Jian Lin, **Chinese Creator Economies: Labor and Bilateral Creative Workers**, New York: New York University Press, 2023, 231 pp., $28.00 (paperback).

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In **Chinese Creator Economies: Labor and Bilateral Creative Workers**, Jian Lin analyzes the Chinese creative industry, one of the most relevant in the world today and a critical subject for understanding recent global dynamics. As the world's second-largest economy and a leading force in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) initiative, China plays a pivotal role in the Global South. Its cultural impact is equally significant, with the country serving as the second-largest cinema market globally. Lin's exploration of the Chinese creative economy and cultural industry ties together these economic and cultural dimensions, highlighting the book's scientific relevance. After the end of the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s, the Chinese government recognized culture and creativity as key economic drivers. However, the diversity and unpredictability inherent in creative economies are also perceived as potential threats to social order and political stability. The authorities implemented a series of policies through cultural reforms to promote and regulate these industries, which the author describes as a dual-track reform aimed to "transform the national economy 'from made in China to created in China'" (p. 35). Lin's work examines how Chinese creative workers navigate precarious yet productive conditions, balancing state governance with individual aspirations, while also considering state-led globalization strategies to expand China's cultural industries on the global stage. The book effectively provides updated data from official policy documents and media reports, and enriching interviews with creative workers, making it an academically valuable resource for contemporary discussions.

In the last decades, China's rise as a non-Western power has spurred discursive debates around its political, economic, and cultural strategies, especially in contrast with Western norms. These debates, especially in the press, intensified with the increased attention directed toward China during the COVID-19 pandemic and the global expansion of its digital platform economy, particularly through TikTok. The country's growing global presence—in different fields and ways—highlights two national pillars: political stability and economic prosperity. Since the 2000s, the Chinese government has officially prioritized cultural industries as a national economic strategy, creating a complex interplay between state control, economic development, and individual agency, that creative workers must manage in their daily lives. Policies and institutions have been crafted to both promote and regulate these industries, with culture serving as both a tool of ideology and a market commodity.
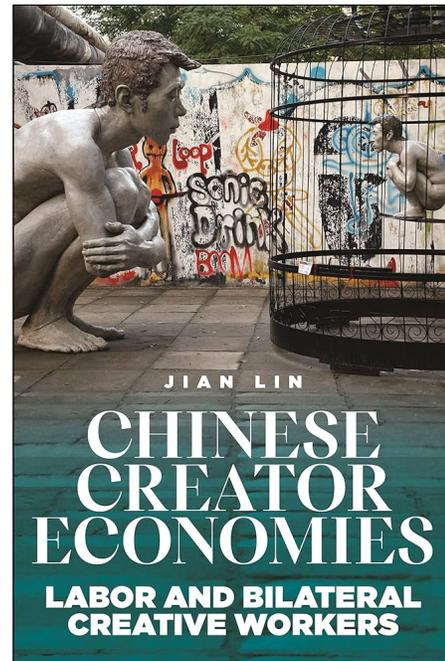
Creative workers in China operate within this dual-track system, navigating regulatory pressures and market demands that vary depending on whether they are employed by the state or the private sector or working independently. This results in varying levels of precarity and exposes the tension between state governance and creative expression. Lin's work traces the evolving perspectives of the Chinese government on its cultural industry over the past few decades, illustrating the impacts on creative labor and economies, and show how digital platforms have become spaces for both economic opportunity and cultural governance. Therefore, scholars and students interested in creative labor, the Chinese cultural industry, and digital platformization in the Global South will find this book engaging.

Chapter 1 provides a historical overview of the Chinese cultural industry's development, focusing on the state's role, especially its plans for the cultural-sector marketization reform. Over the past two decades, the Chinese cultural economy has witnessed significant growth, with various government bodies and market entities involved in this internal process. This makes the system quite complex, leading to bureaucratic challenges but also offering opportunities for workers to find loopholes to their advantage: "The crucial task for cultural producers in China is to negotiate and find ways to 'play' with the state power" (p. 55). In chapter 2, the author analyzes "the most powerful players in China's cultural industries" (p. 58): the state-owned companies and the subjectivity of their workers. The need to balance political expectations (as cultural institutions) and economic ones (as cultural industries) creates a dual dynamic in which these workers navigate the system and their personal motivations. These creators may have fewer creative choices but enjoy more stability. Chapter 3 delves into the independent Chinese film sector, focusing on creatives who, dissatisfied with the state-imposed system, choose to opt out, thereby confronting the challenges that accompany this decision. The three-legged system of state, domestic market, and international capital makes this sector precarious, leading many independent filmmakers to gravitate toward "art cinema," which is less politicized. However, they still manage to explore artistic and cinematic language while benefiting from a larger market space and reduced risk of regulation. The independent sector creators represent a different type of bilateral subjectivity compared to their colleagues in state-owned companies, yet they also balance the coexistence of economic production and the state.

Chapter 4 introduces us to the transnational mobility of labor, with the "rise of China" attracting creative workers from all over the world to Beijing. Channeling foreign expertise into China is in the government's interest, but working conditions are part of the same local system, causing workers to undergo a dynamic of deterritorialization and reterritorialization in this process of mobility, as they adapt to local interests. In chapter 5, Lin focuses on an expressive aspect of Chinese creative work: digital platforms. *Kuaishou* is the focal point of the discussion. *Wanghong*, a term that refers to online celebrities, has evolved into an industry that has generated millions of jobs in recent years and expanded participation among Chinese people from rural areas in the creative sector. These creators "negotiate their marginal position in Chinese society, thereby developing their online communities and creative entrepreneurship and becoming the 'unlikely creative class.'" (p. 162). The precarization of work here stems from the platform economy logic—driven by company governance that manages and capitalizes on this data, using algorithms to promote content—and from state governance through online surveillance. Lastly, chapter 6 speculates on the future of China's creative industries and their bilateral condition, which navigates both the market and the state simultaneously. The author reflects on the acceleration of the digitalization of creative/cultural

industries and the sector's globalizing project to "turn China into a socialist cultural powerhouse" (p. 168). However, China also faces a fundamental bilateral dilemma: The more globalized Chinese platforms become, the less "Chinese" they need to appear to integrate into Western capitalist systems.

The book's chapters cover different levels of precarity of this creative economy depending on the type of work and the degree of involvement with specific sectors of the state and the market. Lin presents a well-structured study that humanizes Chinese creative workers, shedding light on their problems and solutions in search of a better life. However, the book falls short in its de-Westernizing objective. The author's comparison of China to the West—to what he refers to as Anglo-American societies—as though the United States exemplifies freedom and favorable working conditions, undermines the goal of de-Westernizing the academic debate. Considering the Chinese system as "schizophrenic" seems to reinforce the West's position as a normative center. Like many other countries, China also faces challenges in fulfilling its national project. However, it offers a different market approach to the systems naturalized by Western neoliberalism and capitalism. Moreover, Anglo-American societies also have their own dynamics of institutional and state control in favor of their national sovereignties, so why are only non-Western societies considered disruptive?

This book would benefit by considering how China's "socialist cultural" industry positions itself as an Asian agent within a global market dominated by Western forces. It is crucial to critically examine this system and its limitations through a de-Westernized lens and comparative methodologies based on Asian experiences. The initiative to de-Westernize research "invites scholars to reflect upon the broad conditions of intellectual production and propose an epistemic shift" (Waisbord & Mellado, 2014, p. 361), and using "Asia as method" (Chen, 2010) highlights the need to break free from Western-centric frameworks to develop new methodologies based on Asian knowledge and context, and inter-Asian dialogue. This seeks to foster analytical and interpretative approaches that challenge the dominant, elitist epistemology treating the West as a standard of universal validity. The 2023 book *The Labor of Reinvention: Entrepreneurship in the New Chinese Digital Economy* by Lin Zhang (2023) is a good companion reading here for a de-Westernizing approach to Chinese creator economies.

Research on China provides political, sociocultural, and economic perspectives with far-reaching global implications, challenging the Western-centric notion of a universal experience. *Chinese Creator Economies: Labor and Bilateral Creative Workers* stands out as a significant work, amplifying the voices of Chinese cultural creators and shedding light on their experiences. By doing so, it enriches the discussion on contemporary China in today's increasingly interconnected and complex global landscape.

References

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