cultural organisations, usually called cultural work units (*danwei* 单位), were financed by and considered as part of the government apparatus. Their only responsibility was to serve the ideological propaganda of the Communist Party. Propelled by the economic reform starting in 1978, China also launched a cultural system reform in the late 1990s. With the aims of reducing the financial burden and of competing with foreign cultural enterprises, some of these *danwei* were gradually transformed into commercial enterprises under the terms ‘industrialisation’ and ‘conglomeration’ in China’s cultural policy (State Council, 2003, 2014; Keane 2013, 23). The commercialised cultural *danwei* include publishing and news presses, 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 the China Film Group Company and the Shanghai Century Publishing Group Corporation. Supported by the Chinese government, these SOCEs hold a very privileged and powerful position in the 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 from their ideological duty of propaganda and education. Rather, Chinese SOCEs are now supposed to have a dual function: ‘cultural institution’ (文化事业 *wenhua shiye*) and ‘cultural industry’ (文化产业 *wenhua chanye*). As cultural institution, they must produce ‘good social benefits’ (社会效益 *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 of 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 uniting the social benefits with economic benefits… so as to advance the great development and great prosperity of socialist culture. (CCP and State Council 2015)

The cultural system reform also transformed the personnel system. In the pre-reform era, cultural workers were deemed part of a cultural cadre (干部 ganbu), enjoying permanent contracts and decent welfare. They worked and lived within danwei (单位 unit), which for them were not merely workplaces, but homelike units providing a panoply of welfare benefits such as healthcare, 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 senior minorities who still have tenure (编制 bianzhi), most workers have become temporarily contracted 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 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 constitutes 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-realisation 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 earlier, 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 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, a post-90s Chinese man, is an executive editor of Miwei Media, which produced one of the most successful online series, U Can U Bibi (奇葩说 Qipa shuo). Before joining Miwei, Cao worked on the production of a local television show at Shanghai Media Group, 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 organise production by themselves. As a result, CCTV produced several successful news programmes like Horizon (东方时空 Dongfang Shikong) and Focus (焦点访谈 Jiaodian Fangtan), the first Chinese TV programmes conducting investigative reports on current affairs of a watchdog nature. Later on, local provincial media also adopted the PRS, but this was less a measure deliberately promoting autonomy than an expedient response to the tension between employment quota restrictions and the increasing manpower needs caused by rapid business expansion.

A similar reform can be traced in other state cultural enterprises, usually under the name of ‘cultural system reform’. Company A, one of the official news presses of the CCP, shoulders an important responsibility for political propaganda for the Party State. This means specific rules and forms of discipline are imposed on news production. As a journalist and editor at Company A, Jiang Tao characterises

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5 See the previous section for a discussion on cultural system reform.
6 As requested by the informant, I pseudonymised the name of this company, which is a very influential SOCE in China.
these regulations as having two components: value orientation (价值导向 jiazhi daoxiang) and professionalism (专业主义 zhuanye zhuyi). By ‘value orientation’ he means that media reports should be consistent with ‘mainstream values’, be they ‘patriotism’, ‘the Party’s leadership’ or the ‘Chinese value system’. ‘Professionalism’ denotes that news production should follow the normal procedures 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 judgment 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 a journalist enough creative space to make his works more special’. (Jiang Tao, Company A, journalist)

Arguably, since the introducing of cultural system reform, Chinese SOCEs have developed ‘responsible autonomy’ for their creative employees, as exemplified by the above cases. The responsible part, however, always 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 the new system has made the majority of staff members in SOCEs temporarily contracted, the most powerful are still those minorities 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 program 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 双轨制) can easily stifle the creative ideas of producers. Simon, an experienced television producer working at Anhui Television, a provincial television in south China, comments on the problems of the system (tizhi 体制) and its ongoing reform:

Our wage is calculated due 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 one month to go through all the approval procedures after submitting a proposal. 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 news press company in Guizhou Province, most employees now are temporarily contracted. 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 propelled 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.

In regard to Chinese SOCEs, the Party State adds a third dimension to the ‘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-realisation mean for them? And what does the (dis)functionality of self-realisation discourse mean for the governing of creative workers in Chinese SOCEs?
Being creative for the state: benefiting from the system and self-realisation

Sarah 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’, Sarah is responsible for advertising design, which should meet the expectations of both the commercial sponsors and the state television companies. Asked about her motivation for work, she emphasised the sense of fulfilment that it produces:

It’s like playing a game. My job requires dealing 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 makes me feel as though I’m self-realising. (Sarah, 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. This largely resonates with the critiques of the ‘self-realisation’ discourse I referred to earlier: it exposes ‘self-realisation’ as a key aspiration for creative labour and stresses its role as a governmental discourse that mobilises the creative workforce in the creative economy (Hesmondhalgh 2010; McRobbie, 2016). But, given the bureaucracy and the contingent autonomy on offer, the question is how creative workers in Chinese SOCEs understand ‘self-realisation’. To what extent does the discourse of ‘self-realisation’ succeed or fail in producing a certain subjectivity in creative workers employed by the state?

I still remember the day when Jiang Tao warmly hosted me at Company A. We toured the park in the confidential area where the company is located. Jiang Tao invited me for dinner at their canteen: the dishes were tasty and not pricey. ‘That’s one of our welfare benefits, plus a meal allowance of around 1,000 RMB (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 (户口 residence permit) problem for its formal employees. Given the exorbitant living costs and the strict hukou policy (Chan and Buckingham, 2008) in Beijing, these benefits are very 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!’ (Lianna, Chinese Film Library, curator).

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 endows the employees with 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. Because of 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’7 by their business partners from outside, although within CCTV they often have to behave like a ‘grandson’ (2006, 161-162). 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 programs for employees. These activities are reported by many informants to be helpful. For example, SMG has a special annual program called ‘British Class’, a 42-day training program in the UK for selected promising employees (around 15 per year) (media+ 2016). It seems that these advantages can create more possibilities for creative workers employed by the state to ‘realise themselves’.

7 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.
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 as strongly motivated to realise 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 through its training program 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 ‘British Class’ program. The trip to London seems to have deeply inspired Judie, not only teaching her more creative know-how, but 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 this kind of people and their working atmosphere. I wish my colleagues could be like him. (Judie, SMG, producer)

To realise 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 summarises: ‘all forms of mass media have their own value orientation, which is reflected in what you called censorship. Since we chose to join the company, we should adhere to its shared value’.

Among motivated employees like Judie and Jiang Tao, the various working benefits make the state system an ideal workplace for creative labour, which, in the
private industries, is usually quite precarious. In return, these state-employed creatives need to wittingly conduct self-censorship. The desire to realise 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-realisation 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-realisation 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 governance of creative workers through bio-power, exercised through the various welfare provisions that attract those aspiring to self-realisation.

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

Loafing on the job and the ‘resignation wave’

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 that ‘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 had 75 members loafing on the job, while my current company has maybe 70’.

It seems to be a common problem in Chinese SOCEs that employees’ ‘hun rizi’ (混日子), 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 the 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 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 workers’ mind-sets. 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. None at all!

Among the unmotivated, some are older employees who have worked at a company for many years and have 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 new skills learning. Another group of unmotivated employees is comprised of guanxi hu (关系户), 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. While self-realisation means something to 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, however, 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 productivity of these companies as the state propaganda machine. 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-realisation discourse and reveals a contradiction inherent to the state-sponsored cultural system. From the above analyses of autonomy and self-realisation, it is clear that the creativity dispositif in the case of Chinese SOCEs consists of both repressive, disciplinary elements, such as rigid censorship, hierarchy and bureaucracy, and a bio-political discourse of self-realisation. The demand for ‘double responsibility’ on the one hand makes the autonomy of creative labour within the system quite contingent, while, on the other hand, it expects its creative workers to ‘be creative for the state’ under the discourse of self-realisation. In practice, however, as the case of loafing on the job illustrates, it causes a marked contradiction that disturbs the function of the self-realisation discourse and furnishes creative individuals with possibilities to distance themselves from the expected subjectivity of ‘being creative for the state’.

If loafing on the job evidences the disengagement of state employees from creative work and the self-realisation discourse in Chinese SOCEs, then resignation, as the examples I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter show, can be seen as
another instance of the dysfunction of the state system. For SOCEs like CCTV, labour turnover certainly entails a loss, especially when most of the resigning employees are experienced and skilled. For those who resigned, leaving seems to entail an overt rejection of the problematic working conditions at CCTV. ‘You should know, freedom is sublime value,’ Carl told me (Carl, CCTV, manager). He used to work at the chief editorial department of CCTV, before becoming the financial councillor of a new media company in 2015. In terms of subjectivity, we can argue that resignation constitutes a refusal to be creative for the state.

The resignation of established employees from state companies to work at private firms also has an exemplary effect for junior staff members, who often do not have the resources and opportunities and thus the nerve to resign. As Lily stresses in our interview:

Personally, it’s impossible for me to stay here (CCTV) for ten or twenty years, as my parent’s generation did. When I accumulate enough social network and working experience, I will definitely jump out, to do something I prefer. (Lily Yang, CCTV, producer)

As a result, SOCEs have become a stepping-stone for creative workers, especially those with the expectation of self-realisation. When the quitting of experienced workers becomes frequent, it will lower the company’s productivity and decrease the effectiveness of its ideological propaganda. When asked to compare his current job with his previous experience at CCTV, Carl explains:

I think they are really different. In CCTV, we have too many shackles, which refer to not just censorship, but also too much interference from the leaders. Now we have much more autonomy, though we still need to be concerned with ‘content appropriateness’, which is not really a problem. If I think it might be too sensitive, then I just cut it. We don’t need to behave like servants anymore.
It is the better workplace autonomy on offer elsewhere that persuades some CCTV employees to resign. Although the employees in question are mostly still motivated creative workers, they have been frustrated by the bureaucratic system of Chinese SOCEs. To leave for private industries is to leave for a more autonomous workplace that will bring back, at least to some degree, the joyfulness attached to creative labour.

The examples of loafing on the job and the resignation wave exemplify the inherent contradictions and dysfunction of the governance system of Chinese SOCEs. These contradictions not only limit the governance and productivity of Chinese SOCEs, but they also furnish creative individuals with possibilities to distance themselves from the expected subjectivity of ‘being creative for the state’.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has studied creative labour and worker subjectivity in Chinese state-owned cultural companies. First, it has shown that in Chinese SOCEs the governance of creativity and creative labour is not only conducted through neoliberal techniques such as the discourse of ‘self-realisation’ 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, resulting in a bureaucratic everyday management system.

Second, this managerial arrangement in return limits the functionality of the discourse of autonomy and self-realisation, thus creating a contradiction within the system that can limit the efficiency of governance and cultural production in Chinese SOCEs. This governance of creative work in Chinese SOCEs constitutes a typical schizophrenic system that, as I explained in the introduction, promotes and commodifies individual creativities and autonomy, while also constantly circumscribing these because of the potential threat they constitute to the order and stability of the system. As a result, a significant number of employees in Chinese
SOCEs are unmotivated and resort to loafing on the job. At the same time, some of those who remain motivated creative workers have decided to resign and join private creative businesses. In Chinese state-owned media companies, then, the governing system and the process of subjectivation is not always successful, as the system also furnishes creative individuals with possibilities to distance themselves from the expected subjectivity of ‘being creative for the state’.

Finally, echoing what I have suggested in the introduction, the study of Chinese SOCEs reiterates the need for creative labour studies to take into account the different social-political contexts across the world. These contexts may produce diverse modes of creative labour relations. For example, 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 fetishisation of individual creativity ‘corroded efforts to unionise and collectivise in order to offset inequalities and exploitation’ (Banks 2007). However, if precarity of labour is a factor that leads to ‘bad cultural work’ (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011), we cannot simply view the not-so-precarious work in Chinese SOCEs as a form of ‘good work’, as this would discount its limited autonomy and bureaucracy. Rather, it appears 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 proselytising industry and academic perspectives’ (Banks et al. 2013, 6). As the following chapters will continue to illustrate, grasping the experiences of creative labour in contemporary China and shedding light upon the complexities of governance and subjectivity in the cultural economies requires an approach that goes beyond a reductionist theorisation developed on the basis of a dominantly Euro-American perspective.
Chapter 3 From independent to art film and back again: Independent film, precarity and creative labour

Introduction

On the 16th of July 2016, a documentary named The Big Screen of Nobody was aired on CCTV. It tells the story of a young director named Jian Haodong from rural Shanxi, a province located in northern China famous for its rich coal resources and the devastating environmental impact of the mining industry. What intrigues me about Haodong’s story is how he managed to gather money to make his film Eyes Cheat (2015). In 2014, after receiving a diploma in coal mining from the local college, like many of his classmates, Haodong got a job in a coal mine near his hometown. However, already on the very first day, he struck the other miners as different, after telling them that he wanted to be a film director. After fifteen months of hard work, he had successfully earned 50,000 RMB, money he devoted to making Eyes Cheat. The film, however, does not resemble today’s mainstream Chinese movies. Lacking martial arts, romantic plots, or any other commercial clichés, it was about a blind old man who lost his job in the city and ended up feeling alienated again after going back to his countryside home. Based on Haodong’s own experiences and observations in his hometown, the film tackles serious social problems: corrupt local officials, cowardly villagers, and the fast-changing Chinese rural society. The low-budget production, the rough filmic quality and the critical topics addressed together characterise Eyes Cheat as a ‘Chinese independent film’. In 2015, it was included in the main competition of several film festivals, including the Beijing Independent Film Festival (BiFF), the Taiwan South Film Festival and the Chinese Independent Film Festival (CIFF). After this, Haodong moved to Beijing, rented a small, cheap apartment on the outskirts and started his filmmaking career. From being a coal-miner to becoming a Chinese independent filmmaker, he achieved an astonishing transformation in terms of his
work, identity and life. This story leads me to some basic questions concerning Chinese independent filmmaking as a special form of creative labour: why do people like Haodong choose to make independent films? What does the adjective ‘independent’ mean for filmmaking and filmmakers in China? What insights can Chinese independent filmmaking offer into creative labour and the subjectivities it produces?

Guided by these questions, this chapter studies Chinese independent filmmaking as a form of creative labour. Among current studies on the Chinese film industries and independent Chinese cinema, from the perspective of film and media studies, most focus on the aesthetic and political dimensions. Case studies are mostly limited to influential films made by established filmmakers, including earlier documentary directors like Wu Wenguang and Duan Jinchuan, as well as Sixth Generation auteurs like Jia Zhangke and Lou Ye (Dai 2000; Lu 2003; Berry and Farquhar 2006; Jiang 2012; Robinson 2013; Wang 2014). In the few valuable production studies of Chinese independent filmmaking, scholars have investigated issues such as the political economy of Chinese indie film production, the implication of globalisation, the micro power relations within the indie filmmaking community, as well as domestic and overseas distribution (Pickowicz 2006; Zhang 2007; Sniadecki 2013; Nakajima 2016). These studies have revealed that Chinese independent filmmaking, compared with ‘main melody’ and ‘commercial’ film production,¹ is supposed to be low-budget, politically sensitive, artistically avant-garde and seeking relative autonomy and critical thinking (Berry and Rofel 2010). Thus, it scores high in terms of cultural capital in the field of Chinese film

¹ According to Zhang Yingjin (2004) and Nakajima (2016), the function of cinema as defined by the Chinese nation-state has undergone a transformation from the Maoist era, when ‘political propaganda and education’ were its principal and only missions to the time after the ‘Reform and Opening Up’ policy, when entertainment and commercial success gained importance. The ‘main-melody film’, which upholds the political propaganda and education missions, and the commercial film, which aims at achieving a high box office, now constitute the mainstream in Chinese film production.
production (Nakajima 2016). Exemplified by the early experiences of the so-called ‘Sixth Generation’ directors, Chinese independent films, facilitated by digital technology, often deal with social issues in contemporary China (Zhang 2007). Claiming to speak ‘truth’ through the use of either documentary or fiction (Zhang 2007), these films sometimes violate the ‘propaganda and education’ function assigned to film by the Chinese authorities and can thus have difficulty passing the censorship system. Such political uncertainty on the one hand makes these films difficult to get financed domestically, while on the other bringing Chinese independent filmmakers cultural capital and ‘cultural prestige’ (Nakajima 2016:97) among both international and Chinese audiences.

This clear-cut image of Chinese independent filmmaking, however, has been blurred by the rapid commercialisation and globalisation of Chinese cinema during the past two decades. The surging box office has made China the world’s second largest film market, after the US, paralleling its status as the world’s second largest economy (Yin and Sun 2017). The thriving film industry has on the one hand pandered to the Party State's thirst for a powerful and wealthy cultural industry. On the other hand, it has also required the authorities to deploy a more effective governing strategy, so as to orchestrate Chinese cinema towards the state’s needs for ideological propaganda and the accumulation of soft power (Rosen 2012). An ideal cinema for the post-socialist Chinese state should be, according to the newly enforced Chinese Film Industry Promotion Law, ‘prosperous and healthy with a normative and orderly market that upholds socialist core values and meets the spiritual needs of the Chinese people’ (NPC 2016). For Chinese independent film workers, this landscape connotes both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, the expanding film market engenders more space for independent films. As I will show in this chapter, domestic commercial film companies have also started to invest in and support independent filmmaking, usually under the umbrella of the ‘art film’, which refers to artistic, less politically sensitive films. On the other hand,

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2 Independent cinema in China includes both fiction films and documentaries (see Zhang 2006).
those who used to be ‘independents’ now have a more conciliatory relationship with the state and the commercial film industry (Nakajima 2016). Some established independents (for example Sixth Generation directors like Jia Zhangke and Lou Ye) now make films with the ‘dragon mark’ (龙标 long biao)\(^3\), an official screening permission (公映许可证 gongying xuke zheng) issued by Chinese Film Bureau, as well as with large budgets provided by international and domestic film companies.

This chapter investigates the subjectivity of the Chinese independent filmmaker from the perspective of creative labour studies: it views Chinese independent filmmaking as a form of creative work and studies indie filmmakers’ aspirations, forms of self-governance and possible moments of ‘becoming schizoid’. Often following the conceptual framework of Bourdieu, most current research views Chinese independent filmmaking as a special field of cultural production and tries to generalise the political economy of Chinese indie filmmaking and the ‘habitus’ of ‘Chinese indie directors’. In doing so, these studies often attribute these filmmakers to general categories or identities, at the price of neglecting their distinctiveness. This explains the current terminological ambiguities surrounding the terms ‘independence’, ‘independent film’ and ‘Chinese independents’, since any given definition runs the risk of overlooking the differences among the subjects indicated (Tzioumakis, 2006; Berry and Rofel 2011; Jiang 2012; Sniadecki 2013). Without getting mired in these terminological debates, this chapter takes up the notion of ‘independence’ as a discourse that is frequently claimed and practiced by creative workers within the sphere of Chinese filmmaking. At the same time, it aims to highlight the differences between those who claim to be ‘independents’, insisting that these subjects have distinctive aspirations and experiences.

Unlike those working at state-owned cultural enterprises, as explored in the previous chapter, Chinese ‘independent filmmakers’ lack protection from the system (体制 tizhi) and are emblematic of the ‘precariat’, characterised by

\(^3\) For example, Jia Zhangke’s *Mountains May Depart* (2015) and *Ash Is Purest White* (2018), and Lou Ye’s *The Shadow Play* (2018).
‘insecure’, ‘flexible’ and ‘uncertain’ labour in the post-Fordist economy (Standing 2011). Inspired by Isabel Lorey’s analysis of precarity and precarisation (2015), which I will explain in the following section, this chapter sheds light upon three questions: 1) Why do people aspire to ‘independence’ and ‘independent filmmaking’?; 2) How is ‘independent filmmaking’ governed in practice and what is the impact on the filmmakers’ subjectivity?; 3) Under this governing system, where can we locate the individual agency of these ‘independents’ and what does this agency entail and make possible in terms of ‘being creative’?

After a brief summary of current theoretic debates on precarity and precarisation, followed by an introduction of my methodology, the chapter will first probe into the aspirations that drive the choice to work in independent film. Based on an analysis of the stories I collected from three research informants, I suggest that it is the discontent with living conditions and institutions (such as education, the political culture and commercial modes of production) that motivates them to choose independent filmmaking. Subsequently, the chapter illustrates how Chinese independent filmmaking is precarised in practice, through forms of governmentality, and the impact this has on filmmakers’ subjectivity. Finally, based on my fieldwork data, I suggest that the current process of precarisation also helps to establish an informal mutual-caring community based on difference, which provides possibilities to combat the precarity of Chinese independent cinema. Animated by the shared aspiration to ‘independence’ and ‘freedom’, such a community not only helps alleviate living and work pressures by offering opportunities for screenings, skills learning and emotional sharing and caring, but also triggers a more open understanding of ‘independence’ and ‘independent filmmaking’, which makes resisting the creative subjectivity promoted by the existing power relations possible. From ‘discontent independents’ to ‘art filmmakers’ who embrace a ‘spiritual independence’, Chinese independent filmmakers this chapter studies have become schizoid creators.
Precarity, precarisation and Chinese independent filmmaking

Looking back over the last three decades of socio-economic transformation, an ostensible similarity between the west and China is that increasing numbers of workers are employed on a precarious basis: with deregulation and the decline of unions, employment is becoming ‘uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker’ (Kalleberg 2009:2). In China, as documented in Chapter 2, the transition from state socialism to the market-driven economy system has gradually changed the permanent employment system. This is often referred to by media and researchers as the ‘smashing of the iron rice bowls’ (Benson and Zhu 1999). From rural migrant workers (Lee 2016) to creative practitioners (Keane 2016; Matthews 2017), an increasing part of the Chinese workforce is confronting a more fragile and insecure labour system with various risks and uncertainties.

This insecure state of work (and, consequently, life) first of all signifies a governmental precarisation. According to Isabell Lorey, ‘domination in post-Fordist societies is no longer legimated through (social) security, and we instead experience governing through insecurity’ (2015, 11). With the proliferation of neo-liberal governmentality since the 1970s, ‘precarious living and working conditions are currently being normalised at a structural level and have thus become a fundamental governmental instrument of governing’ (Lorey 2015, 63). As Ching Kwan Lee (2016) illustrates in her study of precarious migrant workers in southern China, rural migrant workers have been precarised through ‘authoritarian precarisation’ and land dispossession. The implementation of labour law in China is heavily contingent upon the changing priorities of the Party-State, while political limitations on workers’ collective organisation and activism circumscribe the effectiveness of labour law (Lee 2016). In the meantime, rural migrant workers are made even more precarious by the urban residence registration policy, which leads to an unequal welfare distribution.

In the process of precarisation, as Lorey accentuates, a new form of governmentality is entangled with an ‘extreme degree of exploitation’ and ‘a
liberation from [the] traditional condition’ of Fordism exploitation and social activism based on unions and representation (Lorey 2015, 10). Inspired by the political practice of *Precarias a la deriva*, a group of feminist activists from Madrid, Lorey argues for the establishment of a care community, a form of political resistance that is based on ‘the relational difference, and the resultant possibility of what is common in differentness’ (2015, 100). Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘lines of flight’⁴ and Virno’s conception of ‘exodus’⁵, and also highly influenced by Foucault’s thoughts on power and subjectivity, Lorey underscores that the reversal of and flight from power as control is always possible, but never leads to an outside of power (2015, 102). As she states (2015, 103):

> The economisation of the social, the coincidence of work and life, the demand for the whole person to be involved in performative-cognitive, affective labour, in other words, the capitalisation of modes of subjectivation - these processes are not at all total, all-encompassing or wholly determined…. In uncertain, flexibilised and discontinuous working and living conditions, subjectivations arise that do not entirely correspond to the neoliberal logic of valorisation, and which may resist and refuse it.

For Lorey, precarisation thus implies not only subjugation but is also ‘incalculable and potentially empowering’ (Lorey 2015, 111).

However, such a claim of empowering precarisation also has problems. First, if Lorey’s argument about precarisation correctly characterises today’s neoliberal governmentality, it is still generalised from the perspective of western

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⁴ According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987), lines of flight are ‘not themselves constituted/imprisoned in specific identities’ (Todd 2005: 137), but ‘provid[e] the resources (material) for erasing and redrawing boundaries, for fleeing a particular territory for another one, and, under certain conditions, for imploding the territory itself’ (2005: 139).

⁵ In his political theory of ‘exodus’, Paolo Virno (1996, 191) conceives it as a massive defection from the state in order to institute ‘a non-state run public sphere’ and to achieve a ‘radically new form of democracy’.
developed world. What can it say to the workers in the global South, ‘for whom precariousness has always been a seemingly natural condition’ (Munck 2013, 747)?

Especially in the case of Chinese independent filmmaking, although it is clear that these filmmakers are precarious in terms of their insecure working conditions, the question of how and to what extent such precarity is constitutive of a state governmentality that can orchestrate Chinese indie film production and the subjectivity of indie filmmakers still needs to be answered. Second, Lorey’s claims about a care community based on differentness and the possibility of exodus from within the precarisation need empirical scrutiny. Without it, her generalisation of precarity and precarisation runs the risk of eliding the nuances of precarity in different socio-political contexts. What precise forms does precarisation take in the context of Chinese cultural production and what possibilities of exodus can their precarious life and work offer Chinese indie directors? As Ching Kwan Lee contends, ‘Chinese workers are confronting the global tendency of precarisation, but with Chinese characteristics, just as Indian workers, Japanese workers, and South African workers confront theirs in specific institutional and political-economic contexts’ (2016, 319).

‘Independent filmmakers’ in China can be viewed as a form of precarious labour characterised by ‘insecure’, ‘flexible’ and ‘uncertain’ labour. Besides these general characteristics, the filmmakers’ claim to ‘independence’ further aggravates their precarity by complicating their relationships with the state and capital. On the one hand, it adds a political dimension as the claimed ‘independence’ of their cultural production contradicts the Chinese party state’s policy of censorship and ideological control. On the other hand, the claim to ‘independence’ also implies a struggle between filmmakers and the precarious production system; they are precarised by capital and state control, while still aspiring to independence in their filmmaking. To rephrase the questions I raised earlier, this chapter aims to investigate: 1) why independent filmmaking, despite its precarity, is chosen as a career; 2) what kind of precarity is experienced by the filmmakers; and 3) how they
respond to the precarity and governance of their life and work, and whether their precarious experiences are also empowering, as Lorey suggests is possible.

This chapter is based on 15 semi-structured interviews with Chinese independent film workers and my ethnographic observations of a film production group named ‘New Wave Experimental Film Group’ (新潮电影实验小组 xinchao dianying shiyan xiaozu). The group consists of 10 young film workers who converged in Beijing to realise their independent cinema aspirations. My interviewees include both established film directors like Wang Bing, Zhao Liang and Zhu Rikun and young newcomers who just started their filmmaking careers. I also interviewed several independent film producers. The ethnographic observation was conducted during my fieldwork in Beijing from July to October in 2016, during which I also participated in several screenings and social events organised by independent film workers in Beijing.

**Independent cinema as a way to counter personal and social discontent**

I wasn’t very good at my subject and I was treated as a freak. So I felt at odds with the whole environment in university. But after encountering film, ah… suddenly I found a way of expressing myself. I knew then I must do it.

(Jian Haodong, filmmaker)

One of the main questions, usually the first one, I asked the filmmakers during my fieldwork was ‘why and how did you choose to go into independent filmmaking?’ Although the answers varied according to the filmmakers’ backgrounds, education and circumstances, two common elements emerged: expressions of discontent with their previous lives and Chinese society, and a perception of filmmaking as a way to counter this discontent.

Haodong and Chang Biao are both from Shanxi Province. Born in the late 1980s, they received bachelor’s degrees from Datong University, a second to third tier Chinese higher education institution. Haodong majored in coal mining, while Chang Biao studied computer science. Haodong comes from a mining family; his
father and grandfather are both miners and they helped him choose his major. At the time, coal mining was still considered a profession in which high risk was rewarded by a decent income. But Haodong was not interested in mining. At university, he liked literature and photography, and won prizes in writing competitions. Later, inspired by the story of the renowned filmmaker Jia Zhangke, also from Shanxi Province, he decided to make a film, *Youth without Regret*, adapted from a novel he wrote about student life. During the last year of his studies, Haodong began to work in a coal mine in his hometown to earn money to make *Eyes Cheat*. After earning 50,000 RMB (ca. 6,600 euros), he made the film and moved to Beijing.

Chang Biao was advised to study computer science by his parents, who were convinced that it promised a lucrative career. Similar to Haodong, however, Chang Biao had no interest in computers and programming. Since a very young age, he had loved watching films, renting Hong Kong action movies from DVD stores. After entering university, facilitated by the internet, he encountered art films by Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Tsai Ming-liang and Jia Zhangke. It was during this period that he met Haodong and that they decided to make a film together – *Lao Shan* (牢山) – about a retired coalminer living in a rural village. However, the pressures of graduation and job-hunting interrupted Chang Biao’s dream of becoming filmmaker. He felt forced to prepare for the postgraduate entrance exam, as his parents believed a higher degree from a famous Chinese university might enhance his career prospects. As he told me:

At the time I was struggling with pressure from my family. My parents worked so hard to support my studies, while I kept screwing around with my camera. Teachers and my classmates also blamed me for skipping too many classes. Being frustrated, I started to wake up at 6 o’clock every day, motivated myself and went to the library, reading programming and English. (Chang Biao, filmmaker)
Soon, Chang Biao started to smoke and became depressed. After struggling for three months, he gave up on the postgraduate entrance exam, went to Beijing and became an independent filmmaker like Haodong.

It is clear that Haodong and Chang Biao chose filmmaking primarily because of their discontent with the paths their families wanted them to take. Meanwhile, cinema, especially the independent low-budget kind exemplified by Jia Zhangke’s early work, seemed to provide them with a way of turning self-expression into a future career. During the interview, Haodong quoted a statement by Jia Zhangke: ‘filmmaking is the way to freedom’ (Jian Haodong, filmmaker).

In Chinese independent cinema, there are also some directors who were already experienced commercial or mainstream filmmakers before attempting independent filmmaking. Some of them used to be employed by state-owned media agencies. For example, Wu Wenguang was a journalist at Kunming Television; Duan Jinchuan graduated from the Beijing Broadcast Institute and went to Lhasa Television in Tibet; and Jiang Yue worked at the Beijing Film Studio. During my fieldwork, Zhao Liang and Fan Jian also mentioned that they had previously worked for state-owned media. Such experiences of working within the system were very common among earlier independent directors who started their careers in the 1990s (Johnson 2006; Berry 2006). In the past decade, with the expansion of the Chinese film industries and the rise of private production companies, there have been many cases of commercial film workers making independent films.

Jin Dixiang is the director of *Hua Shan Cross* (2015), which was selected for the documentary competition of the 12th Chinese Independent Film Festival and the documentary competition of the 2016 Xining FIRST film festival. Before making this film, Jin worked in the film industry for over 10 years. He was employed by a video advertising company, making commercial advertisements and internet short films. Frustrated by the stylised commercial photography the company favoured, Jin decided to make an independent documentary about the social and familial issues he had observed in his hometown:
I was introduced to that video company after I graduated from the film academy. It was a good opportunity at the time for young graduates. But such commercial photography is very stylised, which means you might feel good at an early stage, while later on, after years of working, you would get bored and frustrated. (Jin Dixiang, filmmaker)

Speaking of why he chose independent documentary, Jin gave me three reasons: first, in terms of financing, making documentaries costs less than making fiction films and documentaries are also easier to shoot; second, through self-funding he can remain free of pressure from investors as well as time pressure; finally, making independent documentaries contrasts positively with his previous tedious experience of commercial production, in the sense that he can now use a more ‘free’ and ‘profound’ way of filming. *Hua Shan Cross* was made over 7 years, during which Jin struggled to leave behind his previous commercial way of filming. For him, it was a process of ‘learning a new cinematic language’ (Jin Dixiang, filmmaker). To some extent, we could see this transition as a form of resistance to the alienation fostered by commercial filmmaking.

This sense of alienation sometimes also relates to the larger socio-political environment. Rong Guangrong, an independent film curator and director of some renown in Beijing's independent cinema circle, won the best Asian film award in 2017 Rotterdam Film Festival. His film, *Children Are Not Afraid of Death, Children Are Afraid of Ghosts*, is based on the 2015 suicide of a group of left-behind children in Bijie, Guizhou province. The topic, very sensitive to the Chinese authorities, relates to a plethora of social, economic, as well as political

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6 In China, the term ‘left-behind children’ refers to children whose parents work as migrant workers in the cities while their children stay in their rural hometowns with their grandparents or other relatives. In this case, four ‘left-behind’ children were reportedly found dead of drinking pesticide after being abandoned by their parents. No sufficient food or other help had been offered by the local authorities before the suicide happened (Lin 2015).
issues haunting Chinese rural society, and it is therefore not surprising that the
shooting process faced obstruction from the local government. After the award
ceremony, Rong Guangrong and I, together with his wife and my colleague Rowan,
talked about his work. In response to the question of why he chose to make
independent films, especially on such sensitive topics, Rong told me about his early
experiences. When he was a child, Rong’s father liked to have affairs and, as a
result, had a bad relationship with his mother. They quarrelled a lot and sometimes
ended up in physical fights. In Rong’s mind, his father was irresponsible and made
no contribution to the family. His miserable childhood memories deeply affected
Rong’s character: he became irritable, righteous, and intolerant of unfairness.
Living in Beijing now, Rong also feels depressed and uncomfortable about the
political and media atmosphere. On the other hand, he likes children. Maybe due to
the absence of his father during his childhood, Rong especially hopes to be a
responsible father to his own children. After reading the news about the suicide of
the left-behind children, Rong felt suspicious about the official reports and decided
to visit the village and make a documentary. In another interview conducted by
local Chinese media, he also related his motivation for the film to his own
childhood:

The reason for my probing into the ‘kids’ suicide case’ has a lot to do with
my childhood. Very often I don’t consider myself a father, though I have
three children. Since the birth of them (his children), plus my own
childhood memories, I think I can understand children better, be on their
side, be as unreasonable, naughty, wild and angry as they are. Children can
directly express emotions, while adults only control and disguise
themselves. I feel desperate about the world of adults. (Xie 2017)

From the stories of these filmmakers’ early life experiences, we can
conclude that their motivation for undertaking independent filmmaking largely
derives from experiences of discontent, whether with the educational system, the
tedium of commercial film production, or the patriarchal culture. Such a list, for
different filmmakers, could be extended to themes such as the ‘heterosexual culture’,
‘gender inequality’ and the ‘existing political order’. Independent filmmaking is desirable because it is seen as an ideal way of self-expression and of countering the various forms of discontent experienced.

In addition, as scholars like Paul G. Pickowicz have pointed out, some independent filmmakers are also ‘busy chasing global fame (and in some cases global money)’ (2006, 18). The chance to receive validation from overseas film festivals and, as a result, global fame and funds, is clearly a factor in these young people’s decision-making. Moreover, the cultural capital that can be accumulated through showing one’s films at international film festivals also offers Chinese independent directors the possibility of working with the domestic film industries so as to gain local recognition and economic returns. This possibility is exemplified by the case of Jia Zhangke. Aspirations to fame and career success through indie filmmaking are quite common among the informants I interviewed, especially for young ‘independents’ like the members of the New Wave Group. However, I want to suggest that it is most often the sense of discontent that constitutes the primary motivation for working in independent cinema. Attached to this discontent is a sense of using independent filmmaking to make the world better. As Zhao Liang explained to me at his studio in Beijing, ‘of course you always have a sense of heroism, a sense of justice. You have your justifications and you think you’re doing the right thing’ (Zhao Liang, filmmaker). In their own perception, therefore, independent filmmakers see their creative work as a way to express their sense of justice, while also potentially enabling a ‘successful career’.

As I will show in the following section, in reality this imagined balance between self-expression and success often translates into quite precarious politico-

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7 As reported by various scholars and media, Jia Zhangke’s recent films, including The World (2004), 24 City (2008), A Touch of Sin (2013) and Mountains May Depart (2015), were all approved by the state Film Bureau and received substantial financial support from both international and domestic film companies (Callahan 2014; Nakajima 2016).
economic circumstances, leading some Chinese indie filmmakers to be governed into taking on the subjectivity of a depoliticised ‘Chinese art-film worker’.

**Precarising Chinese independent cinema**

On the outskirts of southeast Beijing, just beyond the fourth ring, a group of people in their early 20s live together in a small village called South Bridge (南桥 nan qiao), all with hopes of becoming a Chinese global film auteur like Jia Zhangke. Coming from Shanxi, Anhui and northeast China, they do not have wealthy families; their parents are mostly farmers or migrant workers. Around 2015, after graduating from university they gathered in Beijing and founded the New Wave Experimental Cinema Group (新潮电影实验小组 xinchao dianying shiyan xiaozu). The name was chosen, as one of the members explained to me, to indicate their aim of making experimental and artistic films different from mainstream Chinese films. The group comprises 10 formal members, living together in shabby, tiny apartments. The monthly rent is cheap, around 800 to 1,500 RMB (100-200 euros), because of the poor construction and inconvenient location. From my personal experience, I know that it takes two hours to get there from the city centre. Even so, for young independent filmmakers like the members of the New Wave Group, it is an ideal area with very low living costs and a dynamic community. The area is inhabited mostly by migrant workers from all over the nation and has various cheap grocery stores, barbershops, and restaurants. Most importantly, the experience of group living and working offers the young filmmakers a way of combating precarity.

Unlike earlier independent filmmakers like Duan Jinchuan, Wu Wenguang and Zhao Liang, who mostly had experiences of working at state-owned television or film studios, the New Wave group members have little professional experience or knowledge and lacked a social network before they started making films. To alleviate financial pressure, the members developed their skills mostly through self-teaching, enabled by the internet, and reduced production costs. In effect, most members have developed a particular expertise. For example, Chang Biao is a photographer, Haodong is an audio recorder, Mu Jing an art director and Wang Fa
an executive director; what they have in common is that they are also directors and
scriptwriters of their own works, and all aspire to be global Asian directors like Jia
Zhangke or Hou Hsiao-Hsien. Their expertise allows them to make a living by
working as crew members for commercial production teams. At the same time, they
work together and help each other when someone is making their own independent
film. For example, all the members volunteered to make both Haodong’s film *Eyes
Cheat* and Chang Biao’s *Faded Time*.

Apart from financial precariousness, there is also a creative and affective
precarity attached to independent filmmaking in contemporary Chinese cinema. As
summarised by Chris Berry, since the 1990s, under the influence of marketisation
and globalisation, Chinese independent filmmakers have been governed under a
‘three-legged system’, which is composed of ‘the Party-State apparatus, the
demands Chinese filmmakers to conform politically and bars politically critical or
dissenting films from entering Chinese cinemas. Domestic capital and commercial
corporations, often in complicity with the state (Zhang 2007, 72), provide financial
opportunities for Chinese filmmakers, but only if they accept co-optation and
engage in commercial filmmaking. The overseas film festivals and media, however,
encourage film workers to identify themselves as ‘dissenting/artistic independents’,
by offering opportunities of funding and screening.

This ‘three-legged system’ on the one hand makes politically sensitive
productions increasingly difficult and marginal in the domestic market. The recently
enacted Promotion Law on the Film Industry (NPC 2016) stipulates that any film
must be censored and licensed before participating in overseas film festivals, and
that those violating the law will be fined and banned from filmmaking in China for
a period of five years (NPC 2016). Although it is not yet known whether this law
will be strictly enforced, the space for Chinese dissent filmmakers is arguably
narrowing. As a result, critical realist filmmaking is becoming increasingly
precarious, not least for independent documentary filmmakers. For example, most
of Zhao Liang’s works, including *Petition* (2009), *Crime and Punishment* (2007)
and Return to the Border (2005), are banned on the Chinese Mainland. Despite his
ostensible cooperation with the government in 2009,\(^8\) which was later deemed ‘co-
optation’ by some other Chinese independent filmmakers, Zhao Liang’s new
documentary Behemoth (2015) has not been screened on the Chinese Mainland. The
film focuses on the environmental issues and workers’ miserable living conditions
in the mining areas of north China and captures the dehumanising effects of
economic development. Except for Together, Zhao Liang’s films were all financed
by overseas film festivals and cultural institutions. Moreover, although he is an
established director, Zhao Liang still has financial problems given the high costs of
housing and living in Beijing:

> Compared with the 1990s, the pressure of surviving still exists. Now
everything is expensive. In the 1990s, the rent might just be 300 (RMB) per
month, while now it could be over 10,000. Funding is usually gone when I
have finished one project. If the new project doesn’t come soon, it will be
very difficult during the interim. (Zhao Liang, filmmaker)

On the other hand, however, the expanding domestic film market also
provides more opportunities for independent cinema that is less ‘political’ or
‘critical realist’. This type of cinema, under the banner of the ‘art film’ (艺术电影
yishu dianying), is reported to be gaining audiences in Chinese cinemas and to be
winning support from both capital and the state. These so-called art films are to
some extent depoliticised and tend to focus on personal emotions through poetic
visual symbols rather than clear storylines, in contrast to the art films produced by
fifth and sixth generation directors, such as Red Sorghum (Zhang Yimou, 1988),
The Pickpocket (Jia Zhangke, 1997), and Devils on the Doorstep (Jiang Wen, 2000),
which focused on grand topics such as the individual, China and society in a
specific socio-spatial context. Examples of the new art films include the acclaimed

\(^8\) In 2009 Zhao Liang was commissioned by the Ministry of Health to make the documentary
Together (2010), which is about the social discrimination of people with HIV and AIDS in
Chinese society.
*Kaili Blues* (Bi Gan, 2016) and *Crosscurrent* (Yang Chao, 2016), which both won awards at international film festivals and were also licensed for public release in Mainland China. These art films are mostly characterised by loose storylines, a poetic and rather obscure cinematic language and depoliticised (or less political) context. Politically sensitive issues are deliberately avoided. As Shan Zuolong, the producer of *Kaili Blues*, told me, ‘simply speaking, we are depoliticising. This should not be viewed as bowing to censorship but is actually our intentional aesthetic choice’ (Shan Zuolong, film producer). Depoliticisation may not mean that filmmakers and their productions now have nothing at all to do with politics, or that their cinematic aesthetics has no political connotations at all. Rather, these new art films are looking for more abstract, aesthetical forms of creativity that will not directly challenge the existing political and social order. As Shan explained:

> Independent film is a transitional concept… Now we have passed that era. Filmmakers of the previous generation had a heavy burden, like ‘the Cultural Revolution’ and ‘society under transformation’, all of which could be their source of creativity. Bi Gan (the director) is not interested in these topics. What he wants to explore is the language of film. Politics is not important for him; thus, his films will not offend the censors. (Shan Zuolong, producer)

In the minds of these filmmakers, such an approach of ‘art for art’s sake’ seems an ‘ideal’ way to be creative under the three-legged system. The growing segmentation of the Chinese domestic film market and audience has produced a certain space for

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9 *Kaili Blues* (*Lu Bian Ye Can*) tells the story of Chen’s dream-like experiences on a journey searching for his nephew. Chen is a physician in Kaili, a small county of Guizhou. In the film, the director Bi Gan uses various symbolic and visual elements to build up a surreal time-space continuum in which Chen encounters his past memories and lost love in a very emotional and poetic way. *Crosscurrent* (*Chang Jiang Tu*) depicts the magical love story of a couple on a trip along the Yangzi River in a non-linear way. Similar to Bi Gan, its director, Yang Chao, seems more interested in conveying emotions through poetic visual symbols rather than in presenting clear storylines with a political message.
these art films, while a less political focus also lowers the risk of censorship. At the same time, the exploration of cinematic language and film as ‘pure art’ also ensures that the possibility of success at overseas film festivals is retained.

From my observations of these filmmakers, it can be concluded that an ‘ideal’ scenario for success is now envisioned by them: one pinches and scrapes to make one’s debut film, which should portend one’s emerging film genius, and which should win one or two prizes at international film festivals. After gaining such fame, one is able to find more funding and to continue chasing the dream of becoming a global auteur. Bi Gan’s experience exemplifies this trajectory. He borrowed money from his teachers and friends for the production of his first film. After winning the title of Best New Director at the Taiwan Golden Horse Film Festival in 2015, he quickly obtained fame as well as fortune. The film passed the censorship and received a public release in Mainland China. Bi Gan was acclaimed by Chinese media and audiences as an emerging Chinese film master (Shao 2016). Afterwards, he and his producer Shan Zuolong founded Dangmai Film (Dang Mai Yingye 荡麦影业), a film production company, raising 30 million RMB from a Chinese media corporation named Huace Film (Hua Ce Yingye 华策影视) in series A financing (Shan Zuolong, film producer).

In effect, however, such success is hard to imitate. According to Yang Cheng, an experienced art film producer in Beijing, funding for Chinese art films comprises three sources: self/crowd-funding, domestic film companies, and overseas funding agencies (Yang Cheng, film producer). Apart from self-funding, access to these sources is highly dependent on the filmmaker’s previous experience and social network. For young filmmakers like those of the New Wave group, funding is elusive. After all, not every debut film can win big prizes at international film festivals. At the same time, not every art film can achieve financial success in Chinese cinemas and attract financial investment from domestic capital. Given that China has not yet established professional art-film houses, the rate of art-film screenings in Chinese cinemas is still very low, compared to that for commercial
blockbusters (Xingjue 2017). For art films with high investment, such as Crosscurrent (Yang Chao 2016), even a box office of several million RMB could not cover its production costs.

To seize the limited opportunities for future success, the young independent filmmakers of the New Wave group also have to learn ‘self-emotional management’, to keep an optimistic and positive mentality in confronting career uncertainties and precarious conditions. They need first of all to persuade themselves that their current position is the most rational choice. As Haodong announces:

> These problems are real. But for me, I don’t have any other choices now. I don’t have a rich family. But I like cinema and I feel delighted with my work. Most importantly, after several years of experience, I think I have the talent for being a film director. I’m learning very fast and I feel good at it. I don’t know anything else that I can do. So even now if someone offered me a decent job that has no connection to film, I wouldn’t accept. (Jian Haodong)

New Wave group members also share a sense of optimism about their uncertain future. They like to talk about the success of other independent directors: ‘A got a new car’ and ‘B bought an apartment’. They do not conceal their aspiration to fame and fortune, and the thriving Chinese film industry instils confidence in them:

> The Chinese film market is so active and getting more open. Art film can enter the cinema and the audience is also promoting their aesthetic tastes. This is an opportunity. … We all have a strong mind. It just takes a little while to get through those highly depressing moments, which after all are very few as well. (Wang Fa, filmmaker)

Chinese independent filmmakers are confronted, on the one hand, with scarce and highly competitive financial opportunities offered by overseas film festivals and, on the other, with the ostensible ‘golden era’ of the Chinese film industry, from which independent films, however, are largely excluded. This three-legged system
corroborates Isabel Lorey’s suggestion in her book *The State of Insecurity* that ‘precarious living and working conditions are currently being normalised at a structural level and have thus become a fundamental governmental instrument of governing’ (2015, 63). In an ontological sense, all human beings are born with a certain precariousness, following Judith Butler, for their survival always depends on a ‘social network of hands’ and one’s life is always lived in relation to others (Butler, 2009, 14). Such a shared ontological precariousness, because of its demand for care and protection, and because ‘all protection and all care maintain vulnerability’ (Lorey 2015, 20), finally relates to the social and political dimension of precarity, which engages in ‘hierarchising precarity’ (Lorey 2015, 21). This term refers to the socio-political classification and differentiation of bodies, as well as decisions about which are to be protected and which can be left insecure, without care.

In the field of Chinese film production, to make governable those independent filmmakers who used to be labelled ‘underground’, ‘dissenting’ or ‘rebellious’, a crucial strategy of governance is thus to differentiate and classify them. ‘Dissenting’ filmmakers are stigmatised as threatening the stability and security of the nation, for their critical views toward the government and society. Their life should remain precarious and even be made ‘unliveable’. For those ‘art-film’ producers who are still tameable and willing to accept the tactic of ‘depoliticisation’, their vulnerable lives are protected by the opportunities created by the complicity between the state, the market, and to some extent overseas film festivals. But such protection is far from sufficient, because opportunities are limited and highly competitive. A contingency of precarity must remain to make sure that ‘degradation’ into subversive dissent – ‘insurrection’ – will never happen. Managing this ‘threshold of precarity’, following Lorey (2015, 2), is ‘what makes up the art of governing’ in today’s Chinese independent cinema.

To sum up, Chinese independent filmmakers are governed in the current three-legged system through three forms of precarity: financial, creative, and affective. The resulting precarisation orchestrates Chinese independent cinema
towards a depoliticised ‘art cinema’, while filmmakers have to deploy a self-
governance through multi-tasking, networking and self-emotional management in
order to maintain a sense of optimism about their future.

In the terms of the conceptual framework outlined in the introduction, this
precarisation and depoliticisation of Chinese indie cinema constitutes an active
process of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation of independent filmmakers.
Motivated by their shared discontent with life and society, the cultural value of
independent film attracts them and prompts them to escape from the cultural, social
and political codes they feel are entrapping them. The critical and rebellious spirit
and aesthetics of their early films are meant to directly challenge the established
ideological order. In response, however, the three-legged system constantly
attempts to re-territorialise these ‘independents’ into the ‘depoliticised art cinema’
by precarising their life and working experiences while also offering limited career
opportunities. If Chinese independent cinema is made governable through a re-
territorialising precarisation, then how do filmmakers from diverse backgrounds
respond to this precarity and governance? And can it be said, on the basis of the
experiences of independent filmmakers, that these creative subjects are becoming
what I have termed schizoid creators?

A community based on difference

In early February 2017, the Chinese independent film director Cong Feng was
diagnosed with acute severe pancreatitis and sent to hospital. After the news spread,
independent filmmakers in Beijing quickly lined up to offer assistance. Famous
figures like Li Xianting and Liu Bing helped arrange the hospital and treatment. The
news also drew attention from fans and supporters of Chinese independent film. For
example, in one of the Wechat groups I joined named Lantern Cine-Club, an
independent film-screening club in Beijing, the organiser Guo Xiaodong
successfully raised over 5,000 RMB for Cong Feng within three days.¹⁰

¹⁰ Thanks to timely treatment and the financial support of his filmmaking friends, the
Besides offering mutual assistance in emergency circumstances, in their everyday work and life independent filmmakers in Beijing have formed a mutual-caring community. An informal union has formed, providing everything from technical assistance during filming to promotion activities after production. For young newcomers like the members of the New Wave group, this community provides various opportunities for learning, for screenings and for interacting with the audience. For instance, from August to the end September of 2016, during my fieldwork, the Lantern Cine-Club organised 10 events screening experimental films made by young graduates and filmmakers. Held in small cafés and cinemas, these events created stages for newly graduated film workers to share their works with audiences. These screening events and film clubs function not just as part of the consumption field of Chinese independent film, but also as part of the production field – encouraging the pro-sumption of Chinese independent cinema as suggested by Nakajima (2012). The events help promote Chinese independent film among domestic audiences, while also providing occasions for networking among investors, producers and indie directors. This informal community even has its own film festivals, such as the Beijing Independent film festival (BIFF, Beijing) and the China Independent film festival (CIFF, Nanjing). These festivals, although also precarious in terms of financing and their relationship with the government, provide a good opportunity for Chinese independent/art filmmakers to build their career.

In the case of the New Wave film group, for instance, both Haodong and Chao Biao have experienced sharing their films at screening events as well as domestic film festivals. Through these experiences, they met many other indie directors and producers, who later became their friends and brought opportunities of multi-tasking and funding. During the making of his film *Faded Time*, Chang Biao was also working as a photographer for other film crews he met in Beijing, to earn money for filming as well as his basic livelihood. Three years later, after finishing the production, he was provided with screening opportunities by several film clubs. With the help of some established directors and indie film workers such as Hao Jie operation was successful and Cong Feng eventually returned all donations from fans.
and Guo Xiaodong, moreover, he got a contract from Blackfin, a leading Chinese art film production company that, since 2015, has successfully produced several Chinese indie films, including *Kaili Blues* (2016) and *Free and Easy* (2016). In a recent conversation (2018) through Wechat, Chang Biao told me that *Faded Time* will be submitted to the Locarno Festival and that he had just started a new art film project entitled *Unknown Time*, financed by Blackfin and several other production companies.

The informal mutual-caring community outlined above can be viewed as a spontaneous response, first of all, to the precarious circumstances of Chinese indie film production, especially with regard to securing financing and good career prospects. A more complex question, however, is the following: if the creative and affective precarity I illustrated earlier also serves precarisation as a form of re-territorialising, are there also possibilities for resistance generated from the forming of this community? And do these possibilities lead to the formation of what in my introduction I have called ‘schizoid creators’, who work both for and against the governing system?

In 2011, before the opening of the 6th Beijing Independent Film Festival (BIFF), Zhu Rikun, the former CEO and artistic director of BIFF, resigned, left Beijing and later moved to the United States. One of the reasons for his departure, as Sniadecki’s ethnography shows, was his aggressive 11 and oppositional approach to operating the BIFF. According to Li Xianting, the founder and a major benefactor of the BiFF, Zhu’s stance exacerbated tensions between the festival and the state, thus transforming the indie filmmaking community into a ‘small clique’ (2013, 170). Instead, Li Xianting preferred a more conciliatory way of dealing with the state so as to make the BIFF and Chinese independent cinema more open and inclusive. Years later, when I asked Zhu for his current attitude toward Chinese indie film festivals and his own previous work, he replied:

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11 According to Zhu, his aggressive approach consisted of selecting films critical of the Chinese government, bringing political risks for the festival (Sniadecki 2013, 172).
Doing these things (curating indie film festivals) will bring as much harm as good. It’s hard to explain. Metaphorically, one was very into poetry when one was in university, and tried to help classmates who had the same interest. But now these classmates have become bureaucrats, party members. And the experience of writing poetry becomes something for them to boast about: ‘I like writing poetry, and I’m a literate official’. (Zhu Rikun, filmmaker)

It could be argued that, as Zhu implies, the field of Chinese independent film production has allowed many film workers, especially young directors like the members of the New Wave Group, to gather cultural capital that may benefit their future careers. As long as they treat independent filmmaking as a job through which they also have to make a livelihood, these filmmakers have to adopt a practical approach to the larger social-economic-politico circumstances and be willing to negotiate with the state, the market and society. However, being practical does not equate to a complete surrender to the state or capital; depoliticisation also cannot simply be denounced as ‘co-optation’ or a complete escape from being political. In the preface to the 13th Chinese Independent Film Festival (CIFF), Yang Cheng, the artistic director, writes:

The ‘independence’ of ‘independent film’ is an absolute parameter worth pursuing. It points to ‘freedom’… But ‘independent film’ as a term, a form of specific existence, cannot live without relativity. It needs some references to test, to determine its connotation and extension. Any simplistic either-or definition is unreliable; it’s too easy to camouflage. In this sense, Chinese independent cinema still confronts a complicated situation, both inside and outside, but it is far from being tougher than ever. For true filmmakers, words like ‘hardship’ and ‘perseverance’ should be superfluous. … ‘Survival first’ is still our motto… The so-called new choice does not mean choosing whether to continue being independent or not, but considering what ‘the new independence’ is within independent film. … ‘Post-independence’ does not exist. The perception of the world,
the questioning of the self, and the exploration of film should be without bounds; therefore, each era is the ‘era before independence’. (Yang Cheng, film producer)

For Yang Cheng, a relative understanding of independence does not call for absolute independence from the influence of capital and the state, but for an independence that seeks ‘critical thought and independent spirit expressed in a work’ (Cheung 2007). It is a spiritual independence that points to ‘freedom’ in a relative sense. For reasons of survival in a precarious environment, independent filmmakers have to compromise and adapt their artistic as well as political initiatives. It is in this sense that absolute independence (what Yang Cheng terms ‘post-independence’) does not exist. The significance of Chinese independent filmmaking, however, compared with mainstream filmmaking, is embodied in its aim of seeking ‘freedom’, the freedom of choosing how to perceive the world, of questioning the self, and of exploring the medium of film. Following Yang Cheng, it is the pursuit of relative ‘independence’ and ‘freedom’ that characterises Chinese independent film, rather than its relationship with the state or capital.

In Chinese independent cinema, precarisation as governmentality largely limits filmmakers from pursuing independence and freedom in their everyday production practice. But, even under conditions of precarisation, the ‘spiritual independence’ asserted by Yang Cheng is, or should be, valued and adhered to by those who identify themselves as ‘indie directors’. 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, in the pursuit and identification of ‘spiritual’ independence, Chinese independent filmmaking also opens up the possibility of ‘exodus and constituting’, of ‘leaving and starting something new’ (Lorey 2015, 104). In line with this, it can be said that the practical understanding of independence and independent film signifies an agentic refusal of simplistic, fixed identifications as ‘dissenting artist’, ‘underground filmmaker’, or ‘co-opted’ state/commercial director.
Conclusion

As this chapter has illustrated, independent filmmaking was mostly chosen as a way to balance aspirations to career success with a desire to address the discontent experienced in relation to one’s own previous living conditions or certain aspects of Chinese society. In effect, however, it is precarised by the existing ‘three-legged’ system: the complicity between the state and capital on the one hand seduces independent filmmakers into accepting co-optation and depoliticisation, while, on the other hand, foreign film festivals encourage them to identify themselves as ‘dissenting/artistic independents’ by offering (limited and highly competitive) funding and screening opportunities. This precarisation orchestrates and re-territorialises Chinese independent cinema towards a depoliticised ‘art cinema’, while filmmakers also have to deploy a self-governance through multi-tasking, networking and self-emotional management to maintain a sense of optimism about the future.

In response to the precarisation of Chinese independent cinema, meanwhile, an informal mutual-caring community has emerged. Animated by the common aspiration to ‘independence’ and ‘freedom’, this community not only helps alleviate living and work pressures by offering opportunities for screenings, skills learning and emotional sharing and caring, but also triggers a more open understanding of ‘independence’ and ‘independent filmmaking’. Such a more inclusive and fluid conception of independence allows for the differentness of its members to be preserved and for them to no longer be circumscribed by rigid identities such as that of ‘political dissenter’ or ‘non-commercial’ filmmaker. Thus, the precarious life and working conditions of independent filmmakers not only captures their labour and creativity, but also produces a condition that allows individual difference and that challenges the existing production system. This combination of the oppressive and productive aspect of precarity and precarisation gives rise to the formation of schizoid subjectivities among Chinese independent filmmakers. As I will show in the next chapter, productive precarity and schizoid subjectivity are not only evident
among Chinese independent filmmakers, but also among other commercial creators in China’s cultural economies.
Chapter 4 (Un-)Becoming Chinese creatives: Transnational creative labour mobility in global Beijing

Introduction

David Wong was born and raised in a Chinese family in Canada. After graduating from college, he worked in London as an architect for a few years, after which a shift in interest led him to Denmark to study filmmaking. Later, he spent a year in Berlin and then moved back to London, taking up his architect job again – ‘just because I ran out of money’. In 2011, David was introduced to Beijing by his brother and started to work there as a freelance videographer. Apart from commercial video projects, he has also been working on an independent documentary about Beijing, which fascinates David because of its vibrancy and diversity. Compared to London, he feels the creative field in Beijing is ‘more relaxed and less hierarchical’. His European educational and professional background, and the network he has built through his brother, who also works in China’s creative sector, has afforded David with more work opportunities in Beijing than in Europe. However, after six years in Beijing, David is starting to ponder the possibility of leaving China. With his parents getting older, he feels he should return to Canada to take care of them. In addition, he is not fluent in Chinese, which limits how far he can go in his creative career in Beijing. Since he is working as a freelancer, which in China does not entitle him to a long-term work permit, David has to exit the Chinese Mainland every 90 days to renew his visa. What makes leaving a difficult decision is that he would miss the vibrancy of Chinese society. As David explains:

1 Chapter 4 presents the text published in Mobilities, with minor edits and endnotes converted to footnotes.
Maybe [I’ll leave in the] next year or year and half, but I’m not sure yet. I do want to keep on filming things in China… And in general, I think China is such a chaotic place, which … I like!

This vignette reveals the aspirations and anxiety of international professionals working in Beijing and seeking to build a career in the Chinese creative industries. The social dynamics of contemporary China and the career opportunities engendered by the booming creative economy compelled David Wong to move from Europe to Beijing, while family reasons as well as his visa issues discourage him from staying and will thus potentially lead to renewed transnational mobility.

David’s story indicates a need to study the experiences of international creative workers in China. In comparison to the extensive scholarship on overseas migration from the Chinese Mainland and on the Chinese diaspora (to name but a few: Choi 1975; Sun 2005; Wang and Liu 2006; Martin 2017), a growing number of studies acknowledge that ‘the rise of China’ is now also reversing such transnational mobility of labour and migration. The economic opportunities engendered by ‘the rise of China/Asia’ lead people from overseas to appreciate China as an aspirational place for work and life (Yeoh and Willis 2005; Jan 2006; Bodomo 2012; Castillo 2014; Lan 2017). In his study of African diasporas in Guangzhou, Castillo (2014) finds that although China's immigration policy and precarious work and living conditions discourage these Africans from becoming permanent immigrants, they should not be seen as only dispossessed. Precarious living and work conditions, according to Castillo, produce a precarious homing that, on the one hand, is ‘paralysing’, but, on the other hand, produces a network community facilitating ‘individual and collective attempts to ‘feel at home’ while on the move in China’ (Castillo, 2015:11). Comparing the different experiences of British and Singaporean professionals in China, Yeoh and Willis (2005, 270) importantly note that contemporary transnational subjects are not just mobile careerists ‘circulating in an intensely fluid world’ but also ‘embodied bearers of culture, ethnicity, class or gender’, which give rise to differentiated transnational experiences. These subjects not only belong to the ‘space of flows’ (Castells 2005)
but also to the ‘space of place’, where their transnational experience is situated and co-present with that of others, including locals (Yeoh and Willis 2005).

Building on these existing research findings, this chapter focuses on the transnational mobility of creative labour in China. As I will show in the following, the specific politico-economic conditions of cultural production in China complicate the work and life experiences of transnational creative workers in China, opening up a set of new questions concerning transnational mobility and subjectivity.

Previous chapters have shown that the ‘state question’ (Wang 2001) significantly complicates the governance of creative labour in China. Creative workers have to balance their own creative career aspiration with the Party State’s ideological control and expectation of a politically conforming and cooperative creative subjectivity. At the same time, economic globalisation also connects China to the international cultural market: the emerging Chinese market continues to attract foreign capital, while the Chinese Party State also wishes to perform its creativity on the global stage for national branding purposes, in order to wield ‘soft power’ through ‘Chinese international cultural companies’ (Keane 2013).

Against this background of ‘the rise of China’ on the one hand and the specific political economy of cultural production in China on the other, this chapter examines the transnational mobility of creative labour in Beijing by addressing three questions:

1) What motivates international creative workers to choose China/Beijing as a place to work and live?

2) What are the working and living conditions of these transnational subjects in Beijing?

3) What kind of transnational subjectivity is produced by the mobile but also situated life of these international creative professionals in Beijing?
This chapter will first demonstrate that the globalisation of the Chinese cultural economy has propelled the transnational mobility of creative labour into China. Although attracted by the career opportunities, international creative professionals do not form a privileged ‘elite class’, but rather encounter precarity in their everyday lives and in the workplace. By underscoring precarity as a form of productive governance, this chapter continues the discussion in Chapter 3 of precarious creative labour, but shifts the focus from local Chinese creative workers to international creative professionals in Beijing and their transnational labour mobility. My main argument is that, in Beijing, the precarity of foreign creative professionals fuels interaction and mutual understanding between this group and Beijing locals, providing the conditions for the emergence of a cosmopolitan subjectivity. This cosmopolitan subjectivity goes beyond the Chinese authorities’ expectation of a conforming and economically productive creative workforce, creating the potential for mutual understanding and care among individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Before proceeding to the empirical analysis, the chapter introduces the key concepts that inform this study and the research method.

**Creative labour, mobility and precarity**

As I have shown in my introduction and in Chapter 1, the policy discourse of the ‘creative class’ has been celebrated by business scholars and western policy makers as the driving force behind the construction of the ‘creative city’ and the prosperity of the ‘creative industries’ (Florida 2002). The vibrancy and tolerant attitudes of the city are claimed to be crucial factors for attracting ‘creative talents’ (Hansen and Niedomysl 2009). Over the last decade, the discourses of the ‘creative city’ and ‘cultural/creative industries’, and their emphasis on labour mobility, have been reproduced within the Chinese policy context. Since 2000, the Chinese Communist Party, not without some reluctance, has also incorporated the cultural industries in its national agenda and authorised the central government to establish new institutions and to formulate a host of policies such as five-year plans, special funds
and reform policies to boost the domestic cultural economy (see Chapter 1). At the local level, Chinese metropoles like Beijing (2014), Shanghai (2017) and Shenzhen (2016) have been lining up to promote their own ‘creative city planning’, in which ‘attracting international creative talents’ is a crucial strategy. Emphatic about the contribution of labour mobility to economy growth, the major motivation for these policies is to ‘attract creative talents’, namely established, highly skilled creative practitioners. As one of the policies asserts,

the key is to cultivate and attract international leading talents on high-end cultural management, capital operation, cultural technology and international cultural trade. (Beijing 2014)

What these policies tend to overlook is the impact of mobility on the work and life of cultural workers, who come from far more diverse social backgrounds than the category of ‘creative talent’ suggests. Behind the global flows of creativity is a creative workforce characterised by substantial inequalities and differences engendered by gender, race, class, relationship status, age, skill level, job title, salary, etc. (Banks 2017). Professionals in the cultural sectors, especially less established ones, have become a ‘creative precariat’, suffering precarious working conditions and facing problems such as short-term contracts, unequal earnings and a lack of unions (Curtin and Sanson, 2016; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). In his study of Hong Kong cultural workers in China, Yiu Fai Chow (2017) suggests that the mobility of creative labour from Hong Kong to the Chinese Mainland is quite often contingent in the sense that these workers’ decisions to move are frequently hasty due to the precarious conditions in the cultural sector. McRobbie also points out that the highly mobile creative workplace engenders a ‘time-space stretch mechanism’ that disavows motherhood and family (2016, 2). These critiques remind us that the mobility that now characterises creative labour is not always a choice, but that precarious labour conditions may also force cultural workers to move between A, B, C, etc.
Nonetheless, the intention of this chapter is not simply to repeat the argument that creative labour is precarious. As I argued in previous chapters, my aim is to illuminate the specific experiences of precarity in different social contexts. This chapter, for example, investigates the specific precarious experiences of international creative professionals in Beijing (and in the wider context of the Chinese state’s governance of cultural production and labour mobility), and the consequences of these experiences for their subjectivity.

Precarious circumstances require subjects to constantly adjust their living strategies. This self-governance causes a highly demanding life and work in contemporary societies, but, following Lorey (2015), it is also quite productive and incalculable, as became clear from my discussion of Chinese independent filmmakers in Chapter 3. As Lorey (2015, 103-104) puts it:

The processes of precarisation are a contested social terrain, in which the struggles of workers and their desires for different forms of living and working are articulated. The processes of precarisation are not only productive in the sense of contributing to capitalist exploitation. In the post-Fordist conditions of precarious production, new forms of living and new social relationships are continually being developed and invented. In this sense, processes of precarisation are also productive.

What Lorey reminds us of here is that precarious living conditions, rather than being singularly repressive, can also be productive in terms of subjectivation. As this chapter will show in the final section, while their transnational labour mobility incurs certain forms of precarity, this precarity also leads international cultural professionals in Beijing to foster a situated cosmopolitan subjectivity that fuels interaction and mutual understanding between local and global subjects. Thus, cosmopolitanism here constitutes an incalculable response to precarity.

After a brief account of the research method, the following sections will successively examine the varied motivations behind transnational creative labour mobility, the precarious working conditions with which international creative
workers are confronted in Beijing, and how these conditions lead to the production of a cosmopolitan subjectivity.

**Method**

The empirical data on which this chapter is based stem from field research conducted from July to September 2017 in Beijing, which was chosen as the fieldwork site for its status as the political and cultural centre of China, hosting one of the largest international communities in the country. During the fieldwork I conducted ethnographic observation in places such as galleries, *hutong* pubs and creative districts where many international creative workers habitually stay and hang out. By using the snowball sampling method, 15 in-depth interviews (see Table 4.1 and Appendix I) were conducted in these places with transnational creative professionals working in a diverse range of sectors, including design, film, photography, advertising, video game development, contemporary art, news press and state-run television. Both participants from western countries\(^2\) and from Asia (Hong Kong and Taiwan) were included. At their request, some informants’ names have been pseudonymised for security and privacy reasons. The majority of the participants (11) had been in China for more than 4 years and were able to communicate in Chinese. Apart from one participant aged over 60, all were between 25 and 45 years old. Apart from interviews, I also analyse Chinese policy documents on cultural industries and use secondary sources including media reports and non-academic writings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Gender</th>
<th>Job</th>
<th>Interview Date</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>videographer</td>
<td>13/7/2017</td>
<td>Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Lau</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>freelancer</td>
<td>15/7/2017</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^2\) Among those with western passports, more participants from the Netherlands were interviewed because of my own social network.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>18/7/2017</td>
<td>Malaysia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laurent</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>photographer</td>
<td>24/7/2017</td>
<td>France</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedro Baker</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>artist</td>
<td>24/7/2017</td>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jolene</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>journalist</td>
<td>1/8/2017</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>video game producer</td>
<td>3/8/2017</td>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lance Crayon</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>videographer</td>
<td>6/8/2017</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elsa</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>graphic designer</td>
<td>7/8/2017</td>
<td>Belgium</td>
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<td>television editor</td>
<td>12/8/2017</td>
<td>France</td>
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<td>12/8/2017</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>photographer</td>
<td>21/8/2017</td>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.1 List of participants

Given the lack of statistics on the number of foreign professionals working in the Chinese cultural sectors, this research sample is not offered as representative. The chapter does not claim to present a comprehensive image of international cultural workers in China. Instead, it highlights some common situations faced by the research participants.
Why come to Beijing?

In 2015, Lance Crayon had been working in Beijing for five years, mostly as a videographer for Chinese state-run international media, including Chinese Radio International (CRI) and China Daily. His job was to make videos for cultural programmes: on foods, landscape, customs and history, all the ‘charming aspects’ of China that the state media are eager to promote overseas. In full awareness of the limitations caused by censorship and bureaucracy, Lance was generally happy about his experience in Beijing, which he described as ‘overwhelming’ in the sense of providing plenty of good opportunities for him to perfect his filming and editing skills. According to him, these skills ‘never seemed to develop in America’. More importantly, this job also gave him the opportunity to experience Beijing and China, to visit a number of places and people, and to explore intriguing subjects for his independent creative work. That is how he came to make Spray Paint Beijing (2016), an independent documentary on graffiti artists in Beijing. For Lance, therefore, his jobs at state media companies allowed him to practice his creative skills, while the cultural vibrancy of Beijing inspired his creativity. Together, these aspects helped him to create his own works and benefited his future career.

Lance’s story is not unique. Compared to the developed cultural economies, the emerging Chinese market seems to generate abundant career opportunities for creative professionals from overseas. Not only for so-called ‘foreign talents’, but also for junior cultural workers still in the early stages of their career and desperately looking for opportunities to gain work experience and to improve their skills. As I will show, ‘foreigners’ are wanted in China for their ‘creative know-how’, language/cultural skills and even simply their ‘foreignness’, while Chinese contemporary society provides a seemingly ‘diverse’ socio-cultural environment conducive to creative experimentation and adventure.

Significantly, international professionals are believed to be equipped with the ‘creative know-how’ ambitious Chinese companies and local authorities long for. As Michael Keane (2016, 217) points out, in order to catch up and learn from
the ‘advanced soft-power nations’, which are mostly ‘western developed economies as well as Japan and South Korea’, the acquisition of foreign ‘creative know-that’ and ‘know-how’ is key for China. ‘Creative know-that’ stands for the propositional knowledge of what we know about the world, while ‘know-how’ refers to the ‘abilities and propensities’, ‘capacities, habits, liabilities and bents’ involved in being creative (Keane 2016, 217). Employing international cultural workers seems to be an ideal way to enable a transmission of expertise from the west to China. Significantly, David Wong shared with me that a Chinese film producer once asserted that the best people to hire in the film industry are westerners who live in China or Chinese educated in the west. Both groups are believed to be more professional and devoted to work than the local Chinese, who are perceived as only working for money.

Such belief in the ‘creative know-how’ of foreigners also creates opportunities for junior creative workers, due to their ‘foreignness’, ‘westernness’ or ‘whiteness’. Elsa, for instance, is a Belgian designer working in a Chinese design company. She was educated in the Netherlands and, after working for a year at a Dutch design company, she moved to Beijing where she was employed by a Chinese design company as a senior designer. Elsa did not expect that she would be a senior designer prior to getting the job, as she had less than two years of work experience in Europe. However, she noted, ‘They just assume I am [a senior] because I’m foreign.’

The internationalisation of the Chinese cultural economy also creates increasing demand for those with a bi(multi)-lingual/cultural background. On the one hand, as Keane (2016, 227) illustrates, ‘there is a lack of understanding within China of how to make content that might be successful overseas’. Developing this understanding often starts by hiring creative foreigners who speak the language and understand the overseas audience. For instance, Chinese state-run international media, such as CRI (Chinese Radio International), China Daily and CCTV (China Central Television), all have a number of foreign employees working on their international programmes.
In addition, foreign companies are lining up to access China’s enormous market, generating job positions for those who can speak Chinese while also understanding the international cultural sector. Mike is a Dutch game producer who works in China for an international video game company. After graduating from Leiden University in Chinese Studies in 2013, he came to China as a tourist, to explore the country and put his Chinese language skills and cultural knowledge into practice. Unexpectedly, his friend introduced him to his current employer, an international video game company looking for someone to translate Chinese games into Dutch. He accepted the job and later became a game producer selecting local Chinese independent game developers for international production companies. Besides his knowledge of Chinese, his previous experience with video games in the Netherlands also qualified him as a game producer who could introduce an international audience and game culture to local Chinese game developers.

Finally, Beijing, as the capital city of China with a rich ancient, colonial and communist history, seems to be an attractive place for creative workers from outside China looking for ‘marketable’ inspiration. Just as Lance was intrigued by the graffiti artists in Beijing and decided to make a documentary on them, Pedro Bakker, a Dutch painter, was inspired by Chinese communist history and the story of Chairman Mao and his wife Jiang Qing to make a series of paintings. In August 2017, when I was visiting Beijing, Bakker was working in an art space called The Institute of Provocation on a new painting about the homosexual scenes in the Chinese classic novel Dream of the Red Chamber (曹雪芹 Cao Xueqin). Both of Bakker’s projects were supported by art residency programs funded by European art foundations and Chinese art spaces during the time of China’s growing economic and political power on the global stage. The difference between Lance and Bakker is that Lance is a junior creative worker building a career at Chinese companies, while Bakker is an established artist who only stays in China for short-term art residency programs. Still, they were both motivated by their fascination with Chinese society and the potential market opportunities of working in China.
Beijing also attracts international creative workers with its convenient city life and international atmosphere enriched by local elements, exemplified by the colourful consuming spaces in the hutongs, the most prominent and popular neighbourhoods of Beijing. Although in increasing tension with the local authorities, Beijing’s traditional hutong alleys have the attractions that these transnational workers desire: behind the traditional appearance of the hutong hide live music pubs, local breweries, underground indie cinemas and galleries, as well as tasty street food vendors and local restaurants (Figure 4.1). The international cultural atmosphere in Beijing also creates opportunities for international cultural workers to exhibit and promote their work in the city, as demonstrated by their active presence in creative districts such as 798 and Caochangdi, as well as various hutong venues and galleries. For example, the I: Project space at Banqiao hutong and The Institute of Provocation at Heizhima hutong, two art spaces I visited during my fieldwork, both collaborate with European art foundations and have established residency and exhibition projects for international artists whose work is related to China.

Arguably, the global proliferation of the cultural industries and their uneven prosperity around the globe have propelled the global mobility of creative labour. The emerging Chinese cultural market and the existing gap between China’s cultural economy and its western competitors has translated into a thirst on the part of Chinese authorities and companies for ‘creative know-how’, fostering job opportunities for international cultural workers. Equipped with the needed expertise, these international professionals are thought to enable the future success of China’s cultural industries. Their presence in Beijing as part of the Chinese creative workforce has broadened the geopolitical conception of ‘Chinese creative labour’ and ‘Chinese creativity’. Their expertise and their everyday work and life in Beijing contribute to the image of Beijing as a global creative city, to the thriving of the

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3 In early 2019, the Institute of Provocation moved to the 798 Art District due to rent increases.
Chinese/global cultural industries, and to China’s aspiration for an economic transformation ‘from made in China to created in China’ (The State Council 2016).

Nevertheless, for individuals from overseas their potential importance and contribution to China’s cultural economy does not necessarily guarantee a comfortable life without precarity. As I will examine in the next sections, China’s restrictions on immigration and the working conditions in the cultural sectors discourage these international creative workers from settling down in Beijing permanently and push them to embrace a mobile and adventurous way of life that does not easily accommodate family, care and stability.

**Precarity: Unbecoming Chinese creatives**

Sarah Lau is a freelance film and literary critic from Hong Kong. After working in
Beijing for over nine years, she finally chose to leave in November 2017. The decision, according to Sarah, was partly prompted by the government’s increasingly strict control of the city. As a film critic, Sarah was previously a regular customer of the pirated DVD shops at Sanlitun Houjie, a street commonly known as zangjie (脏街 dirty road), one of the most vibrant nightlife streets in Beijing famous for its cheap bars and restaurants, opened mostly by migrant workers from other parts of China. However, in 2017 a government-lead clearance campaign caused the demolition of zangjie and the shutdown of many shops and street vendors where Sarah used to be a regular customer.

Later in the same year, the city government launched a similar operation named ‘bricking up the holes in the wall’ in Beijing’s traditional hutong alleys (Myers 2017). The operation targeted the so-called ‘illegal buildings’ that opened their doors or windows into alleyways without prior permission from the city authorities. As a result, most of these ‘illegal doors or windows’ were bricked up, affecting a great number of shops, bars and restaurants (Figures 4.2 and 4.3). Though some shops still secretly do business, uniform cement walls have replaced the previous colourful alleys in hutongs such as Jianchang and Fangjia. Throughout Beijing, moreover, rapid urban development and reconstruction have led to modern skyscrapers replacing many of the traditional alleys, transforming them into central business districts. The remaining hutongs, with their increasing popularity among tourists and foreigners, serve as places for

fetishised tourist novelty; cramped and often dilapidated homes for communities of families; or as romanticised and renovated digs for foreigners, who like to stay within walking distance of their favourite hutong bar or restaurant…. (Mouna 2017, 63)

As a result, these hutongs have been transformed from singular residential areas into homogenous spaces for consumption. Often without legal permission from the government, the remaining residents seek to reconstruct and enlarge their houses for commercial use: renting them to tourists or foreigners fascinated by the hutong, or
to migrant entrepreneurs to open souvenir shops, restaurants and beer bars. For the
city government, such diversity within the hutongs makes them chaotic spaces that
need effective governance. By bricking up the ‘illegal buildings’, it can directly
reduce such ‘chaos’ and meet its aim for the city, which is to ‘renovate hutong
environment and bring back the vintage look of Beijing as ancient capital (Yu
2017).

What happened at zangjie and the traditional hutongs accords with what
Zhang Li (2001) reveals in her study of migrant communities in Beijing: the
presence of unauthorised reconstruction and community in the city creates complex
tensions between migrant workers, the state and urban society. The ‘informal
privatisation of power and space’ within these areas causes anxiety among the city
authorities about their ability to effectively regulate urban society and the emerging
private economy (Li 2001, 4). The migrants’ reconstructing practices also run
counter to the Party-State urban aesthetics, which is, according to Li (2001, 4),
‘promoted by the state to attract foreign investment and international and domestic
tourism’.

However, for international cultural workers these informal economies and
lively neighbourhoods are the most attractive elements of the city; they not only
serve as spaces to consume local culture, but also as social spaces to connect with
local and international communities. Consequently, as the story of Sarah Lau
shows, the authorities’ deliberate reconstruction of these areas reduces ‘the charm
of the city’ and discourages international creative professionals. Compared to Hong
Hong, Beijing for Sarah was a quite inclusive city that accommodated people with
diverse backgrounds. She was incited to stay by the city’s cultural diversity and
inclusiveness, which the authorities are now attempting to destroy. Although
international creative workers are not the direct targets of the city authorities in
these campaigns, what is happening there contributes to the growing tension
between ‘creative foreigners’ and city governance. International creatives are
welcomed for their creative expertise, but their search for a ‘hipster lifestyle’ and
‘cultural diversity’ clashes with the authorities’ demand for social stability and homogeneity.

Figure 4.2 ‘Demolishing illegal buildings’! (Photo by author, 2017, Beijing)

The second site of tension is the result of China’s complex regulations on entry visa and cultural production. According to the official requirements, foreigners need at least three documents to work legally in China: an employment permit, a work visa and a work residence permit. Qualified employers first need to apply for the employment permit for their foreign employees, who later will apply for a work visa (z-type) to gain entry to China. Within 30 days of entry, the employees need to apply for a longer-term work residence permit through the city government (Travelchinaguide 2018). Creative freelancers, however, are not entitled to this z-type work visa because they are self-employed and thus do not have a legal employer. Instead, they can only apply for short-term 90-day tourist visa. Although there are certain agencies providing visa services for self-employed
foreigners, the process can still be quite complicated and applicants have to exit China every 90 days to renew the visa, as David Wong does. China has issued its own ‘permanent residence permits scheme’, yet the high threshold for approval has barred most foreign expatriates; only a small proportion of them with special skills, a business or family reasons qualify (Liu 2009). As Bork-Hüffer and Yuan-Ihle (2014, 571) note, despite the changes in the migration law made over the past decade, the Chinese government has no intention of substantially easing restrictions on immigration; only those regarded by China as ‘highly skilled talents’ benefit from the current immigration law. As far as cultural workers are concerned, the current entry regulation system provides convenience for those who are established and designated ‘creative talents’, while posing an obstacle for freelance and junior creative workers from overseas.

Figure 4.3 ‘Bricking up the hole’ (Photo by author, 2017, Beijing)
In terms of their everyday work, foreign creative workers employed by Chinese companies are often perceived as more skilful – ‘more creative’ – and thus expected to shoulder more responsibilities and sometimes to work longer hours than their Chinese counterparts, in line with their relatively higher salaries. Yet they do not enjoy the same social welfare system as Chinese employees. Nance, who has worked at CCTV for four years, shares that their foreign employees are not entitled to the full welfare system including social insurance, the housing fund and the annual bonus. The opacity of the Chinese legal system and the dysfunction of work unions increase the difficulty of challenging unfair treatment for foreign employees.

Moreover, the increasingly competitive job market not only demands ever-higher levels of creative skills but also requires foreigners to adapt to the local production system. Chinese regulations on cultural production apply to all companies producing and distributing their cultural content in the Chinese market. According to the official regulations, international creative professionals are prohibited from starting private businesses in media production sectors such as news agencies, radio, television, and film production. To participate in Chinese media production, foreign firms or individuals have to seek assistance from or collaborate with local companies. Transnational cultural workers in Beijing thus have to adapt their individual creativity to the local/global production system, in which advanced creative skills are demanded while this creativity also needs to be in accordance with, or at least acceptable to, the Chinese authorities. Of course, this is not to suggest that international creative workers in Beijing need to completely give up their individuality and criticality, but meticulous self-governance is certainly required. As Anna, the co-founder of the I: Project space, an independent art space in Beijing, says of dealing with ‘sensitive topics’:

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4 This restriction also applies to foreign companies that want to do business in these fields. See: Opinions on foreign investment in Chinese cultural sectors 2005.
We work with lots of political artists, but for residencies; most of them are not Chinese, so they won’t necessarily criticise China. For exhibition projects, which are mostly for Chinese artists, if it is political work and we think it’s relevant, we will definitely show it, 100%. But we’ll still think about how to promote it. I mean you try not to self-censor, but with regard to promotion, you would be more careful and do it more properly.

Self-governance and self-censorship seem to be a prerequisite for working in the Chinese cultural sectors. International creative workers like Anna have to calculate their creative and business strategies not only to meet the needs of the market, but also to eliminate the political risk that their work might bring in the socio-political context of China.

Finally, the international creative workers’ highly mobile work and life in Beijing, coupled with different cultural norms, discourages them from getting married and having a family. As Nancy explained to me:

For foreign (western) women, it’s difficult to find a Chinese partner. It’s rare to see a couple consisting of a Chinese man and a western woman. The relationship between a Chinese mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is way too complicated for western women. As a foreigner, having children in Beijing [in international hospitals] is also very expensive, let alone Chinese environmental pollution, education and health care. So if we start thinking about settling down and having a stable family life, we’ll probably leave China.

The desire to start a family and to have a stable home is in tension with the mobility and flexibility required of foreigners doing cultural work in China. On the one hand, as in other parts of the world, the seemingly ‘bohemian’ work environment is marked by significant inequalities in terms of gender, race, class, age and disability (Conor et al. 2015). The idea of ‘coolness’ attached to creative work tends to presuppose a young, single and passionate-to-work subjectivity, which militates
against the ethos of ‘collectivity’, ‘motherhood’ and ‘family’ (McRobbie 2016). On the other hand, specific Chinese institutional predicaments, such as restrictions on visas and immigration, environmental issues, as well as obstacles in relation to accessing education and the medical system, aggravate this situation for international creative workers in Beijing.

Besides the gendered form of precarity signalled by Nancy, other forms confront those from different racial backgrounds and those lacking Chinese language proficiency. For example, during my fieldwork, I tried to but never succeeded in finding creative professionals from Africa. The international community in the Chinese cultural sectors seems to be dominated by white westerners, East Asians and those from Chinese diasporas. The relatively monolingual environment in Beijing brings more obstacles for those seeking employment security who cannot speak fluent Chinese.

China’s limitations on migration, the precarious working conditions and political restrictions in the cultural sector, and various social-environmental problems have discouraged transnational creative workers from becoming permanent migrants or Chinese citizens. It seems, then, that the career opportunities brought by the emerging Chinese creative economy are accompanied by risks and precarity, as well as a requirement for effective self-governance.

**The production of cosmopolitan subjects in Beijing**

Until now, this chapter has shown how career opportunities have motivated international creative workers to move to China, while on an everyday basis they often find themselves confronted with precarious conditions. This precarious living in Beijing calls for self-governance: adapting their creativity and subjectivity to the local production and social system. To obtain a network, which might bring new career opportunities, they need to socialise with local Chinese. To do this, they have to understand and speak the local (cultural) language. The various bars, art and
music spaces in Beijing’s hutong alleys are one of the crucial sites where interaction between local and international cultural workers takes place.

Part of their self-governance, these socialising activities are an immediate response to the international creative workers’ precarious living and working conditions in Beijing. On the one hand, this behaviour corresponds to the neoliberal mode of flexible work and subjectivity. On the other hand, as this section will show, it also creates something extra, even something unwanted by the Chinese state capitalist system. My fieldwork for Chapter 3 on Chinese independent filmmaking, for instance, showed that underground film screenings in hutong bars are important occasions for Chinese independent filmmakers to encounter and network with international creative workers. For local filmmakers, these events bring potential opportunities to connect to the international market (such as overseas film festivals and agencies) that can provide alternative distribution channels, allowing Chinese indie filmmakers to dodge the stringent censorship and regulation of the Chinese market.

For international creative subjects, these social events provide opportunities to encounter similarly precarious local producers and, by interacting with them, to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the (Chinese) ‘other’ and the self. Denis, a British man who has studied and worked in China since 2013, explained to me how he views his identity and the question of ‘integration’:

I have to say that the four-year experience in China also becomes a big part of my identity…. I know many people saying that they don’t like China and don’t want to stay because that they cannot integrate into Chinese society, which I understand but don’t believe. I don’t believe in that kind of monolithic Chinese society. In a country as big as China, there are lots of different societies, different economic or social groups with different background.

Denis speaks fluent Chinese and lives in a hutong community with his Chinese girlfriend. Apart from doing translation work for advertising companies, he likes to
photograph street life in Beijing’s traditional hutongs and he is also a devoted viewer of local Chinese independent documentaries. In terms of his perspective on Chinese identity, Denis questions any monolithic interpretation of Chineseness. Similarly, working as a video game producer for an international game company in China, Mike sometimes volunteers as a subtitle translator for a Chinese indie filmmaker. It seems that his day-to-day communication and interaction with local Chinese, enabled by his job and language ability, has made him embrace a more understanding stance toward the cultural differences:

I often tell my Chinese friends that if you want to make me angry, you can simply say ‘you don't understand’. … There are some basic differences in terms of education and life experience between those with a Chinese passport and people like me with a Dutch passport, but simple judgements like 'you don't understand' are not relevant. For some foreigners, similarly, these differences and words like ‘you don’t understand’ can lead them to very simplistic conclusions about China and Chinese. ‘Oh the Chinese are like this!’ That really annoys me because you cannot have these opinions without any further study on it.

That cultural differences exist is acknowledged, but according to Mike such differences do not necessarily preclude active communication leading to mutual learning and understanding.

Their precarious living conditions also prompt these international creative workers to take advantage of the current techno-economic conditions for their own purposes. To avoid the inconvenience of China’s censored internet, they use VPN technology to remain connected to the outside world. The flexibility of their creative work and discounted airfares also give them the freedom to temporarily escape Beijing’s environmental pollution and hot summers. Finally, the growing and globalising Chinese economy ensures that their Chinese expertise will continually bring new career opportunities even when they leave China. These
conditions give considerable leeway to international cultural workers to combat their everyday precarity in Beijing, while also allowing some of them to embrace the mobile and less-planned lifestyle required of them. Dahlia is a Dutch freelancer who has been in China for over 11 years. After getting her degree in fashion studies from the Netherlands, she came to Beijing to visit her parents, who were staying there at the time, and the city fascinated her. Because she was looking to temporarily escape from what she had studied, she decided to move to China without expecting to stay long. Over the years, she has taken many jobs with different organisations, ranging from foreign language teacher, graphic designer, consultant and programme manager to cultural officer at the Dutch embassy. According to Dahlia, change itself really attracts her, regardless of the risks it may entail:

I don’t know where that change is going, [towards] good or bad. There is some energy here behind the change. I never worried about the negative impact that such mobility might bring.... People need risks in life. It’s good for them.

As the above stories illustrate, the precarious life and need for self-governance in the transnational creative workplace in Beijing can yield a subjectivity that is incalculable and potential empowering. Over the years, these transnationals seem to have developed a certain modality of cosmopolitanism: Denis’s understanding of identity and Chineseness, Mike’s remarks on cultural difference and mutual understanding, and Dahlia’s embracing of a changeable and mobile life all suggest that they share a common positive stance toward the diversity and coexistence of cultures. This stance fits into the classic configuration of the cosmopolitan as ‘someone who crosses borders and is ready to expose [herself] to new people, to appreciate their cultures, and to respect them independently of their national, ethnic or religious affiliations’ (Nowicka and Kaweh 2016, 76).
Figure 4.4 a Dutch singer and his friends from a local Chinese band (Photo by author, 2017, Beijing)

According to Nowicka and Rovisco (2016, 2), cosmopolitanism is both a moral ideal and an everyday practice ‘apparent in things that people do and say to positively engage with the ‘the otherness of the other’ and the oneness of the world’. My fieldwork shows that many transnational creatives are active participants in Chinese society and local culture field. For instance, his previous research and work experiences encouraged Laurent to become a volunteer assisting the local people in Beichuan, a county in Sichuan Province, which has been undergoing rebuilding after the catastrophic earthquake in 2008. In August 2017, Laurent hosted a special exhibition and sale of his photographic works in Beijing, donating all the money made to his friends in Beichuan. Meanwhile, as I have already mentioned, many international creatives are supportive audiences for and sometimes co-producers of Chinese local independent cultural productions.
This is not to suggest that every international creative worker in Beijing has embraced cosmopolitanism in this way. This chapter does not assume that international cultural workers in China are a homogeneous group. As noted, diversities of gender, race and linguistic ability can create differentiated experiences of precarity and cosmopolitanism among transnational creative workers in Beijing. Thus, those who openly embrace a cosmopolitan outlook often have obtained high fluency in Chinese, which makes it easier to interact and communicate with local Chinese at a meaningful level.

What this chapter wants to argue is that the experiences of transnational creative workers in Beijing, although characterised by a degree of precarity and a need for self-governance, nonetheless provide a foundation for a cosmopolitan subjectivity. Following Beck (2006), it should be noted that this process of ‘cosmopolitanisation’ can be quite unconscious – a side effect of the everyday experience of working and living in a transnational context. In addition, it is important to emphasise that the type of cosmopolitanism fostered among this specific group in the particular context of Beijing is not that of what Elliott and Urry (2010) call the cosmopolitan ‘global elite’, which keeps a ‘distance from locality’. As I have shown, life in Beijing for these transnational creative workers is rendered precarious by various socio-economic circumstances. Echoing David Ley (2004, 162), their cosmopolitan experience in Beijing is situated and ‘imbued with partiality and vulnerability’. These cosmopolitan subjects also differ from what Pheng Cheah (2006, 492) critiques as ‘a new technocratic professional class whose primary aims in life are making a profit and conspicuous consumption’. It is the global capitalisation of creativity that brings these international creative workers to China, but their goals are not restricted to making money and consuming local goods, as the above cases of these international subjects’ active participation in the local cultural scene underline. Moreover, their actual experience in China is as much precarious as financially productive. The cosmopolitanisation of these international cultural workers is the result of the precarity produced by
Conclusion

This chapter has investigated the experiences of a specific group of cultural workers in China: international creative professionals in Beijing. Their expertise and everyday practice in Beijing have contributed to the image of Beijing as a ‘global creative city’, to the thriving of Chinese/global creative industries, and to China’s aspiration to achieve an economic transformation by moving ‘from made in China to created in China’. As suggested, these individuals come to Beijing for its emerging career opportunities, while in their everyday work and life they confront quite precarious situations, which discourage them from becoming Chinese and may incite them to leave when they reach the stage of wanting to lead a more stable life and start a family.

At the same time, the precarious life produced by the mobility and flexibility demanded of international creative workers in Beijing also 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. As such, it can be seen as an example of what Lorey (2015) terms the ‘incalculable’ consequence of precarisation and self-governance.

This transnational mobility of creative labour in Beijing epitomises the process of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation that I described in the introduction. These international creators’ experiences in Beijing have engendered conditions conductive to a cosmopolitan subjectivity, which not only surpasses the conforming culture Chinese governance of the cultural economies seeks to produce, but also connects to diverse forms of identification espoused by both locals and globals. At the same time, processes of re-territorialisation also incorporate their
labour and life into the larger Chinese and global creative economies, causing a form of precariousness and turning them into schizoid creators. Arguably, although these international creative workers are becoming part of the Chinese creative workforce, they will never ‘be’ Chinese creatives.

This chapter, like Chapter 3, has underscored that it may be too hasty to see the precarity caused by the economic globalisation of creative labour as exclusively negative. We need to pay more attention to the notion of ‘productive precarity’ – to the unexpected effects precarious lives, forms of creative work and economies can have. As the following chapter will demonstrate, in China, this precarious yet also productive system not only incorporates talented, educated and professional cultural workers, but also mobilises a massive group of individuals with more grassroots backgrounds and vernacular creativities to become an ‘unlikely’ creative class.
Chapter 5 The unlikely creative class: Kuaishou and Chinese
digital cultural production

‘Lonely, I feel alive,
I just wanna touch the sky.
And you, girl please don't cry,
You know I’m your Mr.Right!
Boy, playing guitar,
Girl, loving her star,
And together we sing a song that will take me to your heart!’

(Lonely Hero, 一人我饮酒醉, translated by Jiu Xing, 2016)

Introduction

The above words are uttered by a young man in a black sleeveless T-shirt sitting in front of a computer screen; Tian You is his name and he calls himself an MC.¹ In a recorded live-streaming video, he expresses his anger at the prevalence of discrimination, the unequal distribution of wealth and social inequality in the form of Hanmai² (喊麦), a Chinese rap-like performance that has been popular on the

¹ In rapper culture, MC stands for ‘Microphone Controller’ or ‘Master of Ceremonies’; the abbreviation is often used as a title for skilled rappers. Tianyou chose this title to identify himself as a Chinese rapper.

² Hanmai literally means ‘shouting with a microphone’. Chinese online rappers like Tianyou
internet since 2014. Thanks to live streaming platforms like YY and Kuaishou (快手), its particular combination of coarse narration and rhythmical music is now celebrated by millions of young Chinese. Not long ago, Li Tianyou, which is Tian You’s real name, was a scrawny high-school dropout struggling to make a living in a small, dreary industrial city in north-eastern China. Since 2014, he has been one of the best-known Chinese ‘internet celebrities’, commanding a fan base of over 35 million people for his live streaming shows on Kuaishou and earning more than 1.8 million euros a year in payments from his fans and advertisers. And Tian You is not alone. Enabled by emerging Chinese digital platforms, thousands of young Chinese like him are posting images, short videos and making live streaming shows to flaunt their creative talents while also hoping to earn a lot of money. Most of them are uneducated young Chinese from small cities and rural areas. They earn an average monthly income ranging from 2,000 RMB (250 euros) to 4,000 RMB (500 euros); successful ones can earn as much as one million (120,000 euros) per month (Arcbering 2017 Jan. 20; Hernández 2017 Sept. 15).

But this new form of creative business is not without risks. The ranting style of performance and its enormous popularity with massive online fan bases have also troubled the Chinese authorities. In early 2018, Tian You was accused by China Central Television, the central television network controlled by the state, of talking about pornography and drugs during his live streaming. Shortly after, Tian You and some other top-ranked live streamers were banned by all Chinese platforms and their performing careers seem to have come to an end (Chen, 2018 Feb. 13).

When thinking about the ‘creative class’ (Florida 2002) one tends to imagine an urban elite, an educated group of predominantly young people who work in the cultural industries and gather in hipster bars with their Macbooks, dressed in the latest local and cosmopolitan designer brands. But, as the story of created and popularised this form. They shout out rhythmical lyrics, usually rephrased in classical Chinese, combined with popular online slang, to high beat music.
Tian You shows, the emerging digital and platform economy also offers opportunities for lower educated, more marginal people to participate as producers in the Chinese creative economies. According to the *White Paper on Chinese Digital Economy 2016* released by the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), the national administrative bureau in charge of the Chinese internet communication sector, China’s digital economic aggregate in 2016 reached 226 billion RMB, constituting 30.3% of China’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (CAC 2017a, 19). More importantly, the convergence of traditional sectors and digital internet technology has replaced ICT manufacturing, telecommunication and software industries to become the ‘main engine’ of the Chinese digital economy (2017a, 24). Various digital platforms such as Taobao and Wechat have played a crucial role in such convergence processes, forming the so-called platform economy. In the media and cultural sectors, digital convergence has contributed 45.4% of total economic growth in the broadcast, television, film and recording industries. According to Nieborg and Poell (2018, 2), such platformisation marks ‘the penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems, fundamentally affecting the operations of the cultural industries’. Data-based digital/internet technologies afford platforms like Kuaishou a high connectivity that allows them to mediate between various actors, including content producers, end-users and advertisers, and to incorporate them into the platform-dominated network system of ‘the multisided markets’ (McIntyre and Srinivasan 2017; Nieborg and Poell 2018). The platformisation of cultural production blurs the boundaries between traditional media forms and gives rise to an exponential growth of user generated content production. The multi-sided network system not only enables traditional media companies to expand their content business, but also, as Tian You’s story shows, produces opportunities for marginalised individuals to become self-employed ‘creative workers’.

In this chapter, we want to investigate this emerging yet ‘unlikely’ creative class in China, which is part of the rapid platformisation of Chinese cultural

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3 This chapter was co-authored with Jeroen de Kloet.
production, and engage with the aesthetics of their work this class produces. How are these diverse and sometimes marginal groups of individuals and their creativities mobilised and incorporated into the platform creative economy? What kinds of aesthetics and culture are produced on these content platforms? How does platformisation relate to the Chinese state’s governance of culture, economy and society? And what are the differences and similarities between Chinese platformed cultural production and its counterpart in ‘the west’? To address these questions, the chapter focuses on one particular platform, Kuaishou. Labelled by Chinese mainstream media as ‘revitalising Chinese rural culture’ (Liu 2017), the app attracts hundreds of millions of Chinese from the countryside and the second and third tier cities. Since 2012, it has become one of the most popular video-sharing platforms in China, allowing its users not only to watch, make and distribute various genres of short videos, but also to become ‘complementors’ of the platform (Nieborg and Poell 2018): professional content producers contributing to the platformisation of cultural production in China.

As we will introduce in the following section, this chapter studies Kuaishou and the ‘unlikely creative class’ it enables from three conceptual angles: that of the political economy, that of the digital system, and that of the individual agency. Our focus is on the production of creator subjectivities in China’s platformed creative economy. By taking into account the vibrant interaction among the state, the platform and the various individual creators, this chapter serves as a case study to shed light upon the specificities of the platformisation of cultural production in the context of contemporary China.

The platformisation of cultural production in China

As a global phenomenon, the platform economy has been extensively criticised for the type of labour it involves. Van Doorn, for example, notes that in the platform economy contracted labour has been replaced by ‘platform labour’, which adopts ‘a more austere and zero-liability peer-to-peer model that leverages software to optimise labor’s flexibility, scalability, tractability, and its fragmentation’ (van
Doorn 2017, 901). In this sense, workers are regarded as complementors or subcontractors, instead of employees, of the platform companies, which are therefore exempted from providing labour protection. Critical political economists have also attacked content-based platforms for deliberately inviting users to become ‘prosumers’ and thus contributing to the exploitation of free, creative labour (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Fuchs, 2010).

Although these arguments provide valuable insights into the new labour conditions in the global platform economy, what they tend to overlook are the active agency or personal practices of digital/platform creators. The ‘multi-sided markets’ of platform businesses suggest a more complicated relationship among different actors in the operation of platformisation than terms like ‘prosumption’ and ‘exploitation’ can capture. The networked mode of cultural production indicates that ‘the costs of the production and consumption of goods and services’ will affect other complementors of the platform such as content producers and advertisers, and vice versa (Nieborg and Poell 2018, 4). As the word ‘complementor’ implies, the commercial relationship between platform companies and complementors is not only exploitative, but also collaborative and symbiotic. The long-term financial success of digital platforms is thus not simply based on the exploitation of platform labour, but is contingent upon commercial collaboration between platform companies, content producers and other complementors. In the case of Kuaishou, as we will show in the following sections, by actively utilising the digital system afforded by the platform, ‘grassroots’ content producers are enabled to develop a digital entrepreneurship: the diverse content creators actively develop and monetise their creativity and individuality to establish a new form of career and lifestyle – a digital creative business that can not only brings back financial benefits but also social mobility (e.g. from ‘migrant worker’ to ‘urban creative class’). The critiques of ‘prosumption’ cited above may lose sight of the active interactions and the symbiotic relations between the platform companies and their various complementors. To achieve a more grounded and balanced understanding of digital creative subjectivity on platforms like Kuaishou, we need to look at the everyday
experiences of various individual creators – their motivations, struggles and strategies – and locate these experiences in relation to the networked system of the Chinese digital cultural economy.

In this networked system and the development of the platform economy, the Chinese State is a crucial agent. As Yu Hong (2017a, 10-13) illustrates, the Chinese government has pledged to place information and communication at the centre of the national economic restructuring plan, using information, communications and technology (ICT) as industries and infrastructures to transform traditional industrial sectors. However, as Tian You’s experience shows, the state not only wants to ‘profit’ from information and culture, but also to control and shape it. As the previous chapters also reiterated, the Chinese state always expects that the commercialisation of culture and creativity to conform to its ideological control and work towards maintaining social and political stability. With regard to Kuaishou, therefore, we need to begin by asking how this platform’s cultural economy is governed by the Chinese state. How does state governance affect the working experience of the various content creators active on the Kuaishou platform? To address these questions, this chapter will explore the role of the state in the governance of the platform creative economy, as well as the vibrant interactions between the state, commercial actors and the vast number of individual creators on Kuaishou.

The digital economy is also always based on a sociotechnical infrastructure, which includes digital hardware and software, the algorithmic system and even the data centre and the labour regime (Rossiter 2017). Following Brian Larkin (2013: 329), infrastructures are not only a group of things that move and support other things, but also the relations between things and the system that these things operate to create grounds for other objects. Infrastructures ‘encode the dreams of individuals and societies and are the vehicles whereby those fantasies are transmitted and made emotionally real’ (Larkin 2013: 333). In this sense, to study labour on digital platforms also entails probing the ways in which a digital system as an infrastructure becomes entangled with other political economic factors in the
subjectification of the diverse individuals acting on the platforms. The software system of online content platforms, just as Rossiter (2016, 4) shows in his study of logistic media, might also set up ‘new protocols and standards that can shape social, economic, and cross-institutional relations within and beyond’ the media/cultural industries. Algorithms, for example, through the computational calculation of massive amounts of data collected from the public, are becoming crucial engines of platformed cultural production. Their use generates a ‘new knowledge logic’, which replaces the traditional ‘editorial logic’ and promises to offer information and knowledge that is ‘free from human error, bias, or manipulation’ and solutions that ‘we cannot merely rely on, but must believe in’ (Gillespie 2014, 192). Taking these digital technologies as non-human agents, how does the algorithmic system affect the production of culture and subjectivity within the platformed cultural economy? In the context of China, how does such an ‘autonomous’ algorithmic system interact with other actors such as capital and state power, which, as noticed above, always seeks to profit from and shape culture and creativity?

With this conceptual framework in mind, this chapter studies Kuaishou and its digital content creators by engaging with the larger political economy of the Kuaishou platform, its digital operation system and the individual creative labour that provides its content. It starts with an introduction to the political economy of the Chinese platform creative economy and the specific position of Kuaishou in this system. This shows the Chinese platform cultural economy distinguishes itself from its western counterparts in its special state-platform relations, which simultaneously promote and limit platformisation. The close link with the state is seen to constitute a third dimension of contingency, in addition to ‘platform dependence’ and ‘contingent commodities’, identified by Nieborg and Poell (2018) as the forms of contingency characterising the western platform cultural economy, which we will elaborate on below. The following section analyses the workings of the Kuaishou platform. Using the ‘walkthrough’ method of Light et al. (2016, 882), ‘a way of engaging directly with an app’s interface to examine its technological mechanisms and embedded cultural references to understand how it guides users and shapes their
experiences’, we examine how the contingent platform business induced by the complicated state-commerce relationship is encoded in the algorithms of Kuaishou. Finally, to probe the characteristics of this unlikely creative class and the specific aesthetics they produce on the platform, we analyse 200 trending videos and the everyday user activities of 20 popular Kuaishou accounts. For the selection of videos and accounts, we adopted three methods. First of all, to minimise any personal preference, we set up a new account and downloaded the first 20 videos listed under the ‘trending’ tab for 7 days. The second collection of videos was selected from the first 20 accounts on the ranking list of ‘the most popular live streamers on Kuaishou’, provided by xiaohulu.com, a third-party start-up company offering data analysis and operation services for content producers on major Chinese content platforms. The final selection of videos consisted of the 10 most viewed videos on Kuaishou in August 2018, on the basis of data provided by ‘short video factory’, another third-party company publishing business reports on Chinese short video platforms. Besides conducting a visual and digital analysis of the videos, we held 14 in-depth interviews with managers from the Kuaishou company, content producers on Kuaishou and other Chinese content platforms, algorithm engineers, and other professionals whose work is related to Kuaishou and the Chinese platform creative economy. We argue that the platformisation of cultural production in China accommodates the state’s ‘entrepreneurial solutionism’, while also producing a digital creative entrepreneurship among Chinese ‘grassroots individuals’ and a dynamic digital culture permeated with contingency and negotiation.

Kuaishou and the Chinese platformed cultural economy

In 2015, in his annual speech at the Chinese national congress, Prime Minister Li Keqiang announced China’s ‘Internet+’ agenda. This is a new national development strategy that aims at boosting and restructuring the national economy through the upgrading of digital infrastructure and technological innovation (cf. The State Council 2015a). ‘Internet+’ is the continuation of the state’s economic restructuring plan, which aims to replace the unsustainable ‘export-driven’, ‘investment-
dependent’ model with a ‘consumption-based’ and ‘innovation-driven’ economy. The new policy agenda puts the ‘internet’ at the centre, aiming to integrate network connectivity and the ‘disruptive business and managerial model’ (of decentralised, private, post-Fordist corporate management) with a wide range of traditional sectors, from manufacturing, agriculture, energy, finance and transportation to public services and education (The State Council 2015a; Hong 2017b). Moreover, the ‘Internet+’ strategy pledges to propel a new digital economy that can foster and benefit small start-ups, entrepreneurship and innovation. As such, it dovetails with another policy agenda championed by the state government under the name ‘Boosting Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation’ (大众创业万众创新, dazhong chuangxin, wanzhong chuanye) (The State Council 2015b). The latter policy seeks to mobilise the creativity and innovative power of grassroots individuals for national economic growth. ‘Internet+’ complements the ‘Mass Entrepreneurship’ strategy in the sense that the prosperous digital economy provides opportunities for grassroots individuals to find employment and become entrepreneurs. According to Premier Li Keqiang,

Internet+ not only produces new economic driving power, but will also create the largest platform for the sharing economy, which stages ‘Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation’ and will deeply affect our economy, society and everyday life. It provides opportunities for not only technocrats and entrepreneurs, but also millions of caogen (草根, grassroots individuals) to exploit their talent and to realise their special value. (Li 2018)

In practice, as the official statistics cited earlier indicate, the state agenda of ‘Internet+’ and ‘Mass Entrepreneurship’ has greatly contributed to the surging platformed creative economy in China. Kuaishou, together with its competitors such as Toutiao and Douyin,4 enables both traditional media companies and Chinese ‘grassroots individuals’ to establish and expand their content business.5

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4 All are private companies receiving financial investment from Chinese Internet giants such
Launched in 2012, Kuaishou is an algorithm-based video and live streaming platform that allows registered users to create and post all kinds of short videos online. These videos show activities ranging from cooking, body building, skills training and applying make-up to micro fiction films. The remarkably diverse content made by millions of online users is computed and pushed to targeted viewers by Kuaishou’s algorithm recommendation system. This algorithm system, as Gillespie (2014) suggests, replaces the role of traditional editors in the selection and distribution of content, providing a seemingly more ‘objective’ model based on the AI computation of user data rather than on editors’ ‘subjective’ preferences.6

The most important distinguishing characteristic of Kuaishou is that the majority of its users consist of rural or third and fourth tiered city based, uneducated young Chinese (Huo 2016). As we will show, Kuaishou enabled this group to become an ‘unlikely creative class’. They actively perform their vernacular creativity (Burgess 2006) through self-taught skills, using cheap make-up and amateur photographic devices. In addition, they use the digital system of Kuaishou to monetise their creative production through advertising and e-commerce. At first sight, Kuaishou’s platform content business and its ‘unlikely creative class’ thus seem to fit comfortably with the state’s expectation of ‘mass entrepreneurship’.

However, the challenge for Kuaishou is that its user-generated content has to be in line with the Chinese authorities’ expectations of ‘what kind of stories should be told’. This is especially challenging because the stakes are high: as Baidu, Tencent and Alibaba. The headquarters of the Kuaishou company are located in Beijing and receive investment from Baidu, Tencent and several other venture capital firms.

5 The notion of ‘grassroots individuals’ (草根 caogen) resonates with the often used term ‘common people’ (老百姓 laobaixin). While we use these terms because of their prevalence in Chinese discourses, we place them in parentheses to show our awareness that they are highly problematic, obscure rather than clarify, and produce a binary division between the ‘people’ and the ‘elite’ that ignores further stratifications and more subtle class differences.

6 The technical and algorithmic elements of Kuaishou will be further discussed in the following section.
‘Internet+’ is not just about ‘restructuring the economy’, but also about restructuring culture and society. The Chinese authorities have been eager to promote a carefully curated national imagery to wield ‘soft power’ on the global stage on the one hand, while expecting a conforming culture that ensures social stability and national unity on the other. As Wanning Sun (2009, 66) highlights, this means that there is a double agenda: to ‘globally present [China] as a player whose values, ethics, and sensibilities are compatible with ... its international counterparts’, while domestically ‘avoid[ing] ‘chaos’ at all cost, including heavy-handed censorship, in order to ensure social stability and national unity’. This double agenda also applies to Chinese digital platforms. The platformed cultural production system puts users at the centre of production, endowing content producers with more autonomy. Yet, as long as these platforms operate domestically, they are not immune to censorship or the state’s demand for a compliant culture. According to the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), all types of content providers should ‘abide by the law, adhere to the correct values, and help disseminate socialist core values and cultivate a positive and healthy on-line culture’ (CAC 2017b). As the central supervisory entity for the Chinese internet communication sectors, the CAC is a very powerful government agency under the leadership of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission, headed by the Communist Party General Secretary, the Chinese president Xi Jinping. Founded in 2014, the CAC has promulgated 15 policy documents on the regulation of a variety of online content production services, from social media, including Wechat and Weibo, to search engines, mobile applications (APP), and on-line news production. Apart from demanding that all content production and distribution adhere to the law and official ideology, these documents also specify regulations on employee management and user registration, as well as punitive measures for any breaches of these regulations. According to the requirements, platform companies are fully responsible for all content circulated and will be ‘interviewed’ (约谈 yuetan) – the code word for this in China is being invited for tea – when any of it violates the law or regulations. For example, in April 2018, Kuaishou and Toutiao were both ‘invited for tea’ by the CAC for ‘ignorance of the law and disseminating programs that are against social
moral values’ (Liu 2018). The CAC required the two companies to effect a ‘comprehensive rectification’. As a result, their websites and apps shut down thousands of user accounts, including Tian You’s, for posting ‘unhealthy content’ and set up special official accounts for disseminating ‘positive and healthy values’.

Thus, under the policy agenda of ‘Internet+’ and ‘Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation’, the state’s aspiration to economic restructuring drives but also shapes the platformisation of Chinese cultural production. The state-corporate relationship is largely complicated due to the state’s dual concern with economic restructuring and cultural regulation and social stability. This state-commerce relationship renders cultural production on Kuaishou platform acutely contingent and, we argue, distinguishes the platformisation of cultural production in contemporary China from that in the west and constitutes a third dimension to what Nieborg and Poell (2018, 2) summarise as the two aspects of the ‘contingency’ of platform cultural production: ‘platform dependency’ and ‘contingent commodities’. The former refers to the dominant power of only a few platforms, such as Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft (GAFAM) in the west and Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent (BAT) in China, which ‘allow[s] content developers to systematically track and profile the activities and preferences of billions of users’ (Nieborg and Poell 2018, 2). The latter refers to how cultural commodities on digital platforms are contingent in the sense that ‘they are malleable, modular in design, and informed by datafied user feedback, open to constant revision and recirculation’ (Nieborg and Poell 2018, 2). The power of the state, at least in the case of China, engenders a third dimension of contingency that constantly shapes the practice of cultural production on Chinese digital platforms. But how is this contingency further translated in the digital setting and governance of Kuaishou? How does Kuaishou’s digital system also affect the networked relation between the state, the corporate and the various individual users, and what kind of subjectivity and culture are produced within this intricate network? The following two sections will address these questions.
Walking through Kuaishou: Algorithmic and digital governance

According to the three algorithm engineers and computer scientists interviewed, the algorithmic recommendation system of Chinese platforms has four basic components: content analysis, user analysis, evaluation and security auditing. The first two use computation models to analyse and classify various content and user data. Based on this datafication, diverse content is tagged and distributed automatically among users who are predicted by the algorithm as target groups. The evaluation component fixes and optimises the recommendation system based on the feedback from its previous operation. Finally, the security auditing component checks, filters and censors all kinds of online content, including that provided by content producers and interactive content such as end-user comments. Through artificial-intellectual (AI) machine learning, the auditing system will achieve increasing accuracy. This is only a simplistic summary of the algorithm recommendation system. The technical components are very complicated and require enormous financial investment. For security auditing systems in particular, AI is not yet safe enough, meaning that Chinese platform companies often hire manual teams for online censorship. The state’s requirement of a ‘positive’, ‘healthy’ internet culture thus increases the operational costs for these platforms. For instance, one of Kuaishou’s human resource managers told us that it recently recruited 3,000 new employees in branches in Harbin, Chengdu, Yancheng, Tianjin and Wuhan to conduct manual censorship and online surveillance.

Under the algorithmic logic, Kuaishou forges an ostensibly decentralising and democratic system for content production and selection. In principle, everyone is treated equally by the algorithmic machine, whether they are a movie star or a migrant worker. The key for content production is to obtain as much on-line traffic through the creative content as possible. According to the online archives of the Kuaishou webpage⁷ and its update records in Apple’s app store, Kuaishou has

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⁷ See https://www.kuaishou.com/
described itself through slogans like ‘something interesting’ (2015) and ‘record the world, record you’ (2016-2018). On Kuaishou’s webpage, three sentences under appear under this new slogan:

‘discover a real but interesting world’

‘be loyal to the self while not feeling lonely’

‘the same town with the same mood’

Figure 5.1 Vision of Kuaishou (screenshot from Kuaishou’s official website, August 2018)
Such lines conjure up ideas of worlding, of the self, and of locality, thus grounding the contents offered in the everyday realities of China. The images shared on the webpage and in the app store further strengthen that sense of everydayness: ordinary young Chinese are captured on everyday occasions, while travelling, at home with pets or babies, etc. Keywords like ‘real’, ‘self’, ‘interesting’ and ‘same’, together with the photos, are indicative of the vision of Kuaishou: to invite ‘grassroots individuals’ to discover and share the interesting moments in their own and others’ ‘real’ everyday lives (Figure 5.1). By promising an interesting, real, individualised but not lonely online community, Kuaishou absorbs users’ creativity into its platform economy.

Kuaishou is a free app and its revenue sources consist mainly of in-app advertising and a gifting economy through live streaming. As a typical content platform that connects multi-sided markets, Kuaishou offers two ways for in-app advertising. The first one is called ‘fans headline’ (粉丝头条fanshoutoutiao), which allows content producers to promote their video content on the platform. According to the app’s description, by paying 37.9 RMB a posted video can gain an increase of 10,000 views from end-users. Producers can simply click on the ‘fans headline’ button under the settings menu of the app interface. Another form of advertising is offered to third-party companies or brands that intend to buy advertising space on the interface. Commercials are mixed with user-generated videos and fed to targeted viewers by the algorithm. Kuaishou has not publicly specified the cost of its advertising space, but a new media agency discloses (Qirui 2017) that, apart from the one-off service fee of 5,600 RMB, advertisers pay 0.2 RMB for each click.8

Another important revenue source comes from the gifting economy in Kuaishou’s live streaming service. Only a select group of users are authorised to live streaming on the platform. Streamers interact with their fans during the streaming and fans will use kuaibi (快币), a virtual currency specific to Kuaishou, to buy virtual gifts and

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8 Kuaishou does not sell advertising space for financial or medical products, or for other social media platforms.
send them to their favourite streamers. 1 RMB can buy 10 kuaibi and the price of each virtual gift varies from 1 to 188 kuaibi. According to the platform’s regulations, after deducting 20% for tax, half of the remaining income from gifting goes to the platform company while streamers usually get less than 40%. Clearly, Kuaishou’s business model is largely dependent on how much data and data traffic the platform can collect from users. The more popular its contents are, the higher financial returns the platform and its complementors can achieve.

Kuaishou has a very simple interface. One can use email or another digital account such as Wechat, Weibo, Facebook or Google for registration. There are three tabs on the main interface: ‘following’ (关注 guanzhu), ‘trending’ (发现 faxian) and ‘nearby’ (同城 tongcheng) (Figure 5.2). The default tab is ‘trending’, which lists all the videos selected and pushed by the recommendation algorithm. There is no category selection button under the tap and videos that appear here seem to be randomly selected. After using the app for a while, the streaming list will be updated and fed with new contents that are further calculated by the algorithm. Most of these videos are indeed ‘trending’: the majority of them have obtained at least hundreds of likes and most of them were posted that day. The fifth video is usually some product advertisement. The number of videos and their genres will increase as the app is used over time. Under the ‘following’ tab, content is listed in chronological order from the accounts followed by the user. The recommendation algorithm is not applied here, since the user’s preferences are quite clear. For content producers this tab provides a window to interact directly and continuously with their target audience. The ‘nearby’ tab arranges videos based on the geolocational distance between video makers and end-users. The platform gives priority in this tab to accounts that have bought ‘fans headline’ services and accounts that are live streaming. By adding a geolocational feature to the streaming system, the

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9 It is quite ironic that a China-based platform includes both Facebook and Google in its registration interface; this underlines how censorship of both is anything but clear-cut or univocal.
platform takes the opportunity of exploiting users’ off-line real-life social networks, which might create more user engagement.

To post content on Kuaishou, users do not need to change to a different account. By simply clicking on the camera icon above the interface (Figure 5.2), they can upload and post a short video up to 57 seconds long. Users can use smartphones to capture real-time moments and edit them with background music or animation effects provided by the app. They can also use the app to publicise pre-made, more professional content. As with other Chinese internet service providers, a mobile phone number is needed for verification. Before they can be streamed, all videos uploaded to the database will be analysed by the algorithmic system.

Figure 5.2 Screenshot of Kuaishou interface (August 2018)

Figure 5.3 Screenshot of one user’s homepage (August 2018)
Verified ‘legal’ content will then be pushed to a small group of end-users for the first-round feeding – including geographically nearby users, subscribers and those predicted by the AI system as ‘potentially interested users’. After the first 24 hours, the system will evaluate the content based on the feedback of user interactive data and decide whether the content is worthy of a second or third round push. If one buys the ‘fans headline’ service, the posted video will receive the purchased amount of data traffic. As the platform’s most valuable asset, the data traffic generated by the content will bring subscriptions, high interactivity and subsequent advertising opportunities for the account holder. If their account remains highly active for weeks, achieves a large amount of subscriptions and has no history of violating the user regulations of the platform, content producers can contact the customer service for authorisation of a live streaming function. According to the platform’s regulations, there are three standards for the evaluation of such an application: the account should have a high interactivity, including continuous uploading of original content with a large number of followers and on-line interactions; the account adds to the positive image of the platform and does not have any record of violating the regulations; and users should link their account to a mobile phone number to eliminate the risk of being hacked. In 2017 and early 2018, Kuaishou stirred discussion among the public and was ‘interviewed’ by the CAC due to some online hosts’ ‘vulgar’ and ‘unhealthy’ behaviours during live streaming. As a result, the platform has become more cautious in regulating the live streaming service. The ambiguous rhetoric of the regulations gives it ample leeway and power to control and manage the live streaming service in accordance with its own interests and those of the state.

The algorithmic system and its immense database remain largely invisible to content producers and Kuaishou holds a powerful position in its platform system, similar to that of Instagram. The company never discloses any technical details of its algorithms to users. In addition, content producers only have very limited access to interactive data, such as the number of followers, comments and likes, through the app’s user interface. They can check their followers’ public homepage but
detailed user data such as demographic and behaviour information is not available. Apart from restrictions on illegal or malicious content that violates Chinese law, the Kuaishou user agreement also prohibits users from any unauthorised commercial activities such as selling products or private advertisements. By posting any content on the platform, users automatically grant the Kuaishou company ‘a world-wide, royalty-free, non-exclusive, sub-licensable and perpetual (unless withdrawn expressly by you) license, to use the content uploaded (including but not limited to copy, publish, release, as well as adapt, reproduce, translate, transmit, perform and display in original form or other forms)’ (Kuai 2018). This user agreement patently panders to the company’s commercial interests and the Chinese state’s requirement of a conforming and ‘positive’ culture. Any violation of it would lead to punishments such as changing and deleting posted content or suspending and terminating the user’s ability to use Kuaishou.

At a time when the state government is tightening its control over the cultural and media sectors, Kuaishou and other platforms will also reinforce their management of online content, as the case of Tian You shows. This underlines the unequal relationship between content producers and the platform company. Content producers have to meticulously manage their creative production to ensure the accumulation of online data traffic without breaching the platform’s regulations. The governance of digital platforms thus creates a pervasive sense of uncertainty and insecurity among content producers. In the face of this, many content producers feel obliged to post some sentences on their homepage expressing their appreciation of Kuaishou, such as ‘thank you Kuaishou for providing such a wonderful platform’, ‘I support Kuaishou for transmitting positive value’, etc. (Figure 5.3).

Our analysis so far shows that the algorithm-based system of Kuaishou epitomises the platform contingency caused by the special state-platform relationship, which, as the previous section indicated, distinguishes the Chinese platformisation of cultural production from that in the west. As a result, platform governance is subject to state regulatory power, which both promotes and circumscribes the platformed cultural production. The algorithmic machine allows
the Kuaishou platform to achieve a maximal incorporation of creativity from ‘grassroots individuals,’ but state-platform contingency also sets limits to the automation of platform governance, for example in requiring manual censorship.

For individual creators on Kuaishou, the algorithmic system and its immense database remain largely invisible. The question we engage with in the following section concerns the makers and the contents they produce. How do they deal with state-platform contingency and the need to navigate the tightrope between censorship and creativity, between production and commodification, between subjectivity and being subjected?

Unlikely makers, unlikely aesthetics?

Wang Qian grew up in the countryside of Dazhou, Sichuan, a province in west China. At the age of 15, after graduating from middle school, he followed his relatives and went to Shenzhen, becoming a factory worker. In 2016, inspired by the stories of people making money through Kuaishou, he quit his job at the factory and decided to make videos on Kuaishou. Using the name ‘brother Qian’ (谦哥 qiange), he performs and teaches magic tricks in videos and live streams on Kuaishou. Wearing a stylish hat and facial make-up, Wang Qian looks and performs like a professional magician in his videos. Yet he never received any magic training and all his skills were learned from the internet. After two years, his account had over 1 million subscriptions. This large fan base allows him to sell and advertise magic props through the platform. As Wang Qian disclosed in our interview, the digital business enabled by Kuaishou generates an average sale of 70,000 RMB per month. Deducting production costs and salaries for his assistants, Wang’s monthly income can reach 50,000 RMB (6,000 euros). Compared to his job at the factory, his new job has not only multiplied his earnings, but has also changed his appearance and identity: he seems to have gotten rid of the stigmatising label of ‘migrant worker’ to become part of the affluent, fashionable and popular ‘online celebrity’ (网红 wang hong) class. Through Kuaishou, then, Wang has jumped from the ‘sweat shop’ in Shenzhen into the urban creative class.
Wang Qian’s experience is not uncommon on Kuaishou. In Li et al.’s (2019, 13) study of the use of Kuaishou among a group of rural students, the video-sharing app is seen to allow these low-income rural youths a way to ‘express their resistance against education’ through the circulation and production of the ‘shehui ren’ (社会人, society man) subculture. As it did for Wang Qian, Kuaishou promises these rural youths an upward socio-economic mobility through capitalising on their memories and creativity in the production of the ‘shehui ren’ subculture.

Its massive popularity among the Chinese rural population, and the produced culture and aesthetics, significantly distinguish Kuaishou from other Chinese and western social media platforms. Kuaishou targets users from the urban lower social class and young people from rural society, enabling them to ‘record the world and themselves’. According to a manager from Kuaishou, the company has never tried to sign or promote any particular ‘online celebrity’. Instead, Kuaishou seems to embrace an aesthetics of the vernacular, which can be described as foregrounding ‘the un-hip, the un-cool, and possibly the downright square, [it] embraces those marginal and non-glamorous creative practices excluded from arts- and culture-based regeneration. Vernacular forms of creativity are neither extraordinary not spectacular (...) but are part of a range of mundane, intensely social practices’ (Edensor et al. 2009, 10, see also Burgess 2006).

To further explicate this vernacular aesthetics circulated on Kuaishou, we selected and analysed 200 trending videos and the everyday user activities of 20 popular Kuaishou accounts. These selected short videos constitute what Lauren Berlant has called a ‘silly archive’, which may be ‘the silliest, most banal, and ... of erratic logic’ in the everyday experiences of ordinary citizens (Berlant 1997, 12). It is precisely its ‘very improvisatory ephemerality’, its ‘very popularity’ and ‘its effects’ on everyday life, according to Berlant (1997, 12) that makes such a silly archive worthy of serious reading.

In our selection of videos, we observed five recurring genres of content:
1. Everyday life: cooking, cosmetics, pets, family life, etc.

2. Country life: fishing, hunting, crafts, vernacular landscape, etc.

3. Creative skills: singing, magic, dancing, fitness, professional skills, etc.

4. Fiction micro film

5. ‘Positive value content’ mostly produced by official sponsored accounts

For the first four genres, the idea of ‘grassrootsness’ is crucial; it is performed to add ‘authenticity’ to the videos, to make them look more real and closer to the audience’s own life. For Wang Qian, behind his polished appearance in the videos, such grassrootsness is demonstrated by his accent and his way of performing magic. Unlike professional magicians, he shows only forms of magic that he learned from the internet. More than that, he also unveils and teaches magic to his fans. In one of his videos, he remarks at the end: ‘Come on brothers. With this trick you will find a girlfriend!’

Other video makers also choose to deliberately display their underclass identity, through their accent, dress, skin colour or behaviour. For instance, in a series of videos showing cosmetic skills, the female model has quite dark skin and chubby cheeks, which does not meet the current standard in China for a ‘beautiful girl’. Thanks to the skilful use of cosmetic techniques and the special products used, the model has her appearance drastically changed, with fairer skin and thinner cheeks. Her new look (Figure 5.4) is still not comparable to that of professional models in television advertisements, yet videos like these are quite popular on Kuaishou and within a few hours can easily gain hundreds and thousands of likes from users. The secret to the high popularity of these videos is precisely the ‘grassrootsness’ and ‘authenticity’ they aim to represent: not every ordinary person is born with the beauty of a movie star, yet, by virtue of the ‘right’ make-up and techniques, video makers convince their audience that they, too, can change their imperfect physical appearance. On the homepage of another account named ‘Zhang
Deshuai’, the video maker identifies himself as a ‘country lad’ (农村小伙 nongcun xiaohuo) and posts home-made micro films. These films usually choose shabby villages as a background and tell amusing stories about relationships, family life, friendship, etc. However, in contrast to the rural landscape shown, the cast members in these videos always dress in trendy fashion with a stylish haircut, while the hilarious story lines are not necessarily about ‘country life’. The characters in the films, for example, talk about ‘watching movies’, ‘shopping’, ‘drinking milk tea’ and ‘buying a car’. Thus, while these films choose rurality as their background, in terms of the characters they show and the stories they tell they push the limits of rurality and intentionally parody the trendy life of Chinese urban youth. From Wang Qian’s magic demonstrations and the popular cosmetic videos to these self-made fiction films, the aesthetics of the videos on Kuaishou articulate the imagination of Chinese ‘grassroots individuals’ who are marginalised in mainstream popular culture. It is this imagination from the marginal that fascinates many Kuaishou users, who to some extent experience this grassrootsness and marginalisation in their own everyday lives.

At the same time, as we pointed out in the previous section, content production on Kuaishou is not immune to state surveillance. Since being interviewed by the CAC in April 2018, ‘positive and healthy values’ guide content regulation on the platform. The once very popular ‘crazy videos’, such as those depicting adolescent pregnancy and self-abuse, have been banned and deleted. The platform has also established a new genre of ‘positive-value’ content. Apart from its own official account ‘Kuaishou positive value’ (快手正能量 Kuaishou zheng nengliang), the platform invites government institutions such as public security bureaus to open accounts and post videos on ‘everyday ethical models’, ‘Chinese economic achievements’, ‘the positive image of soldiers and the police’, ‘the official policy and ideology’, etc. The algorithmic system has been set to support the videos uploaded by these accounts, which is why, in August 2018, they featured 7 out of the 10 most viewed videos on Kuaishou (SVF 2018 Aug).
In this regard, content producers on Kuaishou have to meticulously calculate their creativity, to remain in line with the platform’s so-called ‘value orientation’ while also making their content attractive to the online audience. Moreover, for these creative individuals, the platform and its digital affordances not only denote a way of performing creativity but also an effective tool for making money and building a career. Data traffic becomes a crucial asset that every creative producer aspires to accumulate in as high a quantity as possible. To do so, they first need to understand and utilise the various digital affordances of the platforms. They should, for example, update their accounts on an everyday basis. From their profile photo to their user name, everything that can give end-users a sense of what the
account is about needs to be deliberately designed and optimised. To be creative
through the digital, one has to know what, how and when to create, and for whom.
The constant posting and streaming also requires good time management skills. On
Kuaishou, producers normally choose to post their videos in the evening around 8
pm, a time when most high school students, one of the largest user groups on
Kuaishou, are at home and have just finished their homework. What Melissa Gregg
(2011, 2) identifies as the ‘presence bleed’ – how digital and communication
technologies enable ‘work to invade places and times that were once less
susceptible to its presence’ – becomes imperative for platform-based creative work.
The aim of this intensified and extensified\(^\text{10}\) (Jarvis and Pratt 2006) work for content
producers is to generate profits, which also leads to users’ appropriation of the
digital technologies for their own business purposes. Although Kuaishou prohibits
unauthorised advertising and commercial activities, video makers can still find their
own ways to avoid the platform’s supervision. Some streamers integrate contextual
advertisements for third-party merchants in their short video and live streaming
performances. For example, someone posts videos of their pets on Kuaishou and
lists their Wechat account number on the homepage to sell pet food, using acronyms
such as ‘WX’ or icons like ‘V❤’ as a substitute for Wechat (微信 weixin) to dodge
the platform’s AI monitoring (Figure 5.3).

At the same time, the high interactivity of the digital platform requires
content producers not only to strategise their creativity for business purposes, but
also to manage their affects and personality to cultivate intimacy with their target
users and audience. On Kuaishou, a phrase that appears frequently in short videos is
‘Come on bro! Double tap 666! Follow me’. The action of double tapping on a
video equals a ‘like’ from a viewer and ‘666’ in Mandarin is homophonic to liu (溜),
meaning ‘cool’ or ‘awesome’. These words are often spoken in a euphoric tone with

\(^{10}\) According to Jarvis and Pratt (2006), contemporary media and cultural industries give rise
to an increasing extensification of work, referring to the distribution or exporting of work
across divergent spaces/scales and times.
local accents. The aim is to add a sense of authenticity to the videos and develop intimacy with the audience. To gain more popularity and subscriptions, one of the strategies used by content producers is to set up a special ‘renshe’ (人设, character) - to perform a certain personality - through various creative practices that will affect and create intimacy with viewers, who will later become their followers, or fans. As is exemplified by the above videos analysed, on Kuaishou, a personality is carefully nurtured and maintained through performing ‘grassroots authenticity’. A frequent discourse that emerges out of these diverse stylisations is that of being ‘real-life’ and ‘jiediqi’ (接地气, down to earth), underlining how the personalities created should be relevant, if not identical, to those of the platform’s users.

As a result, on Kuaishou, platformed cultural production is entangled with the production of affects. These affects, such as ‘a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement or passion’, are produced through the labour process of platformisation, ‘expressing a certain state of body along with a certain mode of thinking’ (Hardt and Negri 2004, 108). By exploiting the various digital affordances and ‘renshe’, ‘grassroots’ content producers have, on the one hand, become self-employed creative entrepreneurs for whom creativity, life and individuality are constantly calculated according to the accounting of costs and profits. On the other hand, in the everyday production and management of affect through the digital affordances provided by Kuaishou, these creative individuals also become aspirational creative workers (Duffy 2016, 441) motivated by the platform’s ‘promise of social and economic capital; yet the reward system for these aspirants is highly uneven’. A data-driven economy becomes the common model that drives all the parts becoming complementors of the platform. Data and datafication matters not only for giant corporations and institutions (van Dijk 2014), but they also become crucial production tools and assets for these new, ‘unlikely’ creative subjects on Kuaishou.
Conclusion

This chapter has studied a special group of creative workers – the content creators on the Chinese social media platform Kuaishou, enabled by the emerging Chinese platform creative economy. It first examined the state-platform contingency caused by the complicated relationship between Kuaishou and the state governance of culture and economy, and how such contingency is embedded in the digital algorithmic system of the platform. This third dimension of platform contingency distinguishes the functioning ecology of Chinese media platforms from those in the west. This contingency maximises the subsumption of individual vernacular creativity in China’s platform creative economy, while also enabling marginalised ‘grassroots’ Chinese to become ‘unlikely’ creative workers.

To some extent, Kuaishou creators resemble the independent filmmakers I have studied in Chapter 3 in the sense that Kuaishou and its platform economy provide a channel for these grassroots individuals to de-territorialise from their previous ‘unsatisfactory’ livelihood and lifestyle (as migrant worker, rural residents or uneducated lower social classes) in order to become part of the urban creative class. At the same time, through this production of an ‘unlikely’ creative class, the platformisation of cultural production accommodates the Chinese state’s ‘entrepreneurial solutionism’ (Keane and Chen 2017), which, exemplified by the state’s policy on Internet+ and Mass Entrepreneurship, takes digital technology and entrepreneurship as the solution to China’s social, economic and cultural problems. The platform economy thus provides opportunities for ‘grassroots individuals’ from diverse backgrounds to become creative workers, pandering to the state’s goal of restructuring the economy.

Importantly, this grassroots digital entrepreneurship, has also transcended the passive ‘digital labour’ and ‘prosumer’ models some critical politic economists have identified (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Fuchs, 2010). Despite the institutional regulation and censorship of the internet, these grassroots creators actively participate in the 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 Chinese mainstream media. Like the creative workers introduced in the previous chapters, these ‘unlikely’ digital creators are also becoming schizoid in their everyday creative and entrepreneurial practices.
Conclusion

This study has illustrated several dilemmas characterising the Chinese creative economies. There is, first of all, the dilemma of governing. The Party-State recognises culture and creativity as both engines for economic restructuring and instruments for social governance. In the post-socialist era, the Party-State has renewed its ruling legitimacy through the marketisation reform, which encourages cultural diversity and incorporates individuals’ creativity for the purpose of economy development and restructuring. However, the vast energy of diversity and difference that the cultural industries have mobilised can also undermine or threaten the social order and political stability that China’s one-party system relies upon. Driven by this dual concern with economic prosperity and political stability, the Chinese authorities have set up policies, apparatuses and institutions to both promote and circumscribe the cultural economies. Within this dynamic system, the state and capital constantly collaborate and struggle against each other. Together, these forces induce job and life insecurities for cultural producers, but also produce an unstable governing system permeated with contradictions.

Chapter 1 has argued that the fragmented administrative system, the decentralised authoritarian regime and the complicated state-commerce relationship all profoundly affect the process of making and implementing policies for the contemporary Chinese cultural sectors. Together, they create abundant space for agency, deviation from official policies and flexibility for diverse actors in the cultural and media sphere. There is, then, a complex, dynamic relationship between administrative power and various production subjects: the crucial task for cultural producers in China is to negotiate and find ways to ‘play’ with state power, which is contested, non-unitary and multivariate. More specifically, in Chapter 2 I showed how the commercialisation reform in Chinese state-owned cultural enterprises has resulted in an entanglement of neoliberal techniques (the discourse of ‘self-
realisation’) and repressive and disciplinary regulation (strict censorship and rigid bureaucracy) in their everyday management, which has acutely reduced the efficiency of management, giving rise to a significant number of employees loafing on the job or resigning. In Chapter 3, the thriving film industry and the strict censorship have precarised Chinese independent filmmakers, re-territorialising Chinese independent cinema towards a depoliticised ‘art cinema’. In Chapter 4, it becomes clear that international creative professionals are believed to be equipped with the ‘creative know-how’ ambitious Chinese companies and local authorities long for. Their presence in Beijing potentially contributes to the thriving of Chinese/global creative industries. Yet in their everyday work and life these professionals also confront quite precarious situations, caused by China’s limitations on migration, political restrictions in the cultural sector, and various social-environmental problems. These problems discourage them from becoming Chinese and may incite them to leave when they reach the stage of wanting to lead a more stable life and start a family. Finally in Chapter 5, the emerging platform creative economy, indicated by the case of Kuaishou, accommodates the Chinese state’s agenda of ‘internet +’ and ‘mass entrepreneurship’ for economic restructuring, while the strict state surveillance and regulation for maintaining social and political stability also make the platform business quite contingent and vulnerable.

Within this dilemma of governance, there is also a dilemma of aspiration. The promised benefits of creative work – autonomy, cultural value, playfulness, etc. – are not necessarily illusory. These benefits and the perceived value of cultural work capture diverse individual creators’ hope for an ‘alternative’ or ‘something better’. Becoming part of the ‘Chinese creative workforce’ functions to de-territorialise them from their unsatisfying previous lives as, for example, coalminers, unmotivated college students, migrant workers or international cultural workers. Once having entered the cultural field, however, these aspiring creatives soon find out that their hope for an alternative becomes compromised by the often-precarious living and working conditions – a process of re-territorialisation that I clarified in
the introduction. As a result, creative aspirations end up at odds with career/life aspirations. A motivated creative worker often has to sacrifice other important aspects of well-being, such as family, friendship, financial security and community. In addition, the imagined creative autonomy or ‘independence’ of art is also undermined by the rule of the market economy and, in China, by the Party-State’s tight regulation of cultural production. As a result, many Chinese creatives, like the independent filmmakers described in Chapter 3, have to choose between ‘hunger’ and ‘co-optation’ or depoliticisation. Transnational creative workers in Beijing, too, experience their work as both compelling and perilous, both rewarding (also financially) and precarious. In the Chinese context, then, various types of cultural workers need to learn the art of balancing, between creativity and financial reward, and between expressing their discontent and catering to the image of China the authorities want to present domestically and internationally.

However, as I have reiterated in the empirical analyses, precarious life is not just perilous but can also be productive. From different angles, all my cases studies have demonstrated that the required self-governance is to some extent incalculable. Chapter 2 underscored the way in which commercialisation reform in Chinese SOCEs has brought contradictions and caused dysfunction in their governance system. These contradictions not only limit the governance and productivity of Chinese SOCEs, but also furnish creative individuals with possibilities to distance themselves from the expected subjectivity of ‘being creative for the state’ – through either loafing on the job or through resigning to join the private creative economy. In Chapter 3, the collusion between the state and capital precarises Chinese independent cinema towards a depoliticised ‘art cinema’, and forces filmmakers to multi-task and network in order to maintain a sense of optimism about the future. But something incalculable is also generated in the form of a quite inclusive mutual-caring community, which offers opportunities for screenings, skills learning and emotional sharing and caring. Moreover, the filmmakers’ precarity also triggers a more open understanding of ‘independence’ and ‘independent filmmaking’ that allows different approaches to film to flourish
and that transcends the rigid identity categories of ‘dissenting artist’ or ‘co-opted filmmaker’.

In Chapter 4, the lack of job security and various specific political-cultural-legal circumstances were seen to induce a sense of precarity among transnational creative workers in Beijing. But, as I have shown, the mobile life and flexible working conditions also create space for interaction and mutual understanding between the transnational creatives and the local population, providing the conditions for a cosmopolitan subjectivity. The presence of these situated cosmopolitans not only enriches and diversifies the Chinese creative economy but may also disturb the Chinese authorities’ expectation of a conforming and profitable creative workforce. In Chapter 5, it becomes clear that the emerging Chinese platform creative economy has enabled a massive amount of ‘grassroots’ individuals from diverse and even marginal social backgrounds to become part of the Chinese creative class. Yet the complex state-corporate relationship also renders this platform business quite contingent and vulnerable, due to the state’s dual concern with economic restructuring and cultural regulation and social stability. This contingency further translates into a complex digital system supported by advanced algorithmic and manual censorship. For content creators, such governance creates a pervasive sense of uncertainty and insecurity, and forces them to develop a grassroots, digital entrepreneurship that accommodates the Chinese state’s agenda of ‘Internet+’ and ‘entrepreneurial solutionism’. At the same time, their use and appropriation of the digital affordances of the Kuaishou platform to make money also constitutes a form of play with the platform’s governance. Thus, the Chinese platform creative economy, as exemplified by the case of Kuaishou, not only gives voices to those marginal social classes who are often ignored or misrepresented by the mainstream Chinese media, but also creates channels for social class mobility and transformation.

In sum, it can be said that cultural production and creative workers in contemporary China are governed through an unstable collusion between the Party-State and the capital that both ignites and delimits individual aspirations to being
creative and to self-realising. While navigating the tensions between governance and aspiration, Chinese creative workers are confronted with precarious, yet productive working conditions. They are encouraged to experiment with their creativity and to adjust their expectations and aspirations to the Party-State’s agenda. But in the conjunction of technologies, capital, state power and individual agency, the governing system has to also continually adjust its techniques to subsume individual creativity and labour. This has become a never-ending game of capture and escape, in which individuals aspire, become frustrated, and then start to hope for a better, more creative future again. It is in this sense that I feel Chinese creative workers are becoming schizoid. De-territorialisation and re-territorialisation continually intermingle in the process of these individuals becoming ‘Chinese creative workers’. Their aspirational work and life both serve and challenge the governance and operation of the contemporary Chinese cultural economies.

Moreover, in the production of a schizoid subjectivity, the Chinese cultural economy has itself also become schizophrenic. Its financial prosperity, which subsidises the ruling legitimacy of the Party-State, is premised on the incorporation of a vast diversity of individuals and organisations. To sustain its operation, therefore, the Chinese cultural production system also requires the effective management and regulation of heterogeneous individual and organisational forces. Much like creative individuals are pushed to master the art of balancing, the Chinese authorities also need to maintain an unstable equilibrium between promotion and regulation, reward and punishment. Despite all the struggles and frustrations caused, it may also be this schizophrenic state of governance that constantly generates and maintains hope for the future, if not optimism, of those who live and work within Chinese cultural economies.
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联网+’行动的指导意见’). [http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2015-07/04/content_10002.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2015-07/04/content_10002.htm)


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# Appendix I

## Interview List

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<th>Name</th>
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<th>Job</th>
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## Appendix II

A list of Chinese cultural industries policy (1987-2017 selected)

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<td>29/08/2014</td>
<td>Instruction on Strengthening the Administration of Internet Security in Telecommunication and Internet Sectors</td>
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<td>08/05/2015</td>
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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 illusionary 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 politic 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.
Samenvatting

Schizoïde Makers: Creatief Werk en Subjectiviteit in de Chinese Culturele Economieën

Dit onderzoek analyseert de omstandigheden van creatieve arbeid en de vorming van creatieve subjectiviteiten in China betreffende de onzekerheden die deze omstandigheden brengen, maar ook de mogelijkheden die ze kunnen genereren voor subjecten van verschillende sociale achtergronden. Deze studie is gebaseerd op het empirisch veldwerk dat ik heb uitgevoerd (voornamelijk in Beijing en Sjanghai) en op archiefonderzoek (bijvoorbeeld beleidsdocumenten en industriële rapporten), en combineert als zodanig een politiek-economische analyse van culturele productie in hedendaags China met vier empirische case studies die zich richten op creatieve werkers in culturele staatsbedrijven, onafhankelijke filmmakers, internationale creatieve werkers in Beijing en de recentelijk ontstane digitale creatieve klasse op sociale media. Door de subjectivering van creatieve werkers te onderzoeken in relatie tot de complexe en gediversifieerde arbeidsomstandigheden van culturele productie in het hedendaagse China, gaat deze studie in op drie vragen over bestuur, precariteit en subjectiviteit: 1) Hoe is culturele productie en creatieve arbeid georganiseerd en gereguleerd in de hedendaagse Chinese culturele economie (bestuur)? 2) Wat zijn de werk- en leefomstandigheden van creatieve werkers in de specifieke politieke economie van de Chinese culturele industrie (precariteit)? 3) Hoe navigeren individuele creatieve werkers het politiek-economische systeem van culturele productie in China (subjectiviteit)?

Ik begin met twee basis-aannames: ten eerste dat er in het huidige wetenschappelijke onderzoek naar creatieve arbeid te weinig aandacht is voor contextualiteit, en dat we de verschillende politiek-economische omstandigheden in de maatschappijen waar creatieve arbeid floreert dringend in overweging moeten nemen. Mijn doel 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 bestaande pogingen om cultureel werk te theoretiseren. Ten tweede, in mijn claim dat creatief werk ambitieus is, weiger ik deze aspiraties te zien als een vals bewustzijn. De onderkening dat ambitieuze creatieve werkers de precaire omstandigheden waarbinnen zij werken wellicht over het hoofd zien of bereid zijn te tolereren, betekent niet noodzakelijk dat hun aspiraties of positieve ervaringen binnen de creatieve sector een illusie zijn, of slechts gebaseerd op misleidende ideologie (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011).

Terwijl ik enerzijds onthul hoe politiek-ekonomische ongelijkheden verborgen worden door de productie van creatieve aspiratie in de Chinese culturele industrie, probeer ik ook de ervaringen en de agency van individuen die werken binnen een breed scala aan culturele sectoren, waaronder televisie, film, design, journalistiek en sociale media, te bevestigen. Ik betoog dat deze creatieve werkers allesbehalve dociele lichamen zijn die simpelweg gemanipuleerd worden door (staats)kapitalistische ideologieën. De specifieke culturele economie van China maakt ruimte voor zowel individuele keuzevrijheid als onzekerheid. Dit laat de mogelijk open dat culturele werkers verworden tot ‘schizoïde makers’ – een concept dat ik leen en ontwikkelen van Deleuze en Guattari’s schizo-analyse van hedendaags kapitalisme (1983). Het bruisende netwerk van culturele productie in China motiveert en beperkt de aspiratie van het individu tot creativiteit en zelfontplooiing. Terwijl door de markt en door de staat verwacht wordt dat ze altijd op specifieke manieren ‘creatief zijn’, vinden culturele werkers ook mogelijkheden dit imperatief te weerstaan. Hiertoe ontwikkelen ze een schizoïde subjectiviteit die het heersende systeem dient, maar tegelijkertijd uitdaagt.

functionalistische, top-down benadering met betrekking tot cultuur, beschouwd als zowel een economische troef als een cruciaal instrument om nationale en internationale soft-power uit te oefenen, en sociale en politieke stabiliteit te handhaven. Zo worden de culturele industrieën ondersteund en gepromoot door de Chinese autoriteiten, terwijl ze ook onder strikt toezicht en censuur staan. Cruciaal is dat deze top-downbenadering van de culturele industrieën en culturele productie doordrenkt is met tegenstrijdigheden, zoals duidelijk wordt bij het beschouwen van de institutionele kenmerken van het Chinese politieke systeem en het proces van beleidsimplementatie. Het gefragmenteerde administratiesysteem, het gedeentraliseerde autoritaire regime en de complexe staat-commercie relatie beïnvloeden allemaal het proces van beleid maken, alsook de implementatie van dit beleid binnen de hedendaagse Chinese culturele sectoren. Het ondoorgrondelijke politieke systeem levert uiteindelijk net zoveel obstakels als flexibele omstandigheden op voor creatieve producenten en andere actoren binnen het Chinese culturele veld. Het is daarom voor culturele producenten in China cruciaal om een manier te vinden om te onderhandelen en te ‘spelen’ met de staatsmacht, die wordt betwist en die non-unitair en meervoudig is

Hoofdstuk 2 bestudeert creatieve arbeid binnen Chinese culturele ondernemingen in staatseigendom (SOCEs). Deze staatsbedrijven zijn getransformeerd van door de staat gecontroleerde culturele werkeenheden en zijn de belangrijkste spelers binnen de Chinese culturele industrieën. Gebaseerd op een empirische analyse van veldwerkgegevens onderzoekt dit hoofdstuk het bestuur van creatieve arbeid in Chinese SOCEs middels een analyse van de omstandigheden van autonomie en het discours van zelfrealisatie binnen de door de staat gecontroleerde Chinese media. De autonomie van creatief werk binnen het systeem wordt afhankelijk gemaakt van de ideologische regelgeving van de Partijstaat, wat resulteert in een zeer bureaucratisch managementsysteem. Desondanks motiveren de verschillende welzijnsvoordelen en carrière mogelijkheden geboden door SOCEs creatieve werkers ook om, via het discours van zelfrealisatie, ‘creatief voor de staat’ te zijn. In de praktijk is het door de staat gesponsorde system echter doordrenkt van
tegenstrijdigheden, waardoor creatieve individuen de mogelijkheid krijgen zich te distantiëren van de verwachte subjectiviteit waarin ze ‘creatief voor de staat’ moeten zijn, zoals gevallen van ‘lanterfanten op het werk’ en de ‘ontslaggolf’ illustreren.


Hoofdstuk 5 bestudeert een ‘onwaarschijnlijke’ groep van creatieve werkers, gecreëerd door de opkomende platformisering van culturele productie in China: makers van korte video’s op het sociale media platform Kuaishou. Het onderzoekt de voorwaardelijke relatie tussen Kuaishou en het staatsbestuur van cultuur en economie, en laat zien hoe deze relatie is ingebonden in het digitale algoritmische systeem van het platform. Het is deze contingentie van staat en platform die de functionerende ecologie van Chinese mediaplatforms onderscheidt van die in het westen. De platformeconomie biedt mogelijkheden voor ‘grassroots individuen’ van verschillende achtergronden om creatieve werkers te worden, in overeenstemming met het doel van de staat om de economie te herstructureren en tegelijkertijd een