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Online Fiction Writers, Labor, and Cultural Economy

Wei He
Beijing Normal University, China

Lei Lin
Fujian Normal University, China

Anthony Fung
Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Abstract

This paper explicates a new form of cultural economy, namely individual cultural economy, with the case of online writing platform. Critical studies of creative workers on online platforms have revealed the capitalist manipulation and exploitation in this new technologized cultural economy, and among those, online fiction writers are one of the fashionable occupations for slash youth in China. Based on survey and interviews, this paper elucidates why some youth in China chose to commit to taking online writing jobs, despite the precarious conditions. This paper argues that online fiction writers, besides deriving satisfaction and pleasure from their work, tag on are able to take advantage of the cultural logic of these capitalist-manipulated platforms, and create for themselves an individual, single person cultural economy between themselves and the platform. Different from the collective, organized cultural economy in most of the social networked platforms, such an individual economy encourages youth to create an alternative lifestyle from that of the mainstream socialist economy.

Keywords

Online fiction, creative labor, platformization, cultural economy, online writers, individual cultural economy

Corresponding author:
Anthony Fung, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2/F Humanities Bldg, New Territories, Hong Kong.
Email: anthonyfung@cuhk.edu.hk

Introduction

This paper examines a new form of cultural economy, namely individual, single person cultural economy, that exists uniquely with the rise of Chinese digital online writing platform in which writers are individually contracted to the platform and writers consider their well-being on their individual term, not on a social basis. In recent years, writing online fiction has become one of the popular cultural activities as well as job sources for youth in China. Specifically, this paper aims to explore the nature of the cultural economy of online fiction writers, and why and how creative labor of such individual cultural economy could satisfy the needs of the new youth generation.

Following the major arguments on platformization studies (e.g. de Kloet, Powell, Guo & Chow, 2019), which in general argue for precarity of the seemingly "creative labor" working on digital platforms, first, this paper has to evaluate the validity of such argument: Is there a veil of creativity online has given young, passionate users a sense of freedom and independence from control? Do the online writers as "creative" online writers are poorly paid, work long hours, and are exploited through the prevailing capitalist logic? Based on a survey and interviews with these online workers in China, we provide evidence that writers on digital platforms survive in a quite different mode. With the evidence presented, on the contrary, we illustrate that online fiction writers—rather than facing difficult challenges—tag on uses the cultural logic of these capitalist-manipulated platforms to achieve something new. Admittedly, some writers are not highly rewarded financially and have to work long hours in exchange for their rewards. From a critical point of view, we can say that they are subjected to exploitation as evidenced in the case described below. However, the data we collected suggests that they do find satisfaction beyond the writing in that they are able to lead an alternative or slash lifestyle and have working conditions that go beyond the more traditional structured time, space, and relationships with others. This paper argues that different from other online celebrities on other digital platforms for live streaming and short video, in which interaction between fans and celebrities is considered as a perquisite for the cultural economy (from Fiske, 1992 to Zhao, 2017; Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017), online writers are individually contracted by the commercial platform to form a micro-individual cultural economy. The amount of work and pleasure derived are relatively independent from other writers and interactions between fans and writers. Creativity for the writers is not so much about freely expressing their personal views with imagination and ideas of utopia (which is much exaggerated and overinterpreted), but more about creating a meaningful life for the writers themselves.

The online novel industry in China

Like other cultural industries, online fiction writing platforms, writers, authors, novelists, both paid or unpaid, and readers form a stable cultural economy in which writers' earnings depend on the sharing of subscription fees with the online platforms. In mainland China, this cultural economy has been stable, evolving since about 2000, but the issue of writer exploitation became a public concern in the late 2010s. In September 2019, a personnel reshuffle in the major online novel player Yuewen's holding of Tencent, which owns platforms, including Qidian, QQ Reading, Chuangshi, and Hongxiu—resulted in the leak of a contract signed between authors and the platforms. When the economy became more transparent, the contract was soon seen as unfair favoring the platform over the novelists. The disclosed contract simply stated that the copyright of all authored works belonged to Yuewen. In practice, should Yuewen decide that they would publish writers' novels free for promotion, writers would not be able to share the income derived from online purchases and subscriptions. However, the author would be responsible for all the legal liability of their work. Yuewen also had the right not just to publish, sell, and distribute the writings, but it also possessed

the right to operate writers' private online accounts, thereby invading writers' private space. This resulted in a backslash in which novelists, in conjunction with many key opinion leaders on social media, publicly reclaimed the autonomy of creation and refused to honor the contract. The movement forced Yuewen to revise the contract, and the public debate evolved into an "awakening" about the working conditions and rights of the so-called creative labor on digital platforms in China.

Despite the publicly acknowledged risky working conditions for online writers, there are still 100,000 online writers in China[1] with 30,000–40,000 of them regarding online writing as their primary occupation or their part-time job (Meihoutai, 2016). Why would writers as creative labor be willing to tolerate such unfairness, precarious working conditions, or exploitation, if any? What are the compelling reasons that these online writers opt for writing jobs on digital platforms despite the exploitation? Are they unconscious of their poor working condition or is it their conscious choice? In this paper, all these answers sought are not so much as to reinforce the major argument of platformization studies, but to probe into this specific cultural economy, in which youth nowadays chose to engage in production and cultural practices that they are willing to do at the expenses of potential risks.

The study of creative labor

Recent studies of digital labor approach the problem from a Marxist perspective, arguing for the potential precarity of the "creative work." In our context, such creative work refers largely to "workers" who, in addition to consuming digital content, produce user-generated content, which ultimately becomes the "commodity" that digital platforms sell to consumers. To Fuchs (2014), such prosumption activities are on par with a form of outsourcing of work from the platform to the prosumers who are unpaid or underpaid, with the value of labor largely going to the platform. It is argued that workers mechanically engage in work but lose their ability to conceive of their own creative role in the industry and determine their own life goals that are subverted to activities of the industry. Arguably, this constitutes a state of alienation that digital labor is unaware of. However, quite often, under the lure of "creativity" promised by the creative industry, to make themselves feel like part of the creative communities, digital laborers present themselves as "affected in an affective way" (Kruger, 2016, 204).

As creative labor, they do not necessarily lead a creative life. In Lin and de Kloet's (2019) study of state-backed enterprises in China, they argued that workers in creative industries are not likely to be creative. In particular, the platformization of creative industries deepens the relationship between worker–consumers and the platform in that datafication, collection of users' behavioral response, and the hidden algorithm behind the platform seemingly give digital workers a better user experience to retain them and maximize their participation (de Kloet et al., 2019). Under this logic of challenging the neoliberalist assumption in the field of cultural studies, the debate on digital or creative labor revolves around the tensions among commerce and creativity, subjectivity, and self-exploitation as well as autonomy and control (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011).

In this study, while mindful of the risky nature and working conditions for creative labor, we empirically examine the tension, if any, that arises in the creative jobs and creative workers working on online fiction platforms in China. More importantly, we go beyond the tensions to identify the specificity of digital laboring and the cultural economy of online writing platforms, which may or may not be different from other cultural economies of Chinese platforms. Whereas the claim of the precarity of creative labor was constructed against under the context of the Western, neoliberal economy, this study also calls for a reconsideration of creative labor in a non-Euro-American context. The significance of this "ex-centric perspective" on creative work lies in destabilizing and decentering the taken for granted notion and concepts that underpin creative labor studies (Alacovska & Gill, 2019).

Critique of the labor conditions of online fiction writers

In China's functioning cultural economy, online fiction writers rely on digital platforms to publish and promote their original Chinese fiction or novels that are published online regularly, from daily to bimonthly. Professional authors seldom publish sporadically or less often than bimonthly as this is not encouraged by the platform lest these authors lose the readers' attention (Editor at Yuewen, personal communication, January 28, 2019). Renumeration of writers depends on, first, profit sharing with the platforms based on readers' subscription and, second, direct "gift" (which is basically money) given to them for fan–author interactions. Because of that, writers are real laborers. The income of the writers is a direct function of their time and effort spent on the creation of texts and exchanges with readers. At this point, these writers are no different from factory workers who spend long hours on the assembly line (Zhao, 2017). Even well-paid, well-known writers spend a considerable amount of time drafting their daily writings; hence, they are given the label "servant for words" (Zeng & Ouyang, 2014).

The precarity of online fiction writers in China has been documented. The constant pressure to meet deadlines can put their physical health at risk, and their personal lives are often affected. Zhao (2017) mentioned that, as writers' income is linked to readership, their income can be very unstable. Due to the reliance on the platform for promotion, writers sometimes have to be subservient to the platform by forfeiting the copyright and Intellectual property rights (IPRs) of their writings for animations, movies, or games. Zhang and Chen (2019) argued that the flexibility of employment (of these writers) in this particular cultural industry in China implies that the capitalists can transfer the risk to the writers by compelling writers to shoulder up all legal liability in relation to the writings while accumulating the profit the writers generate. The panoptic control over the writers' cultural practices online not only reinforces the writers' subjective experience and their commitment to this "business," but also perpetuates the accumulation of the platforms' capital.

With such a background as its departure, this paper aims to explain why the digital labor of online fiction would be content to work under this precarious mode of cultural production. Based on the empirical data collected, we argue that the pleasure experienced by the fiction writers does not necessarily derive from the production, but because the flexibility of this labor allows writers to have a kind of autonomy. Autonomous labor is defined as a situation where one is able to govern oneself, acting on one's own consideration and desires and not being dependent on an imposition from the external environment (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2020). The reflexivity appended to the notion of autonomy underscores that the laborer, upon their own reflection and consideration, is able to free themselves from certain structures and forces that impede their private life world. The latter neither refers to the condition of autonomy in creation—where there is no censorship or organizational constraints—nor does it mean that, with the income, writers are financially independent and can then lead an autonomous life. Such reflexive autonomy denotes that under the planned socialist economy or authoritarian control, laborers have the capacity to recognize the limitation and manipulation of the structure and then make the choice to lead a private life, the norm and rules of which are not defined and structured by the state. A high level of reflexivity, then, means that individuals have the ability and freedom to shape their own norms and articulate their desire or pleasure as an alternative to the structure. In other words, individuals in society are able to self-reference rather than to be determined and defined by an outside party (Babcock, 1980). The data collected from the online writers presented evidence about their strong desire and rational choices for their current job, which they believe will enable them to pursue their own individual lifestyle.

A methodological note

This study combined quantitative and qualitative methodologies. A survey questionnaire was designed to measure the writers' personal rewards, including psychological and monetary rewards

(or income), job satisfaction, their quality of life, covering both physical and mental health, and other demographic factors. At this point, there is no built-in mechanism to physically distribute questionnaires to these writers; there is also no nationwide sampling frame available. Through multiple contacts with writers and informal probes on fiction platforms, we found that fiction writers have their active circles on a few social media forums and private sites, namely, Lkong.net, Zhihu, and Wechat group. From June through August 2020, the questionnaire was distributed through these sites and was followed up with personal reminders from some novelists known to us. We do acknowledge that this is not a representative national sample of online writers in China. Given that it is not possible to identify the actual population and hence sampling frame of online writers, our method is considered as the most feasible method to collect opinions from these online writers.

A total of 399 questionnaires were collected, resulting in 393 valid samples. Among the sample, 18.8% are male and 77.1% are females (while the remaining did not indicate their gender). There are 20.9% of writers are aged below 20 and 50% of writers aged 20–29. Over 90% of these writers are unmarried. The writers are very educated with 68.2% are university graduates and 12.7% with post-graduate education. Based on interviews with Yuewen editors, the profile of the sample was quite close to the reality with more female writers and educated writers (mostly university graduates). Yet, we do acknowledge the sample is too skewed toward the female sample, and this is a possible limitation of the sampling.

The follow-up qualitative interview is designed to triangulate the data from the questionnaire and understand how the respondents interpret the wordings and meaning of the questionnaires, including their satisfaction of the job and working condition, their relationship with the platform, and ultimately their own desires, imagination and utopia as youth under the Chinese context. From those who voluntarily provided their contact information on the questionnaire, we identified 10 writers (7 female, 3 male) from 17–35 years of age across nine provinces and direct-administered municipalities. The selection of interviewees was also taken into account the educational background of the writers with 3 writers who are high school students and 7 university students or graduates. The interviews were conducted on social media (QQ and WeChat) in September and October of 2020.

Deconstructing the myth of creative labor

The myth of creative labor is that the new generation engaged in this new job type affords them a new lifestyle, creative mindset, and more commonly conceived, a comfortable financial reward that allows them to have free time for creative thinking (Florida, 2002). Critical studies on creative labor (e.g., Fuchs, 2014), however, offer an opposite view, which is that the writers who have been lured into the business with the promise of unlimited creativity are instead subjected to constant exploitation. To investigate this myth, our survey was designed to capture the perceived quality of life and materiality of the living conditions of the online fiction writers. The first construct is to directly validate the health condition of these young writers. Previous to the study, we often heard from the media that online writers have a strong health risk: working long hours, not getting enough rest, and suffering psychological stress are the common descriptions of their status (Xu, 2021), not to mention that they are not protected with social health insurance or a retirement scheme. The survey revealed that online writers were concerned about their sleep time and overall health conditions. When asked about these, they tended to give a relatively lower score of 2.88 (out of five) for both conditions. However, more online writers expressed that their health condition did not prevent them from doing the job ($M = 3.26$), and they tended to say that they were energetic enough to deal with their daily job ($M = 3.27$). At least in the survey, it did not reflect that quality of life in general was unacceptable ($M = 3.21$). The data debunked the myth that online writing is a miserable occupation that erodes the writers' physical and mental health.

In a cultural economy, the core concern is always the material reward received in return for the work. The survey data revealed that for most online writers, they had a higher income after becoming online writers. Some 71.8% of the online writers were earning more than at their previous job. However, this was limited to those below the RMB 1000 RMB income bracket. However, for other writers who had previously earned RMB 1000 or more, the percentage of those who earned more was actually far lower. This discredits the myth that online fiction writers are working in glamorous and lucrative jobs. An income of RMB 1000 is not enough for survival even in third- or fourth-tier towns. In fact, only 11.7% of the writers said they were satisfied with their income. Nevertheless, this does not mean that these workers have been put at risk as a result of the meager income they receive working online. Despite the low income, those who responded to us remained on the job. In daily life, the young generation generally do not have a heavy burden, as they have always been supported by their family in one way or another. These writers, who fall into the one-child generation, are mostly unmarried (89.6%), more than half of them are still supported by their family (51.4%), and they earn other income as slashers (55.5%); thus, their situation in life is not bad. Most (52.2%) of them felt that the current online writing job allowed them to live a reasonable life. They stated that what they actually seek is personal satisfaction, as most (67.7%) of them expressed that they "like" or "strongly like" their job as a fiction writer.

Satisfaction in a platformized job

The survey further gauged the reasons for their job choice in terms of satisfaction. Online writers' answers on a validated index on work satisfaction revealed the untold story of these fiction writers. The adopted index we used for the measurement was a localized Chinese version of 15 questions of a developed index, namely, a short version of the Minnesota Satisfaction Survey (Weiss et al., 1967; see Table 1). It included three validated areas of satisfaction that fit well for this type of platformized job as it currently exists in China (Fung & He, 2019). The three areas of satisfaction included: first, the general satisfaction with an occupation as an online writer; second, the internal satisfaction that a writer derives from working on the specific platform; and third, external satisfaction which refers to writers' perception of the job in relation to society at large.

The basic conditions and terms of work such as salary, working conditions, stability, co-workers, and the policies of the platform were summarized in the "general satisfaction" (9 items), which writers did not rate particularly high. The average score of all nine questions was 3.04 ($SD = 0.58$) on the 5-point scale. This provided evidence that these online writers do not particularly value what the platform offers them, that is, its work conditions, stability, or the materiality that we discussed earlier. This suggests that material reward is certainly not the compelling force for choosing fiction writing as an occupation. On those items that directly indicate materiality, namely, working conditions ($M = 2.88$) and salary ($M = 2.42$), we found that the writers did not feel much satisfaction. Rather, the satisfaction with the nonmaterial rewards of the job was much higher. The online writing job gives them freedom to create ($M = 3.65$), their own way of creating (3.52), and a sense of accomplishment ($M = 4.14$).

When it comes to the health and mental well-being of online fiction writers, as seen in the second area, "internal satisfaction" (5 items), the level of the writers' satisfaction was much higher ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.72$). As noted previously for such new, online slash jobs, writers are committed to working on a platformized job to be able to create in their own time and in their own space which gives them a stronger sense of identity and a feeling that they are "somebody," rather than just a worker ($M = 3.36$). Thus, unlike most laborers in planned state-controlled public enterprises, online writers are their own agents, determining what to write and how to reveal in their writings what is important to them (Table 2).

Table 1. Satisfaction of online writers with work.

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
General satisfaction			
The job provides me steady employment	389	2.71	1.203
The way platform politics are put into practice	392	2.20	1.172
My pay and the amount of work I do	388	2.42	1.072
The freedom to use my own judgement	393	3.65	1.020
The chance to try my own methods of creation	393	3.52	1.323
The working conditions	393	2.88	1.269
The way my co-workers get along with each other	392	2.97	.987
The praise I get for doing a good job	390	2.98	1.159
The feeling of accomplishment I get from the job	393	4.14	1.019
	Average	3.04	0.58
Internal satisfaction			
Being able to keep busy all the time	391	3.62	.932
The chance to work alone on the job	392	4.14	.889
The chance to do different things from time to time	393	3.93	1.003
The chance to be "somebody" in the community	393	3.36	1.038
Being able to do things that do not go against my conscience	390	4.03	1.180
	Average	3.82	0.72
External satisfaction			
The chance to do things for other people	392	3.64	.965
The chance to tell people what to do	392	3.17	.942
The chance to do something that makes use of my abilities	393	3.97	1.010
	Average	3.60	0.745

Understanding young writers in this way implies that the expression, text, and stories found in novels provide a means to articulate their individual mix of values which reflect their ideal lifestyle, which differs from writer to writer. In other words, the writer derives pleasure from the creative process and expression. There are young writers who say that "online writing as creation is exhausting but it also brings in pleasure" (Bold baby, female, 17 years old, Zhejiang), and that "achievement comes from the fact that 'I plainly express [in words and plots] my delicate feeling from my mind'" (Silas, female, 33 years old, Suzhou-Zhejiang area). Of course, this does not mean that there is no censorship on the platform. There is limitation on the creation. But these young generations, who have experienced years of state-monitored education, and learned how to openly post on Weibo, Bililbili, Baidu Tieba, and Douyin, know the political boundaries that exist (de Kloet & Fung, 2018). It is also generally known that the limitation on text is stricter than that of visuals on television and film creation in China. So long as they do not go over the red line, they can freely express themselves, create their own fictional stories with imagination and fantasy, and act in accordance with their own consciousness (M = 4.03).

The China specificity

All the satisfaction felt by these writers, however, is experienced in the political economy of China where the political climate is tight and restrictive. Whereas, in Western settings, the discussion of precarity largely rests on materiality, in China, the precarity of capital is felt less. Needless to say, productive activity or writing requires hard work. It involves the most basic form of exchange: work for money. But

Table 2. Cultural economy between individual labor and collective labor.

	Individual labor (online writing platform)	Collective labor (most enterprises)
Relationship with platform/enterprises	Direct contractual relationship with obligation to platform only	Contractual relationship with different obligations among the enterprise and other labors
Relationship among labors	No relationship Indirect competition only in terms of popularity of fictions but not in terms of revenues	Working relationship Direct competition among colleagues in a limited revenue of the enterprise
Self-/interpersonal relationship	Self-reflexive of the revenues earned	Conflict among colleagues may exist
Labor value	Wages received in proportion to what the labor contributes	Wages depending on the decision of the enterprise
Equality	Fair as all writers are abided by the same sharing formula	Inequality felt with differential in wages among different posts and hierarchy
Dispute	Simple demand in changes of Industrial practices, mainly, the contract	Collective bargaining with union with multiple possibilities with differential goal
Possible cultural resistance	Continuous guerilla warfare as individual project	Collective public movement but it is short term

for Chinese youth, it is not the materiality that they value; in fact, it is a small amount of money for them. Moreover, most one-child kids who live in the major cities do not have financial pressure. The writers' concern is more about being an autonomous agent; their satisfaction comes from a sense of accomplishment ($M = 4.14$), a nonmaterial goal. Notably, that immateriality for most of the authors does not endogenously rest within the expression in the text or writing; indeed, none of the interviewed writers talked about the ideology and themes of their fiction which is generated by their imaginations.

Rather, the writers celebrated the enabling aspects of the platform. The economy of this particular cultural industry is a means for them to realize their values—interacting with and helping others—which is exogenous to the writing and the platforms after their basic subsistence needs have been met. The data accurately indicated that their real pleasure was derived from affective engagement and interaction with others, primarily readers, as suggested by their responses to the measure of "external satisfaction" (3 items) which showed a high score ($M = 3.60$; $SD = 0.745$). Apparently, educated youth feel satisfied when they feel connected to readers because they can use their personal skills ($M = 3.97$) to help others ($M = 3.64$) and lead others ($M = 3.17$). This is consistent with the assumption of platform studies arguing that online platforms are often designed in a way that makes affect itself an a priori requirement for participation on the platform (Kruger, 2016).

Yet, we want to underscore that interaction and engagement with readers on the platform is not an ideal for all writers. The online writing platform is constructed in a way that it is tailored for the new generation, and among those are the Net Generation, who are introverted, shy to speak face-to-face, and prefer communicating online. An interviewee remarked as follows:

> Indeed, I think there are some who can write to change fate. In reality, [these people] are not happy in everyday life work, and money is always taken by dreadful employers. There is a feeling that [writers] are often harvested [by employers] as if they are crops, literally meaning that the contributors are being exploited. Writing is, in fact, being employed by myself; one is working for oneself. Earning how much all depends on me. Besides, I have a social phobia. I don't like to deal with people. Occasionally,

> [working in companies] people trick each other. To me, who is introverted, cultivating social relationships is so painful. Writing fits this type of person (Yanzi. Female, 24 years of age, Guizhou).

The way that online platforms work simply provides an environment for the "want to be left alone" adolescent, who uploads their fiction online without involving others and decides how much they interact with readers. In our survey, clearly, the highest self-valuation scores for the platform are the chance to work alone (M = 4.14). That figure is contextually connected to the lifestyle of someone growing up in a one-child family in China.

Laboring and cultural economy

The ensuing issue is why cultural economy of the online platform fits into the unique Chinese youth culture. The answer goes back to the underexplored nature of cultural economy of online fiction or writing platforms. While there are studies about the nature of online literacy communities (Hockx, 2004) and their emerging internal economies within a social network market in which traditional publishing integrates the internet economy (Humphreys, 2009; Zhao, 2011), there are few studies that have empirically explained the specific cultural economy of the online writing platform in relation to the writers, the relationship of which is fundamentally different from other digital platforms or other capitalist economies.

In such an analysis, first, the academic inquiry should not be just about understanding the economy of this specific cultural production as another material culture (du Gay & Pryke, 2002, p. 22), and second, the cultural economy of the online writing industry cannot simply be reduced to a culturalization of global capitalism (Scott, 2007) which assumes that that every micro cultural economy operates in the same logic of capitalism and hence, is subjected to the same Marxist critique (e.g., Fuchs, 2014). Pratt and Jeffcutt (2011, p. 5) have emphasized that there is a variety of cultural industries that are organized in different ways, which might then display a variety of petite capitalism that is not on par with the bigger economy of the state or global economy.

The cultural economy of online writing platforms manifests a rationality of individual cultural economy that is very different from that of a collective labor cultural economy in which workers experience an involvement with enterprises and corporations. Without going in-depth into the fundamental assumption of economics, one would easily distinguish macroeconomics from microeconomics in that the former is preoccupied with rules of equilibrium and efficiency in collective behavior manifested at the market level (Kirman, 2011). However, for writers who work individually for achieving their own satisfaction, either choosing to interact with readers or to isolate themselves, their cultural logic in respect to materiality and immateriality can be very different.

Online writing primarily involves an individual cultural economy in which writers are accountable only to themselves and platforms. Like other jobs, labor contracted to work for a platform exists in the form of class relations. But unlike workers who are physically trapped in a factory as a low-paid drudge, writing laborers are mentally free to create their own work—not a reproduced fetish molded in a factory—and are not physically bounded. This does not mean that we should uncritically downplay the nature of a platform's exploitation of writers as exemplified in the Yuewen case. Rather, as we have seen, the capitalist's goal of maximizing profit and the writers' goal of a sustainable of lifestyle might not necessarily be positioned in opposition to each other. In this individual economy, as told by the writers themselves, their perception of materiality and immateriality can be different.

On immateriality, as illustrated above, flexibility of social space for their personal expression and their temporal space are always the creative aspects of platform labor on YouTube, TikTok, and similar platforms so that youth can extend their adolescent lifestyle as slash labor. In sharing their

similarity with the global culture, Chinese youth celebrates freelancing and slash careers while prioritizing their values and lifestyle over money and other material needs (Yu, 2016).

Materiality, or precisely, the perception of materiality—in particular, in respect to the argument of labor exploitation—is the key issue. Surely, the platform at least takes half of the share of what is generated by the writers' laboring. In the first half of 2021, for example, Yuewen enjoyed a revenue of RMB 4.35 billion with a net profit of more than one billion (Hu, 2021). Surely, if exploitation is seen as the surplus value of the labor, in the strictest sense, it does exist on a macro level. But for writers as strong rational agents, the perception of labor concerning well-being and interest in a micro scale is quite different from the actual reality. They rationalize and evaluate only the micro economy of the platform, not the cultural economy of the platform on a macro scale. In other words, they form narratives from their personal points of view, or a frame of reference for themselves (Salmeron, 2017). In a cultural economy, whenever a writer is directly contracted by the platform without much involvement of others, whether the exploitation is perceived depends on the whether or not the monetary return of online creation is fair and justifiable. In fact, in our in-depth interviews, writers noted that they are usually aware of the exchange relationship of the writing occupation: online fiction writing is not dissimilar to other occupations in the society in that the capitalist derives profit from the surplus value of labor. However, online writing is built on a consensual profit sharing capitalist logic and mechanism on which the revenues are absolutely transparent to the writers, and their sharing would not be limited for other reasons such as age, gender, marital status, educational, and socio-economic background. At this point, workers, trained with socialist education, are seen as self-reflexive and critical of the capitalist logic but they are also contented with the logic of sharing on online writing platforms. A well-known online writer whom we interviewed explained this:

> Because [I am] poor, I write online fiction. Writing online fiction is a quick way of earning money. [I] am not being ripped off. I got what I deserve to get. When you go to other places to work, the boss usually tells you that you to create a whole lot of "values," but how much do [you] actually can take away? You probably create ten times of the wealth [for the companies] and it is not too bad if you can get only one-tenth of it. It is clearly stated that in an online writing [job] that writers share 50% [of the value gained] and other benefits. Now [after the protest of writers against Yuewen], the sharing [even] goes up to 60% or 70% for the author. If I don't earn enough, the blame is on me. My sense of achievement comes direct from materiality. Quite often I earn up to 50,000 to 60,000 [RMB] a month. For good months, I can earn 100,000 [RMB] a month. In the past, I worked in many jobs, [including] physical labor, management of online platform, and chores in an internet company, and then these companies were bankrupted, and I was ripped off (Tree of Kabbalah, male, 26 years old, Jilin).

Admittedly, this famous writer is more affluent than most other writers. Nevertheless, the capitalist logic he is subjected to is the same for all writers who actually look for a predictable income or stipend on which they then can plan their own life, part-time job, amount of work needed, and so forth. It seems that the challenge for youth labor today is not the limited salary, but the instability incurred by most of the commercial jobs, including jobs on other digital platforms. Compared with commercial jobs in private enterprise, exploitative as their nature can be, the revenue structure of this new occupation is systematized and transparent. Under a transparent profit sharing formula between the platform and the writers, and given the users' management of the amount that is written, online writers can assure their salary is acquired, reverting to a simple capitalist logic feature that "whenever they have made effort, they would be rewarded." While acknowledging the surplus value they have created is ripped off by the platform, they clearly know how much exchange value they have actually created and how much they could share in the end.

The platform is closer to a well-informed capitalist system in as much as writers conceive it as a more equitable exploitation than traditional jobs. A young male writer also expressed this:

> I feel the amount of work and income are quite satisfactory. I can earn up to 20,000 [RMB] a month. [Considering the fact that] I write an hour every day, [and] the [daily] update is not stable, 50% share [of the revenue] is very satisfactory. (Edward, male, 19 years old, Shanghai)

The interview illustrated one important point. "I" is always the subject in this single person cultural economy of the platform: the absolute amount of material gain is not the main concern. Rather, the interviewee was satisfied with the relative fairness of the mechanism of the profit sharing of the writing platform. Whether writers could earn more is all about individual effort which is proportional to the monetary reward gained, and with the actual amount they shared, for instance RMB 20,000 a month, a writer residing in a second-tier city could survive comfortably. Interestingly, there is a saying among those in the writing community claiming that "writing changes the fate," but in practice, for the new generation like Edward, he just wants to work an hour daily and there is no intention at all to make a visionary and grand career plan. The rationality is individual, simple, and subjective. That explains why after the incident of a temporary public "revolt" against Yuewen in 2019–2020, the social issue has subsided. Some individual writers continue to work with Yuewen, while some have gone to another major writing platform, Tomato, started by Douyin. Each writer who resides in such an individual cultural economy seeks their own solution, pleasure, and justice.

Individual economy versus collective economy

The cultural economy of an online writing platform, in fact, presents a unique case to illustrate a different kind of cultural economy in which labor maintains a direct contractual relationship with the digital platform, meaning that labor is only accountable to the platform and themselves. As explained by Tree of Kabbalah, the amount of work done is an individual choice and reflects how much they need to earn for their living, enabling writers to lead a relatively flexible and autonomous lifestyle, not bound by the employers or a stringent capitalist system. But in most commercial corporations or state enterprises, laborers are obliged to work together, sometimes in teams or cooperatives, under an organized hierarchy for the collective goal of the organization. Such collective labor often results in a state of competition, or even conflict, as the total revenue of the corporation is fixed and the wages or rewards given to specific laborers is a result of hierarchy, power, or class struggle.

Among such exchange relationships in individual laboring, from the point of view of online writers, the platform in fact offers a new system in which mechanism of laboring, profit sharing, and obligations are transparent. True to their own values and consciousness, writers find themselves laboring in a relatively fair system in which reward is proportional to the actual hours of labor, and every writer is subject to the same commercial formula of sharing. For a collective economy, as in all capitalist systems, labor is subject to different level of inequality and exploitation. In the Chinese context, writers are also aware of the fact that if they quit their job as online writers, they have to return to the normalized and structured jobs and go back collective cultural economy. Individual cultural economy emerges just quite inadvertently out of digital technology.

As evidenced in the short-lived public criticism against Yuewen, the collective movement has no strong appeal for individual labor. In fact, many of the writers interviewed have continued to work with Yuewen. If there is any cultural resistance for the unsatisfied industrial practices perceived, it only exists in the form of individual resistance with each writer choosing a different tactic to meet their own personal goal.

Fictional writing with non-fictional actions

In sum, the significance of this paper offers an alternative and a non-Western view into a specific cultural economy of online platform—perhaps not limited to the case of China--and it attempts to theorize the cultural economy of online fiction writing platforms or similar individual cultural economy in which writers, users or producers produce their own content to the platform as source of revenue. In this paper, the core argument, as noted, does not lie in the content of the fiction, literature, or the text. The latter, together with the discourse of fans or fan fiction could display a wide range of genres, from urban drama to sci-fiction and fantasy novel, opening up the global imaginations and connection for fans who might also read into writers' imagined utopia, vision, and ideal (Black, 2009). While not excluding the possibility that some writers do embed their own values or ideals into the text, and exercise their influence on fans, this paper focus on the cultural economy of writers who, at least told in our interviews, most texts are simply production or a kind of completed work for writers to make a living. For writers, their pleasure, ideal, or desire has crystallized into a set of cultural practices—laboring, earning money, lifestyle, interaction with readers, or acquiring an identity—uniquely enabled by the laboring work within the platform. At this point, platformization, if evaluated in terms of profit they derive—can be precarious as other studies of online literature have concluded (Zhao, 2017), but it is equally enabling in the case of online novel writing. In some sense, we would like to restate the central argument of cultural studies in that the subjectivity of the young writers as creative workers has to be discovered: they are rational and reflexive, know that they are "not ripped off" (Tree of Kabbalah, male, 26 years old, Jilin), and are able to make use of the existing capitalist system to empower themselves. Although it is not a collective social movement or resistance, it does animate youth culture and provide exemplars of youth practices.

Specific to China, the conclusion of the study is also consistent with the general characteristics and the lifestyle of the new generation in China who see the pursuit of their own lives as central. This is in stark contrast with the Chinese authorities that always appeal to national and collective goals. Technologically savvy and financially more affluent, youth in this post-socialist China are increasingly capable of creating their own "me culture." (Sima & Pulgsley, 2010). This group of young people is said to possess two related characteristics. First, with their accessible means, for instance, online blog or writing platform, these youth are able to self-articulate and express themselves (Sima & Pulgsley, 2010), and the online writing platform is an example of where technology joins with young writers to form an individual cultural economy for this purpose. Second, Chinese youth are aware and capable of pursuing their values with the newly emerging technologies: while youth may be denied their rights in public domains, for example, in school and traditional work, in the cultural economy of the writing platform, they have constructed their own narratives that embody their own set of values, including equality, privacy, and sovereignty or other untapped new alternatives (Naftali, 2014). Putting aside whether the fictional texts written by young writers mean anything for them, fans, or society—which goes back to the question about the underlying meaning or representation of cultural text—the very acts of young writers who commit to choose this alternative work mode are not fictional desire. It is a real choice for these young writers, although being lured into a new form of digital capitalism (Pace, 2018). Of course, these writers are mostly unmarried and young; and to them, they follow their ideal lifestyle and have found their life balance, though it is not a stable job as adult defines. At least at this stage of their life, in their 20s and 30s, they celebrate and maximize the pleasure but there is no guarantee as they have grown up.

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ORCID iDs

Wei He https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6022-3984
Anthony Fung https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5760-9816

Note

1. The number is estimated based on the number of income-generating/sharing writers on online platforms in China.

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Author Biographies

Wei He is professor in Digital Media Department, School of Art and Communication, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China. Wei He: hw@bnu.edu.cn

Lei Lin is lecturer at Fujian Normal University, and a C-level advanced talent in Fujian Province, ChinaLei Lin: loncky@sina.com

Anthony Fung is professor in the School of Journalism and Communication at The Chinese University of Hong KongAnthony Fung: anthonyfung@cuhk.edu.hk