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Schizoid creators

Creative work and subjectivity in the Chinese cultural economies

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Publication date

2019

Document Version

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Citation for published version (APA):

Lin, J. (2019). *Schizoid creators: Creative work and subjectivity in the Chinese cultural economies*.

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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)¹

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

al. 2017). 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).² 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

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

political rationality, one that is both authoritarian in a familiar political and technocratic sense and yet also seeks to govern certain subjects through their own autonomy.

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 politic³ 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).⁴ 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

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 Guattari 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

Kuaishou⁵) 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*

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 authorities⁶ (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

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.cacnet.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).⁷ During these trips, I conducted 79 semi-structured interviews⁸ (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

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.⁹ 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

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.

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 production¹¹ 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 multi-tasking, 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.