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Schizoid creators

Creative work and subjectivity in the Chinese cultural economies

Lin, J.

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Conclusion

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

Chapter 1 has argued that the fragmented administrative system, the decentralised authoritarian regime and the complicated state-commerce relationship all profoundly affect the process of making and implementing policies for the contemporary Chinese cultural sectors. Together, they create abundant space for agency, deviation from official policies and flexibility for diverse actors in the cultural and media sphere. There is, then, a complex, dynamic relationship between administrative power and various production subjects: the crucial task for cultural producers in China is to negotiate and find ways to 'play' with state power, which is contested, non-unitary and multivariate. More specifically, in Chapter 2 I showed how the commercialisation reform in Chinese state-owned cultural enterprises has resulted in an entanglement of neoliberal techniques (the discourse of 'self-

realisation’) and repressive and disciplinary regulation (strict censorship and rigid bureaucracy) in their everyday management, which has acutely reduced the efficiency of management, giving rise to a significant number of employees loafing on the job or resigning. In Chapter 3, the thriving film industry and the strict censorship have precarised Chinese independent filmmakers, re-territorialising Chinese independent cinema towards a depoliticised ‘art cinema’. In Chapter 4, it becomes clear that international creative professionals are believed to be equipped with the ‘creative know-how’ ambitious Chinese companies and local authorities long for. Their presence in Beijing potentially contributes to the thriving of Chinese/global creative industries. Yet in their everyday work and life these professionals also confront quite precarious situations, caused by China’s limitations on migration, political restrictions in the cultural sector, and various social-environmental problems. These problems discourage them from becoming Chinese and may incite them to leave when they reach the stage of wanting to lead a more stable life and start a family. Finally in Chapter 5, the emerging platform creative economy, indicated by the case of Kuaishou, accommodates the Chinese state’s agenda of ‘internet +’ and ‘mass entrepreneurship’ for economic restructuring, while the strict state surveillance and regulation for maintaining social and political stability also make the platform business quite contingent and vulnerable.

Within this dilemma of governance, there is also a dilemma of aspiration. The promised benefits of creative work – autonomy, cultural value, playfulness, etc. – are not necessarily illusory. These benefits and the perceived value of cultural work capture diverse individual creators’ hope for an ‘alternative’ or ‘something better’. Becoming part of the ‘Chinese creative workforce’ functions to de-territorialise them from their unsatisfying previous lives as, for example, coalminers, unmotivated college students, migrant workers or international cultural workers. Once having entered the cultural field, however, these aspiring creatives soon find out that their hope for an alternative becomes compromised by the often-precarious living and working conditions – a process of re-territorialisation that I clarified in

the introduction. As a result, creative aspirations end up at odds with career/life aspirations. A motivated creative worker often has to sacrifice other important aspects of well-being, such as family, friendship, financial security and community. In addition, the imagined creative autonomy or ‘independence’ of art is also undermined by the rule of the market economy and, in China, by the Party-State’s tight regulation of cultural production. As a result, many Chinese creatives, like the independent filmmakers described in Chapter 3, have to choose between ‘hunger’ and ‘co-optation’ or depoliticisation. Transnational creative workers in Beijing, too, experience their work as both compelling and perilous, both rewarding (also financially) and precarious. In the Chinese context, then, various types of cultural workers need to learn the art of balancing, between creativity and financial reward, and between expressing their discontent and catering to the image of China the authorities want to present domestically and internationally.

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

and that transcends the rigid identity categories of ‘dissenting artist’ or ‘co-opted filmmaker’.

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

In sum, it can be said that cultural production and creative workers in contemporary China are governed through an unstable collusion between the Party-State and the capital that both ignites and delimits individual aspirations to being

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

Moreover, in the production of a schizoid subjectivity, the Chinese cultural economy has itself also become schizophrenic. Its financial prosperity, which subsidises the ruling legitimacy of the Party-State, is premised on the incorporation of a vast diversity of individuals and organisations. To sustain its operation, therefore, the Chinese cultural production system also requires the effective management and regulation of heterogeneous individual and organisational forces. Much like creative individuals are pushed to master the art of balancing, the Chinese authorities also need to maintain an unstable equilibrium between promotion and regulation, reward and punishment. Despite all the struggles and frustrations caused, it may also be this schizophrenic state of governance that constantly generates and maintains hope for the future, if not optimism, of those who live and work within Chinese cultural economies.