

Precarious Creativity and the State in New Era China

Review of *Chinese Creator Economies: Labor and Bilateral Creative Workers*

by Jian Lin, New York University Press, 2023

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Prior to the economic reforms of 1978, a cultural occupation in the People's Republic of China meant a job for life. By the early 1990s, working outside the state sector was a choice one could make. The emerging private sector allowed more autonomy, but this came with greater job insecurity.

In *Chinese Creator Economies*, Jian Lin offers a deep dive into the precarious creative lives of Chinese, mostly young people, as well as “foreigners” who choose to work in China or visit regularly. According to Lin, the term “bilateral creative workers” describes the paradoxical experiences of workers who must navigate between the vagaries of Chinese state policy and the existential uncertainties of creative labor. The latter idea has been discussed widely in Western literature with relation to the term *precarity*: it is arguably a subgenre of academic publishing now. Lin adds another layer to this literature in documenting authoritarian governance of cultural labor where the aspiration to produce creative work that is personally satisfying must avoid upsetting cultural authorities. This constitutes a delicate balancing act.

Lin adopts a critical media industry approach combined with a political economy of cultural production. Engaging with a wide variety of global critical literature, he historically contextualizes a number of developments: the cultural and creative industries, the creative class, and platform society. Lin further drills into cosmopolitan identity in the face of authoritarian governance of cultural production. It is Lin's fieldwork, however, that support the book's fine-grained critical insights. Lin provides an ethnographic account of creative workers within state-owned cultural enterprises, independent filmmakers, international creative workers in Beijing, and the digital creative class on social media platforms.

The book is organized into an introduction and six chapters. In the introduction, Lin evokes the description "schizophrenic" with relation to how the state apparatus regulates creative expression while encouraging economic success; this theme comes up in later chapters too. For me, schizophrenia resonates with Beijing in particular, where tensions between the state, business, and the art world are most evident.

The first chapter, "Understanding China's Cultural Industries," provides an account of how the cultural industries, together with the internationalizing discourse of creative industries, moved onto the development radar in China. This led to hundreds of designated cultural industry parks and preferential policies for cultural exports. The discussion then turns to the emergence of the discourse of digital creativity in state planning documents. In the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan, digital creativity aligned with the so-called Digital China initiative. The discussion critically engages with the challenges that individual "Western style" creativity engendered, especially during the first decade of the new century among officials in the Ministry of Culture.

The second chapter, "Being Creative for the State," further takes up the idea of creative autonomy through a study of both state-owned cultural enterprises (SOCE) and private media companies. The fieldwork identified workers in the TV, film, and new media industries, and Lin conducted ten in-depth interviews with employees in the state-owned sector. The account of the four-level CCTV grading system is an original contribution to

knowledge. The question of self-realization among state enterprises is central to the discussion: How does one achieve work satisfaction under hierarchical constraints? The constraints on creative autonomy are offset, however, by the benefits of belonging to a state enterprise; for instance, having access to residency permits and the availability of career-building networks.

Chapter 3 investigates independent cinema in China from the perspective of creative autonomy. Lin conducted fifteen semi-structured interviews with independent Chinese film workers and engaged in ethnographic observation of the New Wave Experimental Film Group. Informants attest that having successful screenings at international film festivals provides cultural capital that can be converted into opportunities to work with the domestic film industries, which in turn can lead to local recognition and economic returns. However, while independent film is gaining domestic audiences, this is offset by the limited level of criticality that such filmmakers can engage in, essentially enabling a “depoliticized art cinema.” Lin’s informants say that survival in an uncertain environment means that independent filmmakers must compromise and adapt their artistic efforts and political initiatives.

Chapter 4, “Unbecoming Chinese Creatives,” investigates experiences of international creative professionals in Beijing. Lin skillfully draws fifteen vignettes, from painters to designers, photographers to designers, journalists, designers, translators, and editors. The chapter evoked memories of my own experience in China, the vicarious enjoyment of being a foreigner, which bestowed a certain mystique. Lin says: “Foreigners are wanted in China for their ‘creative know-how,’ language/cultural skills, and even simply their ‘foreignness.’”¹ He says that, at the time of writing, the international community in Chinese cultural sectors was dominated by white Westerners, East Asians, and people from the Chinese diaspora. White Westerners with bilingual capabilities were often sought out and offered roles. This desire for

1. Jian Lin, *Chinese Creator Economies: Labor and Bilateral Creative Workers* (New York: New York University Press, 2023), 117.

“white” foreign expertise has cooled somewhat in the New Era, as Chinese cultural luminaries take center stage. For diasporic Chinese, on the other hand, the opportunities are evident; for instance, in the case of David Wong, he saw the creative field in Beijing as more relaxed and less hierarchical than London, which further illustrates the theme of creative schizophrenia.

Chapter 5, “The Unlikely Creative Class,” concerns the emerging platform economy and the *wanghong* industry. *Wanghong* refers to the phenomenon of Internet influencer celebrity in China. Lin argues that the affordances of the platform economy enable grassroots *wanghong* producers to hone their digital entrepreneurship. At the same time, the state’s governance of the emergent *wanghong* industry is schizophrenic: both protective and restrictive. The Chinese authorities realized that the massive numbers of people going online, combined with enabling policies such as Internet+ and the “mass entrepreneurship innovation” program could stimulate “the innovative power of grassroots individuals.”² Of course, this was happening globally, and it was inevitable that China’s big tech companies would ride the wave. The chapter illustrates the algorithmic nature of content consumption and moderation with a walk-through of the interface for the Kuaishou social media platform. Lin points out that Kuaishou’s algorithmic system and immense database remain largely invisible to content producers. It is worth noting that Lin and his collaborators David Craig and Stuart Cunningham have delved deeper into the creator economy elsewhere.

The final chapter addresses “the future of bilateral creatives.” It could also have been entitled “The future of the cultural industries.” Jian Lin shows how the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted cultural sectors that required audiences and spectators and how it accelerated the digitalization of culture, which paved the way for AI-based solutions. The net effect is that the algorithmic governance of content leads to “safe creativities,” a term that might be exemplified by the flood of playful online videos that are staples of ByteDance and Kuaishou.

2. Lin, *Chinese Creator Economies*, 145.

Chinese Creator Economies is a major contribution to the field, and I congratulate the author for scholarly rigor. I do have a few misgivings. I am not sure why the book is entitled *Chinese Creator Economies*, as the concept of the creator economy is undefined and the term is not used in the book. There are multiple references to the creative economy, a policy discourse that dates from the time China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001 and to cultural and creative industries. A clear description of the evolution of this key term in the opening chapter would have been useful. Nevertheless, this is an insightful book, which will be of interest to all scholars of media and contemporary society.

