

## “O Ever Youthful, O Ever Weeping”: Exploring Youth Empowerment through Platform-Dependent Creative Labor in China

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This study presents “platform-dependent creative labor” as a typology for exploring youth empowerment through the performance of creative labor on Bilibili, the most prevalent Chinese digital entertainment platform among young people. It employs digital ethnography and semistructured interviews to investigate the research question: How does the performance of creative labor on Bilibili affect youth empowerment in China? Findings show that youth empowerment is dynamically achieved through the performance of creative labor on Bilibili in economic, cultural, and sociopolitical terms. However, youth empowerment through platform-dependent creative labor is still faced with multifaceted challenges stemming from capitalist exploitation, stratification barriers, and nation-state censorship in China against the background of marketization, digitalization, and globalization. Overall, I argue that social media can be an empowering tool for the youth as content generators; however, it should be used more cautiously and skillfully.

*Keywords: youth empowerment, social media, platform-dependent creative labor, user-generated content, China*

As a major concern in modern society, youth empowerment has long been considered the key to a more equitable and sustainable future for mankind. Media has played a crucial role in shaping youth’s identities and embedding their actions and decision making into a more extensive social dialogue based on social interactions (Morimoto & Friedland, 2011). With the rapid development of information and communication technologies, social media has been intertwined with every facet of social life, which offers new opportunities for empowering youth in the digital era.

In China, social media has seen its greatest popularity among the youth (*Chinese Journalist*, 2022). Of all the popular social media in the Chinese market, Bilibili stands out for its extremely high concentration of young generations. Founded in 2009, Bilibili, also known as B Station, is the largest ACG (Anime, Comics, Games) and danmu (bullet comment) video-sharing platform, as well as the leading cultural community among Chinese youth. Hitherto, Bilibili covered more than 7,000 multicultural communities of different

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interest groups and ranked first in the lists of "APP Preferred by Generation Z" and "Pan-Entertainment APP Preferred by Generation Z" (*QuestMobile*, 2018) and was selected for the "Top 100 Most Valuable Chinese Brands" (*SinaSports*, 2020). Half of the young people in China use Bilibili, and the majority of active users on Bilibili are under the age of 35 (*TencentNet*, 2021).

Bilibili has broadly been studied from the linguistic characteristics of its discourses (Ding, Yang, Li, & Zhang, 2021; Teng & Chan, 2022; Wang, 2022; Zhang, 2020; Zhang & Cassany, 2020; Zhou, 2022; etc.); political (Schneider, 2021; etc.); and cultural impacts (Chen, 2021; Wang & Picone, 2022; etc.). Despite its wide popularity among the younger generations in China, limited attention has been paid to how Bilibili contributes to youth empowerment. Given that creative labor is a newly arising dimension to interrogate young people's use of Bilibili (Chen, 2020; Zhang & Wu, 2022; etc.), this study aims to unveil how the performance of creative labor on Bilibili affects youth empowerment in China. Under the typology of platform-dependent creative labor, I examine youth empowerment on the platform of Bilibili by delving into young people's production of creative content from economic, cultural, and sociopolitical perspectives. Hopefully, the findings can contribute to our knowledge of youth empowerment via social media, particularly in capitalist, digital, and authoritarian contexts.

### **Literature Review**

In this part, I begin by discussing the relationship between "youth empowerment" and "social media," after which I introduce the economic, cultural, and sociopolitical context of youth empowerment in China, particularly in the contemporary digital era. Then, I demonstrate the typology of platform-dependent creative labor to provide a theoretical framework for the analysis of youth empowerment through the performance of creative labor on social media in the Chinese context.

### **Youth Empowerment on Social Media**

The term "youth" refers to a period in life when an individual is young, with the precise age range varying in definition. According to the United Nations, youth encompasses individuals roughly between the ages of 15 and 24, and all UN statistics are based on this range. The UN also notes that this age range varies and does not prejudice other age groups defined by member nations, such as 18–30. In recent times, an increasing number of countries and regions have extended the upper age limit of youth to 35 years old. Young people often find themselves marginalized within their communities, making youth empowerment a crucial strategy in addressing issues of social injustice (Pearrow & Pollack, 2009). Empowerment is a construct that connects individual strengths, capabilities, and proactive behaviors with social policies and changes. It extends beyond an individual's control over their own life to include democratic participation in the community, often facilitated by various organizations. Thus, empowerment is not just a psychological construct at the individual level but also an organizational, economic, cultural, and sociopolitical phenomenon (Rappaport, 1987). Empowerment is a process in which people accomplish personal enhancements and improvements through the development of capabilities and proficiencies (Staples, 1990), which can occur at different levels: individual, family, community, and organization (Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger-Messias, & McLoughlin, 2006). From an individual perspective, empowerment can be divided into intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioral components. These elements pertain to the perceived and actual

abilities to affect social and political systems (Barak, Boniel-Nissim, & Suler, 2008). Here, power is conceptualized as what addresses one's ability to realize goals. In this sense, empowerment is dynamic since power is chronic (Pratto, 2016).

The overarching objectives of youth empowerment encompass social and sexual justice, along with societal and institutional transformations (Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub, 2009). The Internet has provided youths with new, empowering tools (Valaitis, 2005). Youth empowerment can be measured from different dimensions, including a welcoming environment, meaningful participation, engagement in critical reflection on interpersonal and sociopolitical processes, and participation in sociopolitical processes to affect change (Jennings et al., 2006). As "a set of Internet-based applications that build on the ideas and technologies of Web 2.0 and allow for the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61), social media has transformed Internet users from passive receivers to active producers of content (Lerman, 2007).

Despite young people recognizing the potential for empowerment through social media, they are more likely to use these platforms for socializing with friends or leisure activities than for empowerment (Fab-Ukozor & Ojiakor, 2020). The role of social media in empowering youth to advocate for equality and human rights remains largely unexplored (Smith & Shade, 2021).

### ***Youth Empowerment in China: From Premodern to Modern Eras***

China had a long history of feudal autocracy before the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The establishment of the PRC marked China's transition into a "New Democracy" and initiated the era of socialism with unique Chinese characteristics.

Throughout the history of the People's Republic of China, young people have been instrumental in the fight for social progress and justice. From 1965 to 1976, a significant number of youths enlisted in the Red Army, serving as foot soldiers in Chairman Mao Tse-tung's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. The objectives of the Red Army encompassed toppling "capitalist power," "bourgeois reactionary authority," and "bourgeois royalists," with the guiding principle that "revolution is innocent, and rebellion is justified" (*Phoenix History*, 2016, p. 2). Deng Xiaoping's "Opening Up and Reform" policy, initiated in the 1970s and aimed at rapid modernization through economics, technology, science, education, and social transformation, significantly influenced Chinese youth. They were exposed to new thoughts in economic, cultural, and educational exchanges. Subsequently, in the 1980s, Chinese youth were once again at the heart of civic action as they protested against government oppression and sought to instigate democratic reform (Johnson, Johnson-Pynn, & Pynn, 2007), while the Chinese government implemented its one-party dictatorship (Lee & Chan, 2016).

In recent decades, China's economic overhaul and modernization of infrastructure, education, and tech have greatly benefited its citizens, leading to higher incomes, better information access, and more cultural exchange opportunities (Gifford, 2011, p. 4). The advancement of digital technologies has garnered extensive public interest because of the unprecedented and substantial changes it has brought to Chinese society. The widespread adoption of digital media, especially social media, is seen as a catalyst for the

liberalization of public discourse. Additionally, it has provided netizens with fresh opportunities to express their political views (Esarey & Xiao, 2011). Amid the tension and contradictions between the government's efforts to encourage digital media use and control information flow, new media technologies have carved out innovative spaces for young people to express themselves in various forms. This dynamic contributes to the intricate processes of social change in contemporary China (Wallis, 2011).

In the era of media convergence (Jenkins, 2004), the patterns and effects of communication on social media are shaped by the confluence of emerging grassroots creativity and the surge in user-generated content (Jenkins, 2006, p. 117), which has overthrown the traditional information dissemination led by professional elites by following a nontraditional bottom-to-up paradigm (Khan, 2017). However, in the contemporary Chinese context, empowerment via social media following a top-down approach (Jing, 2015) has largely been studied from a governmental perspective, which makes it important to employ a down-top approach to add new perspectives. Bilibili is one of the most popular social media platforms among youth in China, and it facilitates genuine self-organization. More significantly, it offers a technological infrastructure that allows them to engage in certain types of public discussions through their self-expression and participation (Yin & Fung, 2017). Therefore, Bilibili can serve as an exemplary platform for us to adopt a bottom-up approach to youth empowerment through social media.

### ***Platform-Dependent Creative Labor as a Typology***

Defined as the production of new and useful ideas, creativity has been considered a crucial youth developmental outcome impacted by various elements that contribute to youth empowerment. Although no consensus has been reached on "what is creative labor?" or "who are creative laborers?" in cultural production, it is generally believed that all workers directly engaged in the production and distribution of cultural goods and services that embody creativity should be classified as part of the creative workforce (Machado, Rabelo, & Moreira, 2014). Digital platforms, including social media platforms, serve as venues for creative laborers to share, express, and monetize their creations; democratize creative labor, allowing anyone with an Internet connection and a digital device to participate in various forms of cultural production; and, firstly, use algorithms to influence what content is displayed to users, shaping the kind of creative labor that is valued and carried out. However, platforms have also been criticized for potentially exploiting creative labor, given that the gig economy model frequently falls short of providing the benefits and job security found in traditional employment. In addition, given the Chinese context, the creative content produced and circulated on digital platforms faces increasingly rigorous nation-state censorship. In what follows, I elaborate on the typology of "platform-dependent creative labor" to examine youth empowerment on social media in China, focusing on economic, cultural, and sociopolitical perspectives.

First, platform-dependent creative labor can be examined in economic terms. The platform-dependent creative economy is powered by a neoliberal ethos that encourages individuals to view themselves as commodities and promotes the rebranding of independent work as "entrepreneurship" (Duffy, Pinch, Sannon, & Sawey, 2021). Platforms enable digital laborers to earn income through creative activities. Platform-driven commodification also establishes tangible, frequently monetary, links between content creators and collaborative advertisers (Meisner & Ledbetter, 2022). However, "precarity" has been prominent in the broader discourse surrounding the essence of the creative economy, which grapples with the instability and insecurity prevalent in

labor markets (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p. 149). Creative laborers deviate from the conventional organizational structure centered around companies, as they operate as self-employed individuals or freelancers. They enjoy the advantages of autonomy, independence, and a creative environment within their work. Nevertheless, creative labor has consistently been associated with the notion of “precarity,” resulting in an unstable cultural economy characterized by uncertainty and instability (Kong, 2011). Over the past decade, creative work has become increasingly uncertain and unstable because of intensified competition, pervasive insecurity, and the tendency to place individual responsibility for risk management (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017). The platformization of cultural production highlights the natural inclination of capital and corporate ownership to accumulate, which in turn has consequences for power dynamics and the precarious and exploitative conditions experienced by both producers and end users of cultural and immaterial labor (Kim & Yu, 2019; Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Audiences have long been a significant yet overlooked arena for cultural and creative labor within the mass culture industries. In the digital era, their roles have gained increased prominence and relevance (Shimpach, 2005). Audiences used to be seen as passive participants. However, in the digital era, there has been a shift in audiences’ roles in cultural production, as they can now impact the narratives of production, authority, and ownership of creative products (Miller, 2016; Roth & Flegel, 2014). Apart from audiences, advertisers hold a crucial position in the capital market within digital platforms. As social commerce continues to evolve, digital platforms have transformed into arenas for e-commerce. Advertisers enthusiastically incorporate their services or products into social media programs, and their effectiveness is typically evaluated using metrics, such as views, likes, shares, comments, and follower counts (Mhalla, Yun, & Nasiri, 2020). Advertising on platforms plays a significant role in the platform economy by generating demand and expanding markets (Hao & Yang, 2022).

Second, platform-dependent creative labor can be analyzed from a cultural perspective. Existing scholarship mainly adopts a cultural-technical standpoint to evaluate the cultural aspects of platform-dependent creative labor, which concentrates on the interaction between culture and technological infrastructures. Research explores the representation of cultural practices in creative works, highlighting both obvious and subtle elements that add depth. These studies reveal how creators embed cultural value into their stories, from overarching themes to fine details that reflect distinct cultural experiences, analyzing symbols, language, and techniques used to convey cultural messages (Jamal, 2020; Sarjiati, 2022; etc.). Other studies extend to understanding how the platform’s technological features and algorithms influence the creation and dissemination of cultural content, which involves unpacking the role of different platform features, such as comment sections, recommendation algorithms, and sharing functions, in shaping the visibility, accessibility, and consumption of culturally infused content. Moreover, the research explores how these features might inadvertently create biases that favor certain types of content or creators over others, potentially influencing the cultural narrative that is being constructed and shared (Bonini & Gandini, 2019; Simpson & Semaan, 2023; Zhang, 2021; etc.).

Third, platform-dependent creative labor can be investigated from the dimension of sociopolitics. Cunningham (2009) stated that we can categorize the global manifestations of the creative industries concept into four broad variations: the United States, Europe, Asia, and the Global South. When examining the local contexts of East and South Asia, we observe that the concept of creative industries places particular emphasis on the significance of national socioeconomic and political conditions. The notion of “vernacular creativity” has been introduced and elaborated on to describe and highlight creative practices that originate

from nonelite, everyday contexts. This concept has been put forth to provide a more nuanced understanding of “creative labor” in the regions of East and Southeast Asia (Light, Griffiths, & Lincoln, 2012). The concept of “creative labor” in East and Southeast Asia differs from Western perceptions, primarily because of variations in industrial practices, cultural contexts, and experiences of globalization (Fung, 2019). In China, the platform-dependent cultural creative industry differs from its Western counterparts in its special state-platform relations complicated by platform algorithms (Lin & de Kloet, 2019). Chinese digital platforms offer creative laborers the opportunity to access flexible choices and utter their voices, but they operate within a sociopolitical and state-monitored public sphere that imposes certain limits on creative laborers’ activities (Fung, He, & Cao, 2022). However, research has found that despite the presence of nation-state censorship, creative labor has the potential to be revolutionary. Revolutionary creative labor involves the coming together of expression, production, and revolution, and it contributes to the development of a subjectivity that distinctly sets itself apart from industrial labor (Kraidy & Krikorian, 2017).

### **Methodology**

#### ***Data Collection***

I employed digital ethnography and semistructured interviews to examine how the performance of creative labor as a cultural production on Bilibili has influenced youth empowerment in China.

Since the rise of digital technologies, ethnographic methods have been used to study online social practices and interactions (Lindlof & Shatzer, 1998). Online ethnography, a method for understanding the meanings of technology and the cultural experiences provided by digital media, has been applied extensively to investigate cultural activities within a digital context (Hine, 2017). Observation and note-taking are essential in ethnographic fieldwork in digital environments, generating detailed field notes that provide rich descriptions of lived realities (Bailey, 2007; Coleman, 2010). Digital ethnography emphasizes a new orientation toward the relationships between humans and technologies (Small, 2022). I spent eight months from April 1 to December 1, 2022, observing and recording the content creations and social interactions of young users on Bilibili, with a concentration on ACG themes and democratic discourses.

Semistructured interviews involve a flexible approach in which the interviewer follows a predetermined plan of inquiry that includes a range of questions. The interviewer has the flexibility to explore emerging topics during the interview based on the interviewee’s responses, deviating from the predetermined list of questions (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). I recruited Bilibili users aged between 15 and 24 who participated in the production of creative content on the platform by releasing recruitment information on social media and asking personal friends for help. I obtained informed consent from the interviewees. I began each interview, which lasted from 15 to 30 minutes, with a brief explanation of the concept of empowerment. Following this, I posed questions that not only helped the interviewees better grasp the research theme but also steered the conversation toward the research subject. The interviews were conducted in Chinese and later transcribed into English. All interviewees were assured that their interviews would remain confidential and anonymous and that their personal details would be protected. In all, I completed 31 interviews. In the data presentation, I used pseudonyms to replace the interviewees’ real names (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Informants' Details.**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Format</b>
Yi	Male	21	College	Face to Face
Xuanxuan	Female	18	College	Face to Face
Daniel	Male	19	College	Face to Face
Alan	Male	20	College	Instant Messaging
Lulu	Female	23	College	Face to Face
Frank	Male	23	College	Instant Messaging
Lingyan	Female	15	Middle School	Instant Messaging
Kelly	Female	20	College	Face to Face
Taotao	Male	22	College	Face to Face
Paddy	Male	24	College	Face to Face
Mandy	Female	18	High School	Instant Messaging
Lian	Female	20	College	Instant Messaging
Yujie	Male	16	High School	Face to Face
Jiahao	Male	15	Middle School	Face to Face
Jiaying	Female	18	College	Instant Messaging
Bobby	Male	22	College	Instant Messaging
Dan	Female	22	High School	Instant Messaging
Jingyu	Female	18	College	Face to Face
Gong	Male	24	College	Instant Messaging
Yiqing	Female	15	Middle School	Instant Messaging
Yuhuan	Female	18	High School	Instant Messaging
Jiangyi	Male	23	Middle School	Instant Messaging
Eric	Male	24	College	Instant Messaging
Stella	Female	21	College	Instant Messaging
Chunlong	Male	22	High School	Instant Messaging
Dai	Male	24	High School	Instant Messaging
Vivien	Female	22	College	Face to Face
Jianmei	Female	17	High School	Instant Messaging
Shuqin	Female	16	High School	Face to Face
Guotong	Male	22	College	Instant Messaging
Elaine	Female	23	College	Instant Messaging

### **Data Analysis**

I applied thematic analysis to examine the surface and latent content of the records and interviews. Thematic analysis is a method employed in qualitative research to detect, examine, and report patterns, or themes, within data. It is a versatile and beneficial research instrument capable of yielding a comprehensive, intricate, and detailed depiction of data. Thematic analysis is an iterative process that allows for adjustments

and enhancements to the themes as the analysis progresses, ultimately providing meaningful insights and implications from the data (Clarke, Braun, & Hayfield, 2015). First, I familiarized myself with the data collected to code them by identifying main ideas and recurring topics, after which initial themes emerged from the coded data. These themes were then refined and revised, creating a thematic framework to organize the data. Then, I applied this framework to the entire data set, coding the data accordingly. Each theme was analyzed in depth, considering context and connections. The findings were synthesized, and clear narratives were presented, supported by illustrative quotes or examples. Overall, three themes with subthemes emerged:

1. Economic empowerment through the youth's platform-dependent creative labor: Material gains against capitalist exploitation.
2. Cultural empowerment through the youth's platform-dependent creative labor: Participatory communities against stratification barriers.
3. Sociopolitical empowerment through the youth's platform-dependent creative labor: Infrapolitical expressions against nation-state censorship.

## **Discussion**

### ***Economic Empowerment Through Youth's Platform-Dependent Creative Labor: Material Gains Against Capitalist Exploitation***

The shift from a "planned" to a "market" economy following the "opening up and reform" period has resulted in the development of what is known as the "socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics" in China today, which can be understood as a market-based economic system in which public ownership and state-owned enterprises play a prominent role (Ding, 2009, p. 235). In recent decades, China's digital economy has leapfrogged into a leading global force at an exponential rate. As the second largest digital economy following the United States around the world, China's digital economy, estimated to be worth US\$7.1 trillion in 2021, increased by 16.2% from 2020 and accounted for 39.8% of China's total gross domestic product in 2021 (Sun, 2022). Platform-dependent creative labor is a key driver of China's digital economy.

Dan runs her beauty channel on Bilibili, boasting a substantial following of more than 100,000 individuals. The majority of her followers are predominantly female and share a keen interest in fashion and cosmetics. Dan felt economically empowered by sharing creative content on the platform:

...I was born into a rural family that treated boys as superior to girls in Southwest China...However, I am very lucky to be a quite popular uploader on Bilibili because my videos are favored by many girls on this platform. With the money that I make from Bilibili, I have bought myself a house in a second-tier city in China. Now I have a promising career and two lovely cats, which makes me feel empowered in a way that I never expected...

In addition to Dan, another 11 interviewees mentioned that they have achieved economic empowerment through content creation on Bilibili. Platform-dependent creative labor economically empowers



young creative workers like Dan in different ways. Digital platforms allow them to showcase and monetize their work, enabling them to generate income and establish revenue streams. By leveraging their skills, talents, and unique content, creative laborers can attract sponsors, advertisers, and brand collaborations, leading to financial compensation through endorsements and partnerships. Moreover, platforms facilitate the cultivation of a dedicated fan base and the creation of a community centered on their work. With a loyal following, creative laborers can capitalize on their secured paid opportunities, such as sponsored content and product promotions. However, with the intervention of capital, labor-audience relations have been alienated in the digital economy. As Dan pointed out, economic empowerment through creative labor also caused her distress:

...But there were moments when I felt weak... I remember that once an advertiser offered me 20,000 RMB (about 2,870 USD) to promote their cosmetic product in my video and they asked me to exaggerate the merits of it. I did what they asked me to for the money, but I felt very sorry for my followers...

For freelancers who pursue creative production on social media platforms as a career, advertising serves as a vital economic resource. However, the influence of capital on content creation can often be restrictive and driven by profit motives, hindering creative freedom, and diminishing job satisfaction. Twenty-five of the 31 interviewees indicated that they engaged in the performance of creative labor on Bilibili of interest. According to Alan:

...I think that it is out of love... I am young, and I still have time to explore my life career and can take it well even if I don't make money from it. I assume that you have heard the saying—'O ever youthful, O ever weeping' and I guess that I am not the only uploader who is devoted to the career for some spiritual pursuits...

Lulu also mentioned:

...It is difficult to stand out among tens of thousands of uploaders and it is time-consuming to edit those videos... However, I feel very happy and peaceful when I create those videos, which gives me a sense of self-fulfillment, especially when I see other girls' comments saying that they also love the characters in the dramas and my editing is great...

For young people, the perceived self-worth and self-satisfaction derived from their creative labor on Bilibili outweighed their actual economic income. This could be attributed to the fact that, unlike older individuals, who often face greater economic pressures and have limited opportunities in the Chinese job market, young people have the luxury of time and energy to explore and learn from their mistakes. Therefore, young people have become the main force behind content creation. The involvement of capital in this process commercializes the interaction between creative laborers and their audience. On one hand, it transforms creative labor into a profit-oriented professional business, commodifying content production. On the other hand, it alters the dynamics of the labor-audience relationship, shifting its foundation from emotional connections to a mixture of emotional responses and material benefits. Eric has more than 20,000 followers, and he expressed "a sense of insecurity" when asked to talk about empowerment on the platform:

...I felt empowered the most when I earned 5,000 RMB from a sponsor because I advertised their product in one of my videos that recorded my daily life... You may say that 5,000 RMB for one video is easy money... There are also months I make less than 1,000 RMB from the platform. I spent a lot of time making and editing the videos. It is difficult to be creative all the time. I am worried that my inspiration will run out and my fans will leave me...

The platform economy has been critiqued for being precarious and for exposing creative workers to capitalist exploitation (Mehta, 2019; etc.). On Bilibili, young creative laborers have various avenues to achieve financial gains through uploading content to the platform. These include signing contracts with Bilibili, participating in the Creative Motivator Project, engaging in live streaming, joining the Charging Project, and incorporating advertising. When uploaders sign contracts with Bilibili, they receive a stable but relatively low basic salary. Those with more than 1,000 followers or more than 100,000 video views can apply for the Creative Motivator Project, where they earn revenue based on the number of views, typically ranging from 15 to 30 RMB per 10,000 views. Live streamers can either be contracted by Bilibili or rely on viewer rewards for income. By participating in the Charging Project, uploaders receive 70% of the revenue generated through viewers, with the platform retaining the remaining 30%. Additionally, uploaders can earn money by promoting products or services through advertisements. However, despite the opportunities for financial gain, the interview data reveal unequal power dynamics between the platform and creative workers. Bilibili claims a significant portion of the economic profits generated by user-generated content. Moreover, uploaders' financial gains are heavily affected by audiences' tastes and platform revenue distribution mechanisms, making their income unstable and exposing their work to capitalist exploitation.

### ***Cultural Empowerment Through the Youth's Platform-Dependent Creative Labor: Participatory Communities Against Stratification Barriers***

Frank is a diehard fan of ACG culture. He has uploaded self-edited videos themed on ACG culture for more than four years. When I asked Frank what empowerment meant to him as a content creator on Bilibili, he said that the platform had a unique cultural atmosphere:

...I think the platform gives young people the opportunity to create their own space to express themselves and make friends. Most of the users on Bilibili who watch ACG videos are young people like me, and we don't have to worry much about the misunderstandings caused by generation gaps. There is a special cultural environment in which we use our own "language" to communicate...I think that the special atmosphere in the creative community empowers me. I feel that I belong here, with other young people who are energetic and interesting. I always enjoy watching videos on Bilibili with danmu and discussing them in the comment zones with other viewers, which strengthens my sense of belonging to the community...

Including Frank, 18 of 31 interviewees mentioned the youth culture on the platform. According to Elaine:

...Whenever I see my videos covered with danmu, I feel a great sense of accomplishment. I believe that the culture of Bilibili is collectively created by young people and is incredibly diverse and inclusive. Everyone's thinking is active and unconventional. In fact, through the interaction with my audience, I have gained a lot of creative inspiration...

Jingyu also shared her opinions:

...I feel that the cultural atmosphere on Bilibili is more friendly compared to Weibo (often referred to as the Chinese Twitter)... I think this may be because the primary users of Bilibili are young people, who generally have better education and overall higher quality...

The youth, as content creators, are believed to be culturally empowered through the participatory communities on the platform. For example, one distinctive aspect of Bilibili is its "danmu" functionality, which allows users to post comments that appear as overlaid text messages on videos in real time (Schneider, 2021). This creates a sense of virtual live interaction for users, as they watch videos (Fu, Li, & Lee, 2022). The use of danmu requires passing an online exam and becoming a Bilibili member, which can be time-consuming but serves to select users who align with the platform's culture: "You need to pass an online exam and become a Bilibili member first, after which you can use the function of creating bullet comments" (Lulu). This unique participatory feature fosters the formation of cultural communities primarily composed of young people with shared interests (Wang, 2022). Bilibili encourages users to abide by the rules of "dammu liyi (etiquette of bullet comment)" to foster a relatively open and inclusive cultural atmosphere (*Renshengyushi*, 2020, p. 1).

Bilibili provides a platform where young people can express themselves and share their creative content. This allows them to showcase their talents and perspectives, empowering them to actively contribute to cultural discussions. Additionally, Bilibili offers a wide range of content options for young people to contribute to, including animation, gaming, music, and more, catering to the diverse interests and passions of young people. Bilibili plays a role in fostering cultural empowerment and facilitating the formation of individual identities among young individuals. Moreover, Bilibili encourages community engagement and interaction through features such as comments, live streaming, and fan communities. These features motivate young users to actively participate in discussions, collaborations, and creative exchanges, thereby promoting cultural empowerment through shared experiences and mutual support. However, it is noteworthy that some interviewees mentioned that cultural stratifications as barriers to youth empowerment exist on the platform. As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, Taotao raised the following concerns:

...Bilibili is known for its diverse community, but there are distinct cultural groups that have formed their circles. While this can foster a sense of belonging for those within these groups, it also leads to a certain level of exclusion for those without... As a gay myself, my non-mainstream sexual orientation to some extent prevents me from blending in many other communities. The platform seems to have been consistently recommending homosexual-related content to me, which makes it harder for me to focus on and integrate into other cultural groups...

The cultural stratification phenomenon on the platform can be attributed to multiple factors. As a large and diverse content platform, Bilibili attracts users from different backgrounds and interests. This

diversity leads to the formation of separate circles or communities for different cultural groups on the platform, resulting in a certain degree of cultural stratification. Additionally, algorithms play a significant role. The platform's recommendation algorithm uses users' browsing history, interaction behavior, and personal preferences to push related content. If users frequently browse or interact with content related to specific cultural groups, the algorithm tends to prioritize and recommend content related to those groups, thereby reinforcing cultural stratification. Compared with platforms like Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok) and Weibo, which cover a wider range of content types and user demographics, there are some differences in cultural stratification on Bilibili: Bilibili is more popular among young people and focuses more on their interests and culture. This leads to a more pronounced cultural stratification among the youth of Bilibili. Furthermore, Bilibili specializes in specific fields, such as animation and gaming, which create differences in the content direction of cultural stratification on the platform.

The cultural stratifications of Bilibili may hinder the cultural empowerment of young people. Cultural stratification refers to different cultural groups forming their circles or communities on the platform, with some degree of segregation and difference between them. This cultural stratification can result in certain groups' voices and perspectives being more prominent, while the opinions and creations of other groups may be overlooked or excluded. For young people, if their cultural backgrounds or interests do not align with the dominant cultural stratification, they may feel excluded, thereby affecting their opportunities to exert cultural influence and empowerment on the platform. Furthermore, cultural stratification can limit the cultural creations and perspectives of young people. If a specific cultural group dominates the platform, its values and aesthetic standards may become mainstream, while the creations and viewpoints of other cultural groups may be marginalized.

***Sociopolitical Empowerment Through the Youth's Platform-Dependent Creative Labor:  
Infrapolitical Expressions Against Nation-State Censorship***

The Internet landscape in China exhibits a complex blend of stringent government control and vigorous online activism (Yang, 2009, p.2). The government employs various measures, such as regulatory practices, technological surveillance, economic incentives, and administrative penalties, to prevent and suppress online activities that are perceived as potential threats to social and political stability (Tsui, 2003). However, there is also a growing trend of online activism that captures significant public attention and serves as a challenge to government policies, practices, corruption, and the misuse of power (Yang, 2009, p.5). Within the category of "authoritarian nations," "hybrid ones," mixing democratic and authoritarian factors can also be included, in which sense, most Asian nations, including China, have authoritarian features (Chew, 2023). In China's online sphere, political discussions are restricted and discouraged. However, young people often find their way into expressions, intentionally or unintentionally, through playful and entertaining means. This manifestation can be seen as a form of infrapolitics, representing a hidden political struggle that allows subordinate groups to camouflage their resistance in the presence of the dominant (Yang, Tang, & Wang, 2015). On Bilibili, there is a noticeable trend in which young individuals engage in political discourse by actively participating in the creation of creative content. This serves as an alternative pathway toward democracy within an authoritarian context.

Gong, a programmer employed at an Internet company, dedicates his leisure time to uploading edited videos on Bilibili. According to him, the empowerment experienced through creative labor on Bilibili is intertwined with the active involvement of young individuals in political agendas:

...I believe that only when we can utter our voices, we take a first step towards empowerment. Bilibili witnessed my first step. The first video that I edited and uploaded was a news interview about Section Chief Ma... It is ironic. Ma showed us the dereliction and tactfulness of Chinese officials with his excellent acting skills that should be put in textbooks... I was excited to see the danmu such as "Protect Section Chief Ma on our side," "His vague manner concealed a brilliant mind," "Section Chief Ma is a true hero," "He is a master of playing the fool" ... I felt that we at least have the freedom to express our dissatisfaction with the government here. Everyone didn't say much, at least not sharply or violently, but everyone understood each other. At least here, we could talk about politics relatively freely, without worrying about being invited for tea<sup>2</sup>...

In 2011, the CCTV News Channel reported "Wu'an<sup>3</sup> Iron and Steel Investigation—the Hard to Answer Steel Capacity Question" (*People's Daily*, 2011). When reporters questioned Section Chief Ma from the local Development and Reform Bureau about steel production capacity, he was left speechless and unable to provide a direct response. Instead, he insisted on reciting prepared background materials and repeatedly stated "no more" (*Beijing News*, 2011). Gong utilizes the ironic case of Section Chief Ma to illustrate how Bilibili serves as a platform for young people to express their political viewpoints and advocate for social change using skillful and covert tactics. Despite the Chinese government effectively controlling access to information on politically sensitive topics (Tang & Huhe, 2014), the youth find an alternative discourse that challenges the top-down control exerted by those in power through their participation in online cultural activities on Bilibili (Yin & Fung, 2017). In a sense, the infrapolitical expressions of young people as content creators enable them to make political appeals and strive for political rights more covertly in an authoritarian context. However, drawing from the data collected, the political empowerment of the youth through platform-dependent creative labor is still believed to be hindered by the increasingly rigorous nation-state censorship of content generation and circulation. Although creators on Bilibili can still express political viewpoints through metaphors, implications, or indirect means, the existence of a nation-state censorship system still imposes certain limitations on their expression and creative scope. According to Chinese laws and regulatory requirements, Bilibili is obligated to conduct strict content censorship on user uploads to ensure compliance with government-set standards and guidelines. This censorship system imposes certain constraints on the ability of young creators on Bilibili to express their political viewpoints and social concerns. For instance, if a young creator wishes to produce a video on Bilibili discussing sensitive political topics or criticizing government policies, such content is likely to face restrictions imposed by the censorship system. Bilibili's moderation team reviews such videos, and if they are deemed to violate relevant regulations, the videos may be deleted or restricted from being shared, and the creator's account may even be banned. Furthermore, content censorship on Bilibili also influences the creative thinking and expression of creators. To avoid touching on sensitive topics or being subjected to censorship, some young creators may engage in self-censorship and restrict the content they produce, refraining from

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<sup>2</sup> "Being invited for tea" here refers to being investigated or interrogated by the authorities.

<sup>3</sup> Wu'an is a county-level city under the jurisdiction of Hebei Province in China.

directly expressing political viewpoints or challenging existing authorities. This self-censorship and limitation can hinder creators from expressing their genuine opinions and societal aspirations, thereby impacting their sociopolitical empowerment.

### **Conclusion**

Exploring creative workers' behavior in media production helps them develop strategies to deal with being caught in the dominant narrative facilitated by the cultural industry (Jamal, 2020). This study applies the typology of platform-dependent creative labor to examine youth empowerment through digital media practices in China. Drawing from data collected from digital ethnography and semistructured interviews, I argue that the performance of platform-dependent creative labor can empower young people as digital workers from economic, cultural, and sociopolitical aspects at both the individual and community levels, which contributes to both theoretical and empirical knowledge of understanding youth empowerment on social media through media cultural practices. It provides insights into the ways young individuals can use digital platforms to achieve financial gains, establish cultural communities, and participate in sociopolitical discourses.

However, such youth empowerment is faced with challenges from capitalist exploitation, stratification barriers, and nation-state censorship in today's China against the background of marketization, digitalization, and globalization. It is worth noting that the "empowerment" discussed is mostly self-perceived and self-reported by the interviewees, which is subjective and context-specific. Hence, there are still certain concerns that I intend to elaborate on for further exploration: First, it is necessary to consider whether the youth's economic empowerment derived from engaging in platform-dependent creative labor will diminish in the future because of the precarious nature of the digital economy and the loss of their age advantage. Second, although Bilibili has created supportive participatory communities for young people, it is important to recognize that they are more vulnerable to harmful information spread on digital platforms because of their young ages; therefore, more attention should be paid to whether the cultural communities that they are emotionally connected to can amplify the negative impact of harmful information such as cyberbullying. Finally, the true impact of Bilibili as a platform for infrapolitical expression and alternative democracy has not been thoroughly examined. The future of youth's political empowerment on social media remains uncertain because of increasing censorship and information restrictions in Chinese cyberspace.

This study acknowledges limitations in terms of perspectives, methods, and contexts. Future research could consider using mixed methods and conducting comparative analyses across different cultural, social, and geographical contexts to understand the variations in the performance of platform-dependent creative labor and its impact on youth empowerment. Longitudinal studies can be undertaken to examine the long-term effects of such labor on youth empowerment, providing insights into its sustainability and potential challenges. Additionally, exploring the intersectionality of youth empowerment and platform-dependent creative labor, examining ethical considerations, evaluating existing policies and interventions, and incorporating collaborative and participatory approaches with young people as coresearchers can further enhance our understanding of and inform strategies to promote youth empowerment in digital spaces.

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