Towards a Pathway and Consequence of Precarious Geography of Creative Labour in China

Presented at International Labour Process Conference 2017, Sheffield, UK

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Date: 19 Apr 2017
Time: 1600-1730
Venue: B5-121, AC1
Language: English
This abstract set up against the background of burgeoning cultural strategies in urban redevelopment of China, which has let to a growing number of floating creative labour. Under the global supply chain, millions of paint of Van Goghs, Da Vincis, and Warhols are painted by these artists and sold all around the world. These artists call for attention under the culture-led urban strategy in China, whose precariousness is overshadowed by a glamourized image of cultural profession. Not only is the social group labeled with flexible specialization suffering from the uncertainty of self-employment but also a mobile characteristic, which renders life more precarious.

This abstract attempts to investigate this community of artists of China from the perspective of a flexible labour and attempts to investigate the pathway to precarious work and precarious life and its consequence from both temporal and geographical approach. Firstly, it will focus on the informal employment relationship of precarious creative labor and its consequence on the inequality and insecurity. Secondly, it will further discuss how this precarious labour condition also moves from work place into the organization of social welfare and life. Most importantly, this abstract seeks to define precarious geography, which broadens the scope of precariousness. The pathway towards precariousness not only results into a temporal consequence, but also a geographical one, which here refers to an always-ongoing process of spatial mobility (non-mobility) of labour.

The empirical research is based on a two months’ preliminary fieldwork in preparation for the author’s PhD dissertation. It takes place in the city of Xiamen, which is one of the origins of oil painting industry in the 1980s. The two core methodological tools are participatory observation and qualitative review. The participatory observation covers the daily life experience of the author working in a painting studio as apprentice run by a young couple with five painters and interviews with around 20 informants in two oil painting villages in the city, covering painter, studio owner, art dealer, staffs of painting association and so on.

The finding shows that the precarious creative labours are exposed in an informal labour market and self-employed. In terms of production, these self-employment labour are responsible for their own commission or establish a loose connection without legal contract. From the perspective of consumption, they are also responsible to grasp the changing taste of each consumer. In order to keep this loose connection of commission and customers, one’s social life is inevitably eroded by work in terms of work-life balance and networking events after work. Besides, Putting under the context of globalisation of China and the status of migrant workers, not only do each individual painter suffer from a lack of hukou (citizenship and social welfare), but also a lack of bargaining power.
at work and life. Plagued by this vulnerability. Relentless displacement and re-displacement happen while its powerless in the end makes an immobilization under this circumstance.

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*All are welcome!*