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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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## Chapter 4 (Un-)Becoming Chinese creatives: Transnational creative labour mobility in global Beijing<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

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

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 4 presents the text published in *Mobilities*, with minor edits and endnotes converted to footnotes.

Maybe [I'll leave in the] next year or year and half, but I'm not sure yet. I do want to keep on filming things in China... And in general, I think China is such a chaotic place, which ... I like!

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

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

but also to the ‘space of place’, where their transnational experience is situated and co-present with that of others, including locals (Yeoh and Willis 2005).

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

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

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

- 1) What motivates international creative workers to choose China/Beijing as a place to work and live?
- 2) What are the working and living conditions of these transnational subjects in Beijing?
- 3) What kind of transnational subjectivity is produced by the mobile but also situated life of these international creative professionals in Beijing?

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

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

### **Creative labour, mobility and precarity**

As I have shown in my introduction and in Chapter 1, the policy discourse of the ‘creative class’ has been celebrated by business scholars and western policy makers as the driving force behind the construction of the ‘creative city’ and the prosperity of the ‘creative industries’ (Florida 2002). The vibrancy and tolerant attitudes of the city are claimed to be crucial factors for attracting ‘creative talents’ (Hansen and Niodomysl 2009). Over the last decade, the discourses of the ‘creative city’ and ‘cultural/creative industries’, and their emphasis on labour mobility, have been reproduced within the Chinese policy context. Since 2000, the Chinese Communist Party, not without some reluctance, has also incorporated the cultural industries in its national agenda and authorised the central government to establish new institutions and to formulate a host of policies such as five-year plans, special funds

and reform policies to boost the domestic cultural economy (see Chapter 1). At the local level, Chinese metropolises like Beijing (2014), Shanghai (2017) and Shenzhen (2016) have been lining up to promote their own ‘creative city planning’, in which ‘attracting international creative talents’ is a crucial strategy. Emphatic about the contribution of labour mobility to economy growth, the major motivation for these policies is to ‘attract creative talents’, namely established, highly skilled creative practitioners. As one of the policies asserts,

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

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

Nonetheless, the intention of this chapter is not simply to repeat the argument that creative labour is precarious. As I argued in previous chapters, my aim is to illuminate the specific experiences of precarity in different social contexts. This chapter, for example, investigates the specific precarious experiences of international creative professionals in Beijing (and in the wider context of the Chinese state's governance of cultural production and labour mobility), and the consequences of these experiences for their subjectivity.

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

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

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

After a brief account of the research method, the following sections will successively examine the varied motivations behind transnational creative labour mobility, the precarious working conditions with which international creative

workers are confronted in Beijing, and how these conditions lead to the production of a cosmopolitan subjectivity.

## Method

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

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Job</b>	<b>Interview Date</b>	<b>Nationality</b>
David Wong	male	videographer	13/7/2017	Canada
Sarah Lau	female	freelancer	15/7/2017	Hong Kong

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<sup>2</sup> Among those with western passports, more participants from the Netherlands were interviewed because of my own social network.



Simon	male	entrepreneur	18/7/2017	Malaysia
Laurent	male	photographer	24/7/2017	France
Pedro Baker	male	artist	24/7/2017	The Netherlands
Jolene	female	journalist	1/8/2017	Taiwan
Mike	male	video game producer	3/8/2017	The Netherlands
Lance Crayon	male	videographer	6/8/2017	USA
Elsa	female	graphic designer	7/8/2017	Belgium
Nancy	female	television editor	12/8/2017	France
Dahlia	female	freelance designer	12/8/2017	The Netherlands
Amy	female	newspaper editor	12/8/2017	Taiwan
Anna	female	art space director	16/8/2017	Germany
Denis	male	commercial translator	17/8/2017	Great Britain
Ruben	male	photographer	21/8/2017	The Netherlands

Table 4.1 List of participants

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

## Why come to Beijing?

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

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

Significantly, international professionals are believed to be equipped with the ‘creative know-how’ ambitious Chinese companies and local authorities long for. As Michael Keane (2016, 217) points out, in order to catch up and learn from

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

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

The internationalisation of the Chinese cultural economy also creates increasing demand for those with a bi(multi)-lingual/cultural background. On the one hand, as Keane (2016, 227) illustrates, ‘there is a lack of understanding within China of how to make content that might be successful overseas’. Developing this understanding often starts by hiring creative foreigners who speak the language and understand the overseas audience. For instance, Chinese state-run international media, such as CRI (Chinese Radio International), China Daily and CCTV (China Central Television), all have a number of foreign employees working on their international programmes.

In addition, foreign companies are lining up to access China's enormous market, generating job positions for those who can speak Chinese while also understanding the international cultural sector. Mike is a Dutch game producer who works in China for an international video game company. After graduating from Leiden University in Chinese Studies in 2013, he came to China as a tourist, to explore the country and put his Chinese language skills and cultural knowledge into practice. Unexpectedly, his friend introduced him to his current employer, an international video game company looking for someone to translate Chinese games into Dutch. He accepted the job and later became a game producer selecting local Chinese independent game developers for international production companies. Besides his knowledge of Chinese, his previous experience with video games in the Netherlands also qualified him as a game producer who could introduce an international audience and game culture to local Chinese game developers.

Finally, Beijing, as the capital city of China with a rich ancient, colonial and communist history, seems to be an attractive place for creative workers from outside China looking for 'marketable' inspiration. Just as Lance was intrigued by the graffiti artists in Beijing and decided to make a documentary on them, Pedro Bakker, a Dutch painter, was inspired by Chinese communist history and the story of Chairman Mao and his wife Jiang Qing to make a series of paintings. In August 2017, when I was visiting Beijing, Bakker was working in an art space called The Institute of Provocation on a new painting about the homosexual scenes in the Chinese classic novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* (曹雪芹 Cao Xueqin). Both of Bakker's projects were supported by art residency programs funded by European art foundations and Chinese art spaces during the time of China's growing economic and political power on the global stage. The difference between Lance and Bakker is that Lance is a junior creative worker building a career at Chinese companies, while Bakker is an established artist who only stays in China for short-term art residency programs. Still, they were both motivated by their fascination with Chinese society and the potential market opportunities of working in China.

Beijing also attracts international creative workers with its convenient city life and international atmosphere enriched by local elements, exemplified by the colourful consuming spaces in the *hutongs*, the most prominent and popular neighbourhoods of Beijing. Although in increasing tension with the local authorities, Beijing's traditional hutong alleys have the attractions that these transnational workers desire: behind the traditional appearance of the hutong hide live music pubs, local breweries, underground indie cinemas and galleries, as well as tasty street food vendors and local restaurants (Figure 4.1). The international cultural atmosphere in Beijing also creates opportunities for international cultural workers to exhibit and promote their work in the city, as demonstrated by their active presence in creative districts such as 798 and Caochangdi, as well as various hutong venues and galleries. For example, the I: Project space at Banqiao hutong and The Institute of Provocation<sup>3</sup> at Heizhima hutong, two art spaces I visited during my fieldwork, both collaborate with European art foundations and have established residency and exhibition projects for international artists whose work is related to China.

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

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<sup>3</sup> In early 2019, the Institute of Provocation moved to the 798 Art District due to rent increases..

Chinese/global cultural industries, and to China's aspiration for an economic transformation 'from made in China to created in China' (The State Council 2016).



Figure 4.1 *Jianchang No. 9*, a local pub at Jianchang Hutong (Photo by author, 2017, Beijing)

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

### **Precarity: Unbecoming Chinese creatives**

Sarah Lau is a freelance film and literary critic from Hong Kong. After working in

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

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

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

As a result, these hutongs have been transformed from singular residential areas into homogenous spaces for consumption. Often without legal permission from the government, the remaining residents seek to reconstruct and enlarge their houses for commercial use: renting them to tourists or foreigners fascinated by the hutong, or

to migrant entrepreneurs to open souvenir shops, restaurants and beer bars. For the city government, such diversity within the hutongs makes them chaotic spaces that need effective governance. By bricking up the ‘illegal buildings’, it can directly reduce such ‘chaos’ and meet its aim for the city, which is to ‘renovate hutong environment and bring back the vintage look of Beijing as ancient capital (Yu 2017).

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

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



‘cultural diversity’ clashes with the authorities’ demand for social stability and homogeneity.



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

The second site of tension is the result of China’s complex regulations on entry visa and cultural production. According to the official requirements, foreigners need at least three documents to work legally in China: an employment permit, a work visa and a work residence permit. Qualified employers first need to apply for the employment permit for their foreign employees, who later will apply for a work visa (z-type) to gain entry to China. Within 30 days of entry, the employees need to apply for a longer-term work residence permit through the city government (*Travelchinaguide* 2018). Creative freelancers, however, are not entitled to this z-type work visa because they are self-employed and thus do not have a legal employer. Instead, they can only apply for short-term 90-day tourist visa. Although there are certain agencies providing visa services for self-employed

foreigners, the process can still be quite complicated and applicants have to exit China every 90 days to renew the visa, as David Wong does. China has issued its own ‘permanent residence permits scheme’, yet the high threshold for approval has barred most foreign expatriates; only a small proportion of them with special skills, a business or family reasons qualify (Liu 2009). As Bork-Hüffer and Yuan-Ihle (2014, 571) note, despite the changes in the migration law made over the past decade, the Chinese government has no intention of substantially easing restrictions on immigration; only those regarded by China as ‘highly skilled talents’ benefit from the current immigration law. As far as cultural workers are concerned, the current entry regulation system provides convenience for those who are established and designated ‘creative talents’, while posing an obstacle for freelance and junior creative workers from overseas.



Figure 4.3 ‘Bricking up the hole’ (Photo by author, 2017, Beijing)

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

Moreover, the increasingly competitive job market not only demands ever-higher levels of creative skills but also requires foreigners to adapt to the local production system. Chinese regulations on cultural production apply to all companies producing and distributing their cultural content in the Chinese market. According to the official regulations, international creative professionals are prohibited from starting private businesses in media production sectors such as news agencies, radio, television, and film production.<sup>4</sup> To participate in Chinese media production, foreign firms or individuals have to seek assistance from or collaborate with local companies. Transnational cultural workers in Beijing thus have to adapt their individual creativity to the local/global production system, in which advanced creative skills are demanded while this creativity also needs to be in accordance with, or at least acceptable to, the Chinese authorities. Of course, this is not to suggest that international creative workers in Beijing need to completely give up their individuality and criticality, but meticulous self-governance is certainly required. As Anna, the co-founder of the I: Project space, an independent art space in Beijing, says of dealing with ‘sensitive topics’:

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<sup>4</sup> This restriction also applies to foreign companies that want to do business in these fields. See: Opinions on foreign investment in Chinese cultural sectors 2005.

We work with lots of political artists, but for residencies; most of them are not Chinese, so they won't necessarily criticise China. For exhibition projects, which are mostly for Chinese artists, if it is political work and we think it's relevant, we will definitely show it, 100%. But we'll still think about how to promote it. I mean you try not to self-censor, but with regard to promotion, you would be more careful and do it more properly.

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

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

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

The desire to start a family and to have a stable home is in tension with the mobility and flexibility required of foreigners doing cultural work in China. On the one hand, as in other parts of the world, the seemingly 'bohemian' work environment is marked by significant inequalities in terms of gender, race, class, age and disability (Conor et al. 2015). The idea of 'coolness' attached to creative work tends to presuppose a young, single and passionate-to-work subjectivity, which militates

against the ethos of ‘collectivity’, ‘motherhood’ and ‘family’ (McRobbie 2016). On the other hand, specific Chinese institutional predicaments, such as restrictions on visas and immigration, environmental issues, as well as obstacles in relation to accessing education and the medical system, aggravate this situation for international creative workers in Beijing.

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

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

### **The production of cosmopolitan subjects in Beijing**

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

music spaces in Beijing's hutong alleys are one of the crucial sites where interaction between local and international cultural workers takes place.

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

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

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

Denis speaks fluent Chinese and lives in a hutong community with his Chinese girlfriend. Apart from doing translation work for advertising companies, he likes to

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

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

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

Their precarious living conditions also prompt these international creative workers to take advantage of the current techno-economic conditions for their own purposes. To avoid the inconvenience of China's censored internet, they use VPN technology to remain connected to the outside world. The flexibility of their creative work and discounted airfares also give them the freedom to temporarily escape Beijing's environmental pollution and hot summers. Finally, the growing and globalising Chinese economy ensures that their Chinese expertise will continually bring new career opportunities even when they leave China. These

conditions give considerable leeway to international cultural workers to combat their everyday precarity in Beijing, while also allowing some of them to embrace the mobile and less-planned lifestyle required of them. Dahlia is a Dutch freelancer who has been in China for over 11 years. After getting her degree in fashion studies from the Netherlands, she came to Beijing to visit her parents, who were staying there at the time, and the city fascinated her. Because she was looking to temporarily escape from what she had studied, she decided to move to China without expecting to stay long. Over the years, she has taken many jobs with different organisations, ranging from foreign language teacher, graphic designer, consultant and programme manager to cultural officer at the Dutch embassy. According to Dahlia, change itself really attracts her, regardless of the risks it may entail:

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

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





Figure 4.4 a Dutch singer and his friends from a local Chinese band (Photo by author, 2017, Beijing)

According to Nowicka and Rovisco (2016, 2), cosmopolitanism is both a moral ideal and an everyday practice ‘apparent in things that people do and say to positively engage with the ‘the otherness of the other’ and the oneness of the world’. My fieldwork shows that many transnational creatives are active participants in Chinese society and local culture field. For instance, his previous research and work experiences encouraged Laurent to become a volunteer assisting the local people in Beichuan, a county in Sichuan Province, which has been undergoing rebuilding after the catastrophic earthquake in 2008. In August 2017, Laurent hosted a special exhibition and sale of his photographic works in Beijing, donating all the money made to his friends in Beichuan. Meanwhile, as I have already mentioned, many international creatives are supportive audiences for and sometimes co-producers of Chinese local independent cultural productions.

This is not to suggest that every international creative worker in Beijing has embraced cosmopolitanism in this way. This chapter does not assume that international cultural workers in China are a homogeneous group. As noted, diversities of gender, race and linguistic ability can create differentiated experiences of precarity and cosmopolitanism among transnational creative workers in Beijing. Thus, those who openly embrace a cosmopolitan outlook often have obtained high fluency in Chinese, which makes it easier to interact and communicate with local Chinese at a meaningful level.

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

global/Chinese capitalism, but is also incalculable and transcends the subsumption of capital.

## Conclusion

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

At the same time, the precarious life produced by the mobility and flexibility demanded of international creative workers in Beijing also fuels interaction and mutual understanding between local and global subjects, providing the conditions for a cosmopolitan subjectivity. This subjectivation of international cultural workers may transcend the Chinese authorities’ expectation of a conforming and profitable creative workforce. As such, it can be seen as an example of what Lorey (2015) terms the ‘incalculable’ consequence of precarisation and self-governance.

This transnational mobility of creative labour in Beijing epitomises the process of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation that I described in the introduction. These international creators’ experiences in Beijing have engendered conditions conducive to a cosmopolitan subjectivity, which not only surpasses the conforming culture Chinese governance of the cultural economies seeks to produce, but also connects to diverse forms of identification espoused by both locals and globals. At the same time, processes of re-territorialisation also incorporate their

labour and life into the larger Chinese and global creative economies, causing a form of precariousness and turning them into schizoid creators. Arguably, although these international creative workers are becoming part of the Chinese creative workforce, they will never 'be' Chinese creatives.

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