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## Digital Labor Under the State/Capitalist Duopoly: State Labor and Playful Workaholics in Chinese Digital Space

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### Introduction

With the explosion of digital technology and the spread of social media, a highly exploitative workforce has emerged in digital cultural and creative industries (Abidin, 2016; Baym, 2015; Duffy, 2017). In Western contexts, digital labor is often considered neoliberal agents, embracing a form of entrepreneurship that preaches the neoliberal ideologies of self-governance and ideals of individuality (Marwick, 2013). However, it is worth noting that digital creative industries and labor subjectivities in China present a different dynamic.

First, contemporary Chinese digital creative industries are dominated by Multi-Channel Networks (MCNs). As full-fledged service providers, MCNs are actively involved in Chinese digital creative industries. Often seen as “*wanghong*<sup>1</sup> incubators” (Han, 2021), MCNs have gone beyond service providers to full-fledged organizations, bringing together professionals from all walks of life dedicated to digital cultural production and operation (Si, 2021). In addition, MCNs in China operate a triangular business model of “social community – *wanghong* – e-commerce retail,” playing the role of “a critical intermediary which progressively fills—and institutionalizes—the space between different types of dominant platforms” (Han, 2021, p.6). In recent years, MCNs have quickly demonstrated tremendous profitability through traffic monetization. An economy called “social commerce” rises in Chinese digital space — a hybrid economy combined platforms, influencers and consumer markets (Lin, 2020).

Despite the unstoppable growth, MCNs have been accompanied by controversies. Given that MCNs represent an alliance of various capital forces to maximize traffic monetization, their dominance has made it extremely difficult for individual entrepreneurs to survive (Wu, 2021). For the most part, micro-influencers and digital

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<sup>1</sup> *Wanghong* (网红), a Chinese social media catchphrase for influencers or Internet celebrities.

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entrepreneurs have no choice but to sign up with MCNs to mitigate the instability of platformization. MCNs interfere with content production mainly based on market metrics (Jin, 2021). When necessary, MCNs mostly end support for accounts (or influencers) that do not consistently see a favorable ROI (i.e., Return on Investment). MCNs' intervention thus casts a shadow of asymmetrical power relations in Chinese digital creative industries. Importantly, MCNs do not work for nothing. They tend to take the lion's share of the revenue. Si (2021) noted that the legal relationship between digital laborers and MCNs is often seriously threatened, as MCNs deliberately damage the interests of live streaming hosts and infringe on the intellectual property of content creators.

At the same time, digital laborers in China cannot properly be characterized as neoliberal agents in the traditional sense. Instead, they grow in a digital landscape under "socialism with Chinese characteristics" (Harvey, 2007). Despite the adoption of similar neoliberal policies, China still maintains a state-led economic structure (Duckett, 2020). Importantly, platforms have become an integral part of Chinese society as the boundary between platforms, public infrastructure, and civic life becomes increasingly porous (de Kloet et al., 2019). Contemporary China has entered an era of state-led platformization that differs from platform capitalism and algorithm-based cultural industries described in Western societies (Srnicek, 2017). As evidenced by the 13th and 14th Five-Year Plans, a series of national agendas surrounding platforms and digital economy has been released in China's policy blueprint (Gao & Mu, 2021). Digital creative industries and entrepreneurship have been increasingly used for political aims and economic development. The ubiquity of state-led platformization and emerging national agendas not only fit with China's ambition for economic, technological, and infrastructural development but also brings a new model of governance to Chinese digital labor (Craig et al., 2021). Chinese state-led platformization, as "a project of "de-Westernizing" that challenges the cultural and entrepreneurial contexts of Western platform hegemony, cannot be generalized by Western platform studies (Davis & Xiao, 2021). To understand digital labor in China, it is necessary to place them into their unique platform ecology and broader sociopolitical context.

Recently, there has been a growing academic interest in China's digital labor, such as post-feminism in wanghong culture (Liao, 2021) and contingent agency of platform labor (Sun & Chen, 2021). However, the attention on MCNs, laborers under MCNs, and their interplays with the broader Chinese socio-economic context remains unexplored. As MCNs continue to grow, the status quo of digital employment and labor issues in China warrants more scholarly interrogation. Amid state-led platformization, the digital employment led by MCNs has the potential to provide new insights into structural inequalities in Chinese digital creative industries. Taken together, this project aims to address the following questions: What are the characteristics of the ideal digital laborers that MCNs look for? What are the potential exploitations and inequalities faced by these digital laborers? What are some different implications of Chinese digital labor?

## **Method & Preliminary Results**

This study focuses on digital employment in China and explores how major Chinese MCNs imagine their ideal digital laborers. Considering the significant number of MCN

agencies in China, this study focuses on those MCN agencies with beauty/fashion industry as their main business area. According to Chinese MCN Industry Development Research White Book (2020), the beauty/fashion industry occupies the highest proportion of the Chinese MCN market, with over 70% of MCN agencies involved. Drawing upon a qualitative textual analysis of 203 recruitment advertisements of MCNs, I aim to explore the characteristics of digital laborers of MCNs and the potential risks and exploitation faced by these laborers.

The findings of my study reveal that digital laborers of MCNs are trapped in a duopoly of capital power and state-led platformization. Digital laborers of MCNs not only face a range of inequalities of capitalized, platformed digital creative industries but also bear the stamp of national agenda. Under the systematic division of labor, both the highly gendered wanghong in front of the camera and the laborers behind the scenes face great risks of platformized digital economy. In the market-state nexus, I argue that digital laborers sought by MCNs can be understood as a form of state labor, whose labor subjectivity largely depends on state interests and is shaped by the national development agenda. Laborers are expected to embody the national character promoted by the state and to contribute to China's economic goals of achieving a prosperous digital economy.

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