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Creative work and subjectivity in the Chinese cultural economies

Lin, J.

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Chapter 2 Being creative for the State: Creative workers in Chinese state-owned cultural enterprises¹

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 hosts² 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

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,⁴ 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

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 SOEs. 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'.⁵ Company A⁶, 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

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 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.