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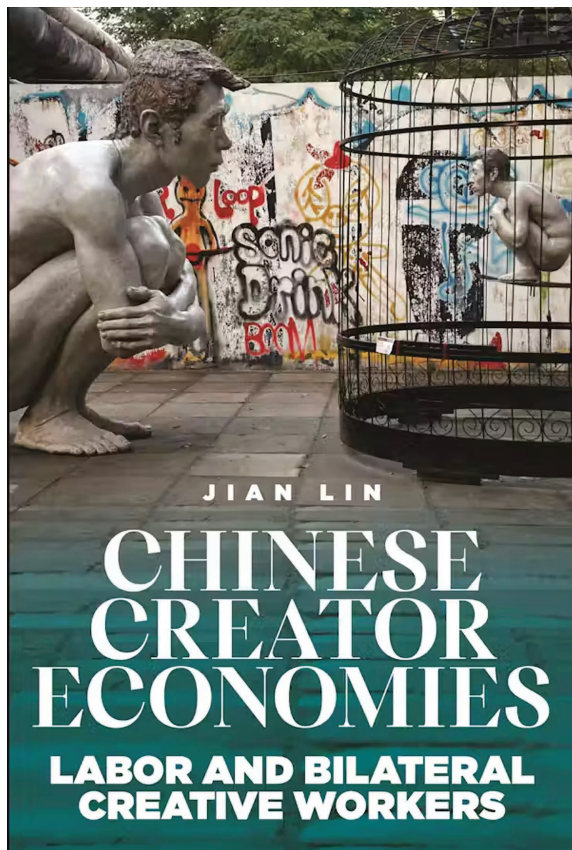
Lin, Jian. *Chinese Creator Economies: Labor and Bilateral Creative Workers* (New York: New York University Press, 2023)

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Within the scholarly discourse on the creative industry, labor occupies a distinctively inconvenient entry into the glossary. The autonomy, aspiration, flexibility, and expressivity promised by the creative industry comes at a price tag of contingency, vulnerability, and insecurity. Labor precarity is entangled with the "entrepreneur of the self," to borrow the words from Michel Foucault, insofar as creative economy, exemplified by gig work arrangements and platform-based works, produces neoliberal subjectivity that binds self with market rationales and profit logics in the context of Western democratic societies. However, the subjectification process in the creative economy and the model of creative labor should not be understood as monolithic. Jian Lin's *Chinese Creator Economies: Labor and Bilateral Creative Workers* offers a timely intervention in rethinking creative subjectivity through the lens of China's contemporary media industry.

Foregrounded in the book is the concept "bilateral creatives," which refers to the Chinese media practitioners' exigency to "seek a balance between their own cultural/career aspirations and the push and pull of the state and the market."[2] This is because the country's market reform since the 1980s had precipitated

a duplex state-market sociopolitical condition that created what Lin calls "schizophrenic" governance.[3] Navigation between the state and capital is not the sole manifestation of bilaterality; the process of becoming bilateral also involves the adherence to and contestation of the larger power relations. Put another way, bilateral creatives find themselves engaged in a multifaceted pursuit characterized by negotiation, navigation, and resistance vis-à-vis state regulation, capital expectation, and personal fulfillment. Individuals, therefore, simultaneously subjugate (and hence subjectify) themselves to and undercut the systems of state capitalism and neoliberalism. Seen in this way, Lin's push for a multiplied understanding of precarity is undergirded by complex labor conditions in China in response to both state disciplinary power and the neoliberal system. In effectively mapping out the labor conditions of the creative economy in China, he conducts a trifurcate analysis—revolving around governance, precarity, and subjectivity—to unveil the details of how bilateral creatives come into being. Having charted a policy history of cultural production since the market reform in chapter one, Lin unfolds the rest of the book by explicating the working conditions of different creative spheres of contemporary China through case studies.

Lin's ethnographic study of creative workers in China is representative, if not comprehensive: workers in state-owned/affiliated media enterprises, independent filmmakers, international creatives, and grassroots content creators. Not only does each chapter take stock of one group of creative workers, but it also attests to the necessity of paying attention to "different sociopolitical localities in order to facilitate a more differentiated theorization of creative labor."[4] In chapter two, the empirical study on state-owned cultural enterprises (SOCEs) reveals what Lin terms the subjectivity of "being creative for the state." Working within SOCEs involves a trade-off: The constrained autonomy as a result of censorship and bureaucracy is accompanied by the assurance of relative occupational stability, commensurate benefits, as well as access to a reservoir of resources and career opportunities (e.g., moonlighting). The study on independent filmmakers in chapter three revolves around what Lin puts as "precarization as governmentality." His interviews reveal that disgruntlement with living and social conditions motivated them to pursue a career in independent filmmaking, yet such trajectory is always precarized by, as Lin borrows words from the Chinese film studies scholar, Chris Berry, the "three-legged system": state censorship, capital demanding, and overseas expectations. The final aspect refers to the ways in which Chinese independent filmmakers attain recognition by conforming to the preferences of international film festivals and media, a network that often valorizes dissent. This trajectory is not unfamiliar with the experiences of globally acclaimed filmmakers like Jia Zhangke.

Noteworthy is the demographic composition of Chinese creative workers under examination in the book, which transcends the dichotomy of those who work within and out of the state system, as exemplified by the first two case studies. Chapters four and five introduce two creative classes that are often overlooked by studies on the Chinese creative industry. Chapter four directs attention to the international creative cohort within China, whose precarious socioeconomic circumstances, stemming from disparate access to social resources compared to their Chinese counterparts, impel them to foster close engagement with the local community and cultivate a cosmopolitan subjectivity. Here, Lin reminds us that despite its adverse implications, precarity can also be productive. By underscoring the distinctive experiences of working in creative industries in China, Lin argues for understanding "Chinese

creative labor" as "a fluid assemblage that allows for the coexistence of heterogeneous elements and the continuous unfolding of the difference that they embody."[5]

The penultimate chapter presents what those studying digital economy and labor as well as platforms would find most relevant, not only because the object of study is Kuaishou, a short video platform, but also because of the appearance of an "unlikely" creative class. The burgeoning monetary value of Chinese social media platforms such as Douyin, Kuaishou, and Douyu is paralleled by the emergence of a distinct subset of creative laborers, who, unlike the urban elite imagery that one conjures up, comprise blue collars, migrant workers, and those living in the Chinese countryside. Lin points out that the commonly perceived lowbrow, trite, and vulgar content—as demonstrated in the epigraph and illustrations in the chapter—produced by the philistine class can be nonetheless empowering for them. With a training background in film studies, I also found this chapter particularly intriguing in that the author adeptly guides readers through an exploration of the platform and provides insightful content analysis. For Lin, Kuaishou videos betray "grassroots authenticity" and down-to-earth formality.[6] In contrast to the polished and meticulously crafted media created by state and corporate media, grassroots videos catalyze an alchemy in which "the banality of the everyday has been converted into the productive footage of their online creative, signifying a moment when mundane life, creativity and career converge."[7] In tandem with the content analysis, Lin also walks us through the algorithm, monetization, and regulation of the platform. He points out that the *wanghong* (online celebrity) economy undergirded by these platforms co-opts with the state's vision of advocating creative entrepreneurship as a vehicle for restructuring the economy.

In the concluding chapter, Lin comments on the recent incorporation of AI technology and digitization into the Chinese creative economy—a development bolstered by state policy and an enzyme for further precarious labor conditions—as well as the globalization of platforms like TikTok. In the book, he reaffirms his argument about the bilateral nature of the Chinese creative economy "as both an industrial organization and a governing system."[8] It forces the Chinese creative workers to constantly navigate between state regulation and capital maximization, which are more often than not contradictory.

Chinese Creator Economies' intervention lies not so much in its affordance of an alternative paradigm to the dominant creative labor studies theorized from a Eurocentric perspective as a self-sufficient framework capable of encapsulating the distinct empirical intricacies of creative labor precarity in China. The book can also be praised for its attentiveness to the heterogeneous experiences of different cultural workers and its conceptualization of the term, Chinese creative labor, that is neither essentializing nor all-encompassing (as demonstrated by the chapter on international creative workers). Notwithstanding the vivid, detailed ethnographic studies and comprehensive account of the cultural policies, the book should not be understood as merely descriptive. The book's criticality lies in its engagement with analytical terms such as governance, precarity, and subjectivity throughout, and it keeps its promise of criticality to de-Westernize labor studies while also accommodating the interstice of resistance, at most, or resilience, at least. They are exemplified by cases such as loafing on the job and wave of resignation (in the chapter on SOCEs) and forming reciprocal communities among independent filmmakers.

It is noteworthy that the vibrant, interdisciplinary field of Chinese digital media labor studies is right up Lin's alley, with his prior publication *Wanghong as Social Media Entertainment in China*, coauthored with David Craig and Stuart Cunningham in 2021. Those teaching Chinese creative labor will find a growing array of materials that are adjacent to Lin's books on the bookshelf. For a similar ethnographic approach, one can find Lin Zhang's *The Labor of Reinvention: Entrepreneurship in the New Chinese Digital Economy* (Columbia University Press, 2023) as a supplement read to *Chinese Creative Economies*. For humanities scholars, Margaret Hillenbrand's *On the Edge: Feeling Precarious in China* (Columbia University Press, 2023), examining precarity, exploitation, and empowerment through close readings of contemporary cultural materials, offers provocative takes on a similar issue. For visual texts, one can't find a better rendering of Chinese creative labor than with the SXSW Grand Jury Award–winning documentary *People's Republic of Desire* (dir. Hao Wu, 2018).

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[2] Jian Lin, *Chinese Creator Economies: Labor and Bilateral Creative Workers* (New York University Press, 2023), 3

[3] Lin, *Chinese Creator Economies*, 6.

[4] Lin, *Chinese Creator Economies*, 62.

[5] Lin, *Chinese Creator Economies*, 134.

[6] Lin, *Chinese Creator Economies*, 161.

[7] Lin, *Chinese Creator Economies*, 162.

[8] Lin, *Chinese Creator Economies*, 166.