

Introduction: Creative labour in East Asia

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journals.sagepub.com/home/gch**Jeroen de Kloet** 

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Abstract

In this introduction to this special issue on creative labour in East Asia, we explore how the creative industries discourse, and related debates around creative labour, continue to be haunted by a Eurocentric cum Anglocentric bias. The critical language of this discourse often directs all discussion of “inequality”, “precarity” and “self-exploitation” of creative labour towards a critique of “neoliberalism”, thus running the risk of overlooking different socio-political contexts. We point at the urgency to contextualize and globalize, if not decolonize, creative work studies, including the debates surrounding precarity. This special issue explores the nuanced situations of governance and labour experiences in the cultural economies of East Asia.

Keywords

Creative Labour, East Asia, Precarity, Neoliberalism

The demand to be creative is haunting all forms of labour. Indeed, in a general sense, all human labour is potentially embodied with creativity (McGuigan, 2010, p. 324). In the past two decades, however, the circulation of capital has delimited creativity as a definitive feature that distinguishes certain occupations in the so-called creative industries. Policy makers around the globe embrace the ‘creative industries’ discourse and trumpet creative work for its bohemian spirit, autonomy and playfulness. Creativity has become a keyword globally, underpinning transformations of,

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especially, cities towards a creative economy. All over the world, the word 'creative' is the favourite prefix for related terms like districts, hubs, incubators, makerspaces, factories and labs, to cite just some of the globalized jargon currently *en vogue*. As Andreas Reckwitz (2017) writes, 'Not to want to be creative [. . .] that would seem an absurd disposition' (p. 1, author's emphasis). Yet, the notion of creativity itself remains fluid and slippery. And as Oli Mould (2018) claims, 'Contemporary society is formulated, operated and maintained with creativity as the core source of progress' (p. 25). He argues, like Andreas Reckwitz and Angela McRobbie (2016), for an unbundling of creativity, and creative labour, from its current capitalist logic.

Such critiques have noted that the real situation of creative work is not so much an ideal occupation as a new precarious condition, in which creative workers suffer from problems such as short-term contracts, uncertain career paths, inadequate insurance and pension provisions, unequal earnings, and a lack of labour union solidarity and possibility (Curtin & Sanson, 2016; Deuze, 2009; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Lloyd, 2010). As these, and other, critics indicate, the absence of responses to these problems in current creative industry policies constitutes an intentional governmental tactic of neoliberalism, rendering creative practices and institutions governable within the doctrine of the free market economy (Banks & Hesmondhalgh, 2009).

First coined by the British Labour Government in 1997 (Flew, 2012, p. 9), the creative industries discourse, with adjustments and modifications, has been taken up by many countries around the world, underscoring their contribution to employment creation, economic growth as well as national export. In the original British context, this discourse signals British 'New Labour' government's top-down approach on cultural economy. It aligns arts and media policies with economic policies and, more importantly, calls for more engagement of arts and media with the intellectual-property based information technology (Flew, 2012; Garnham, 2005).

This 'creative industries' approach arouses widespread critique. The conflation of arts with economic discourse 'overrides important public good arguments for state support of culture, subsuming the cultural sector and cultural objectives within an economic agenda to which it is ill-suited' (Galloway & Dunlop, 2007). The marketization of culture and Richard Florida's recipe of 'creative class' run the risk of normalizing the precarious and neoliberal paradigm of labour condition (McGuigan, 2010; Ross, 2009). According to Nicolas Garnham (2005, p. 15), this policy strengthens the intellectual-property protection, which benefits the major media conglomerates in the so-called copyright industries such as software, media and entertainment industries, and shifts the focus from distribution and consumption to creator human capital (promoting and aggregating the precarious employment condition). Creative industries, therefore, become a 'Trojan horse, secreting the intellectual heritage of the information society and its technocratic baggage into the realm of cultural practice', and align 'it with inappropriate bedfellows such as business services, telecommunications and calls for increases in generic creativity' (Cunningham, 2009, p. 375).

Nonetheless, we should also acknowledge that the discourse of creative industries has been diversified and translated differently when it travels around different countries and regions. As Cunningham (2009, p. 376) points out, instead of being a 'Trojan horse', creative industries become 'a Rorschach blot': the take-up of creative industries policy varies in different parts of the world – Europe, the United States, Asia or Global South – and assembles different interests and explanatory schema. For example, the top-down approach did not apply to the United States and some parts of Europe, where creative industries policies are mostly place-based, regional and municipal development strategies (Boix et al., 2016; Cunningham, 2009). Compared to British government's emphasis on economic growth and information and communications technology (ICT) innovation, the European approach on creative industries generally 'tend to stress a greater degree of

communitarian benefit and strategies of social inclusion' (Cunningham, 2009, p. 378). Similarly, in poorer countries of the global South, their approach to creative economy often associate with poverty alleviation, cultural heritage as well as basic infrastructure (Cunningham, 2009).

Arguably, however, in most cases of the transnational diffusion of the 'creative industries' policy, the 'Trojan horse' and the 'Rorschach blot' are nothing but the 'different sides of the same coin' – that either 'economization of culture' or the 'culturalization of the economy' tends to use market reasoning to dissociate culture and media from socio-political concerns (Hesmondhalgh, 2008; Lee, 2016). Within this policy context, professional creative work, especially those in mass media production such as film, television and music industries, has become increasingly subjected to the logic of market economy and capitalism.

This 'creativity *dispositif*' produces vast inequalities within global creative workplaces (Reckwitz, 2017). Gender, intersecting with race/ethnicity, age, (dis)ability and sexuality, results in various forms of occupational segregation and unequal access to creative work and its reward system (Banks, 2017). According to triumphalist claims about the 'creative class' and the 'creative city', the tolerance of cultural diversity and individual differences is crucial to cultivating creativity and a creative economy (Florida, 2002). Yet, the actual practices of the creative industries reinforce the marginalization of minorities and reproduce existing power relations and inequalities (Alacovska, 2017; Finkel et al., 2017). A number of individuals reap significant rewards from their creative labour, but a significant proportion of the population, for example, ethnic minorities and women, cannot gain access to the most prestigious sectors of the cultural industries (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011, p. 232). Even Florida (2012) himself, in the second edition of *The Rise of the Creative Class* (p. 392), as well as in his later work (2018), admits that 'a social safety net for the creative economy' is needed to compensate the risks brought by 'the flexible, hyper-individualized and contingent nature of work' in creative economy.

Most of these claims are elaborated from the perspective of Euro-American 'neoliberal' creative industries. The critical language used often directs all discussion of 'inequality', 'precarity' and 'self-exploitation' of creative labour towards a critique of 'neoliberalism', thus running the risk of overlooking different socio-political contexts. As Alacovska and Gill (2019) note, 'creative labour studies are notoriously centred on Euro-American metropolitan "creative hubs" and hence the creative worker they theorize is frequently white, middle-class, male and urban' (p. 2). The global hierarchy of creative industries and the specific regional context of political economy often affect the condition of creative labour and make the discourse of creativity function in different ways (Fung, 2016; Lin, 2019). The account of the neoliberalization and precaritization of the social (Lorey, 2015) may not be pertinent to describing politico-economic conditions in non-western contexts such as Asia, Africa and Latin America. Different social realities also give rise to variations in the discursive formation of cultural industries policy (Cunningham, 2009; Flew, 2013) and, consequently, in the actual labour conditions.

For example, in the case of China, culture and creativity are not only touted for 'restructuring economy', but also designated as instrument for wielding 'soft power' and maintaining social stability (Keane, 2010). Yiu Fai Chow (2019, p. 17) also accentuates that the Chinese political context distinguishes the politics surrounding creative workers and women in China from those in western social-democratic societies. Severe state control and rampant capitalism dilute possibilities for effective activism or revolution. Whereas politics and individual resistance never stop emerging, they are trivialized and internalized into everyday work and life.

Chow also questions the limits of the idea of precarity. He asks in his study about creative female workers in Shanghai whether, 'for these Chinese women, precarity is a human condition

known to them, suitable for them, and available to them? Perhaps “precarity” is a male-centric and Western-centric notion?’ This inspires him to ‘argue for the limits of the politics of precarity, and to propose instead an ethics of care’ (Chow, 2019, p. 4). In a similar vein, Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter (2008) argue that ‘[p]recarity appears as an irregular phenomenon only when set against a Fordist or Keynesian norm’ (p. 54). In other words, in many places around the world, including East Asia, it may well be precarity that is the norm, rather than exception. Provocatively, and speaking somewhat against Guy Standing’s (2016) work, they observe an increased disjuncture between academia and politics when they claim that ‘[t]he emergence of precarity as an object of academic analysis corresponds with its decline as a political concept motivating social movement activity’ (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008, p. 53). In the context of Japan, Shinji Oyama (2019) shows in his paper titled “Why do they not talk about creativity in Japanese creative industries?” how it are old, rather than new, media that hold most prestige in Japan, and are thus offering highly desirable job conditions. There, the demand to be creative and innovative features much less, as these are outsourced to young, freelance, and precarious labour. Creativity itself is thus managed quite differently in Japan.

In the light of this need to contextualize and globalize, if not decolonize, creative work studies, and with the debates surrounding precarity in its slipstream, this special issue explores the nuanced situations of governance and labour experiences in the cultural economies of East Asia. How does the creativity *dispositif* function differently across different geo-political contexts, such as in East Asia? Instead of grouping all the creative labourers as ‘precariat’, how do creative practitioners from different social, political contexts experience precarity differently? Most importantly, how do these diverse creative workers respond to precarious life and work? If creative subjects always have a ‘future temporal orientation’ (Alacovska & Gill, 2019) that constantly motivates them to embrace precarity and self-exploitation, then it is also our goal to explore the differences and paradoxes of their imaginations and practices of future and hope. Precarity is only the starting point for such exploration.

This special issue

The article of Changwook Kim and Sangkyu Lee shows how, despite our discussion earlier, the issue of precarity continues to be relevant for studying creative labour. They show how the digital game industry in South Korea uses freelance workers in the industrial shift towards the mobile game market. The industry is highly fragmented, making a collective mobilization against precarious work conditions highly difficult. The workers are facing what the authors call an actually existing precarity, articulated in their interviews as a strong and deep sense of anxiety over one’s future. Underscoring their search for a better future, the authors argue to connect organized labour unions to unorganized creative workers. This will help to promote solidarity and resist fragmentation and precarity. The authors thus not only add to our understanding of how precarity works in the context of South Korea; they also engage with thinking about future possibilities of collective mobilization.

Located in the increasing body of scholarship on K-wave – itself an inflection of the increasing regional and global relevance of this geocultural formation – the two subsequent contributions on K-pop turn their focus not on the industry professionals conventionally defined as creative workers. Instead, the authors, as guided by their empirical trajectory, have yielded two rich case studies that question the very notion of creative work and creative workers. Studying the Australian-based

The Academy, Kai Khiun Liew and Angle Lee, founder of the Academy, offer readers precious glimpses into the world of transnational K-pop dancing training. Through an analysis of training contents and trainee experiences, their work supplements the special issue in two interesting and important manners. First, by focusing on an institution (The Academy), that builds its business on the intersection between fan (re-creative) labour and aspirational (creative) labour, it has the potential to enrich understanding of creative labour as such. Second, it has attempted to connect creative labour with issues of identity, which is refreshing.

Meichang Sun, building on her investigation of K-pop fans in mainland China, inserts fan labour as a form of creative labour. Her article documents and dissects the ways fans, or at least some of them, consider themselves and their (economic) activities essential to the sustained creative and commercial vibrancy of K-pop; in that sense, Sun argues, they should be seen as creative labour. This argument wedges open discussions on the relationship between fandom and creative industries as well as creative immaterial labour.

The remaining articles move back to what would conventionally be seen as creative workers themselves. The new employment opportunities generated by the creative economy are often characterized by flexibility and precarity, yet the actual experiences and consequences are highly diverse among various individuals. Qing Wang's article explores such differentiations by zooming in on the experiences of Chinese female creative entrepreneurs in Shenzhen. Despite the increasing number of emerging women digital entrepreneurs, she argues that there is a constant difficulty to sustain a creative-based entrepreneurial identity. These female creative labourers face a constant devaluation of female entrepreneurship due to the hyper-competitive and masculinist forms of digital entrepreneurship and related technical fields, combined with traditional gender roles and family responsibility.

As illustrated in Ning Wei's contribution, the Chinese state's turn to a creative and digital economy has led to the flexibilization of labour relations and the dismantling of traditional secure employment. The iron rice bowl has cracked once again. As a result, China's younger generation is mobilized, this time not to fight traditional values, but to embrace the subjectivity of 'slash youth'. This term refers to a contingent combination of multiple careers and conflation of both flexibility and uncertainty. As Wei argues, however, the actual experience of being slash youth is diverse and complicated, suggesting that slash youth are stratified, and they demonstrate a differentiated ability to translate uncertainties into opportunities under the condition of individualization and precarization.

In the final article in this special issue, Lok Yee Wong and Yiu Fai Chow engage with creative workers that moved out of the industry. Drawing on the life histories of five creative workers in Hong Kong, they show how they got disillusioned and decided to quit. Four dimensions prove vital for this choice to move away from the creative industries: first, the increased level of precarity; second, a disillusionment with creativity as such; third, the urgency posed by aging; and fourth, the specific political situation of Hong Kong. These reasons of failure help, the authors argue, to broaden our framing of what constitutes precarity, away from sole economic and market-related factors to include other indicators.

Together, the articles in this special issue help to recast discussions on what constitutes precarity, the role of the nation-state and its policies, and the gendered and aged agency of creative labourers themselves. They all gesture towards the urgency to insert the East Asian experiences of creative labour into global debates over the creative industries – not only as another empirical case, but, more fundamentally, as a possible theoretical intervention. Just as the notion of creativity may

operate differently in a non-Western context (see de Kloet et al., 2019), so does creative labour differ in different parts of the world. The urgency is to unleash the combined empirical and theoretical potentials of these multiplicities of creative labour. This special issue is just a modest step into that direction, to truly and more powerfully speak back towards eurocentrically inflicted notions surrounding creativity, labour, precarity and agency; more work, from different parts of the world, needs to be done.

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