‘They don’t need us’: Affective precarity and critique in transnational media work from the margins of ‘Cultural China’

Introduction

Creative labour studies has yielded much critical insights from workers' experiences of 'inequality', 'precarity' and 'self-exploitation' under the increasing neo-liberalization of the cultural and creative industries. While this work is important, its overwhelming focus on the critique of neoliberalism based on Euro American case studies of 'creative hubs' risk overlooking insights, concerns and labour practices important to other socio-geopolitical contexts (Alacovska & Gill 2019; de Kloet et al 2020). This paper addresses these gaps by focusing on a group of transnational media producers in Singapore working at the margins of the mainland Chinese media industry in the era of the 'rise of China'.

While existing studies based on non-Western case studies have usefully challenged and expanded on the 'entrenched theoretical tenets in creative labour studies' (Alacovska & Gill 2019: 6), this group of producers bring a particular transnational perspective. Set against the background of the rise of the PRC as global superpower and the culture wars between China and the West, the reconfiguration of global cultural production (Chua 2007) is marked by an influx of creative labour into the Mainland Chinese market alongside accusations of 'Chinese influence' on Hollywood cultural productions. While the 'soft power' influence of China on the West through media has largely been unsuccessful (Keane et al 2018), there is a little research

on how the rise of China as producer of mass culture impacts on media production in Southeast Asia, where the majority of China's media exports travel to outside of 'Greater China' (Hong Kong and Taiwan). For ethnic Chinese Southeast Asians who have had to navigate variegated processes of ethnic de-identification around postcolonial nation-building, the rise of China has also substantially raised the stakes for 'Chineseness' and made life more complicated (Wee 2016). As a young postcolonial nation-state and the most Westernized country in Southeast Asia with a majority ethnic Chinese population, Singapore finds itself caught in between the demands of Western and Chinese hegemony, while being an outsider to both (Ong 2022; Yong 2021). Situated on the mercurial edge between existing dominant global hegemony of the West, and the rise of the PRC as a producer of mass culture, Singapore's transnational producers seeking work opportunities with the PRC occupy a unique position to observe how these geopolitical and sociocultural changes impact on localized creative work practices. So how do these intersecting cultural, economic and geopolitical power relations manifest in transnational creative labour situated in the margins of and living under the shadows of both the West and a rising China?

In the rest of this article, I first situate this research within creative labour studies and contextualize my case study. Following that, I draw on ethnographic observations and interviews with key Singaporean producers engaged in transnational production work with the PRC to discuss the kinds of 'invisible' labour producers engage in during

collaboration. My argument converses with existing work in two ways. First, expanding on conceptions of emotional labour and precarity as serving neoliberal structures, I highlight how these producers' experiences are deeply embroiled in their embodied, ideological and positional entanglements with China and the West. Second, I address the question of agency in creative labour studies by exploring how these labour practices work as a form of critical agency.

Transnational media work from the margins of 'Cultural China'

Following the global celebration and uptake of 'creative industries' discourse and policy since the late 1990s (Florida 2002), a large body of critical scholarship emerged critiquing its marketization of culture and its normalizing of the precaritization and exploitation of creative labour (e.g. McRobbie 2015; Kuehn & Corrigan 2013; Duffy 2015). Much of this work revolve around the critique of 'neoliberalism' from market perspectives (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011).

While this body of work is enlightening and important, these understandings derive largely from research on the 'neoliberal' creative industries of Western Europe, Australia and North America. As Alacovska and Gill (2019: 2) wrote, 'creative labour studies are notoriously centred on Euro-American metropolitan "creative hubs" and hence the creative worker they theorize is frequently white, middle-class, male and

urban'. This risks overlooking politico-economic contexts where neoliberalization may not be the most or only pertinent concern (de Kloet et al 2020). Defining work solely through the lens of exploitation or freedom make it difficult to illuminate the specificities of global and local inequalities of labour conditions (Hermes 2015) and the qualitative experiences of creative workers around the world remain understudied (Tse 2022). This article follows calls to 'resist dehistoricizing and flattening precarious experiences, and to offer a more specific, empirical understanding of what is taking place elsewhere' (Chow 2019: 13) through looking at a relatively understudied geopolitical case study. In particular, what neoliberalization means in Singapore is complex. The Singaporean state invests heavily in the neoliberal anti-welfare ideology of meritocracy (Tan 2013) while concurrently rejecting 'minimal' governance and privatization of state enterprises (Chua 2017). This contradiction also manifests in its state-linked but privatized mainstream media. Producers' subjection to, at times conflicting, state, nationalist and commercial disciplines generates tensions that run deep in the media industry's 'structures of feeling', often resulting in self-policing practices (Fong 2022). This raises questions about how much existing creative labour concepts critiquing neoliberal industry practices may apply or transform in a context like Singapore.

Although there is a growing body of research based on non-Western case studies which show that creative workers engage routinely in a complex array of labour

practices that do not necessarily abide by the monetary, profit-seeking logic of neoliberalism (Alacovska & Gill 2019: 8; Wong & Chow 2020; Chow 2019), the majority of these studies focus on national creative industries (Kim 2014; Lin 2018; Wang & Keane 2020). Media globalization, however, raises questions about how the increasing transnationalization of production impacts on creative labour. With particular reference to the rise of the PRC as producer of popular culture, the implications of the influx of media labour into the Mainland Chinese media industry for Taiwan and Hong Kong are well-documented, whether in terms of producers' navigation of geopolitics ideologically (Lai 2020; Yang 2018; Zhao 2016; Liew 2012; Chan 2020); stylistic negotiations in media aesthetics (Chu 2015; Bettinson 2020); or mobilities of labour and cultural know-how in collaborative media work with China (Keane et al. 2018; Keane 2016). While being a shared witness – alongside Taiwan and Hong Kong – to the rapid rise of China in recent years, Singaporean producers' experiences also add to the literature in two ways. First, compared to the more developed regional media industries, Singapore's producers present as a case for studying those who might feel 'left behind' by wider media globalization trends. Alongside many countries in Southeast Asia – such as Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia and Thailand – Singapore rates as one of the top receivers of so-called 'China influence' and 'soft power', particularly through media exports and platform technology (Ong 2022; TNC 2020; TC 2020). However, Southeast Asia's participation in global trends of tapping into the expansive Chinese media market

through collaborative production remains limited. This article therefore examines the labour experiences of being a 'willing collaborator' (Keane et al. 2018) under such unequal power relations in the era of the 'rise of China'.

Second, studies of transnational production work have largely approached negotiations of ideological and cultural knowhow from textual or political economic perspectives, with relatively few works focusing on the subjective experiences of labour. This article combines insights from creative labour studies with transnational media production to examine producers' affective experiences of transnational media work and how these relate to shifting geopolitics past and present.

This then also speaks to debates about agency in creative labour studies. Against post-structuralist approaches that assume workers' subjective experiences only serve to lubricate abuses in the capitalist system (Hope & Richards 2015: 119; Chow 2019: 123), Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) argued we should take creative workers' subjective experiences seriously in order to locate labour agency in their accounts of what constitutes 'good work'. In particular, I am inspired by their appeal to Hochschild's (1983) concept of 'emotional labour' as important to 'understanding the socio-psychological dynamics of cultural work' (Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2008: 115). Through this case study, I seek to extend these insights beyond the negative or economic connotations of emotional labour in creative work by considering how such

emotional labour practices may form a part of what constitutes ‘good work’ in situated geopolitical contexts. This focus opens up room to consider the disjuncture between the discursive, material and affective ways in which acts may be experienced by different people involved, and how these are situated in and impact on existing inequalities of power.

To do so, in addition to creative labour studies works, I draw on feminist approaches to affect as at once deeply felt, social and public (eg. Ahmed 2004; Berlant 2011; Brennan 2004), thereby making the affective an avenue for examining power and inequality beyond material or discursive forces (Fortier 2017; Hunter 2015). In particular, this article makes use of the concept of ‘emotional labour’ as the internal labour requiring the worker ‘to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others’ (Hochschild 1983: 7) while ‘simultaneously struggling to distance themselves from its emotional effects, to make it just another aspect of the job’ (Grindstaff 2002: 133). This internal negotiation that creative workers’ undertake to regulate their own emotions contrasts with the more autonomist concept of ‘affective labour’, which focuses on the production, manipulation and circulation of affects that are profitable in the marketplace (Hardt and Negri 2004). Following feminist conceptualizations that recognize the impossibility of separating circulating affects from their embodied production (Ahmed 2004), I focus on emotional labour in this article as the self-management efforts (such as

internalizing negative feelings that might otherwise challenge the status quo) necessary to doing affective labour such as expressing optimism or other affective commodities – feelings, relationships and qualities – as resources that facilitate profit-making (Veldstra 2020).

In particular, I consider the potentialities for emotional ambivalences to generate media workers as geopolitical subjects and how these emotions create 'sites of contestation' (Schick 2019) to challenge hegemonic ideas and practices. This requires taking seriously that feelings materialize both through encounters in producers' everyday modes of sense-making (Berlant et al 2022) and their articulatory accounts of these feelings. My main approach to this research was therefore oral interviews of storytelling with key interlocutors, supplemented with some ethnographic observations of key public events. My research for this paper involved following the networks of my existing informants within Singapore's Chinese-language media industry, with whom I have maintained yearly fieldwork contact since 2012, who introduced to me the personnel and companies at various stages of pursuing transnational work with Mainland China in different capacities. Following their recommendations, I also attended the Asia TV Forum held in Singapore in 2019 and 2020, a key annual event for Singaporean producers to network with their Asian counterparts. I observed these networking and pitching sessions, and spoke informally to various Singaporean producers pursuing projects with Mainland Chinese counterparts during these events. I

also interviewed the same informants between 2018 and 2022. In total, I spoke at varying depth, formally and informally, with 20 Singaporean media workers occupying different positions in relation to collaborative work with the PRC. Findings from a relatively small snowball sample focusing on subjective and qualitative experiences of work are not generalizable beyond those terms. What this study hopes to do is to follow my informants' critical reflections and articulations as they work through their own affective responses in order to tease out the embodied aspects of complex experiences and to understand the emotional implications of working with powerful counterparts.

'They don't need us' – Affective precarity and feelings of disjuncture

When I asked my Singaporean interlocutors whether they have considered moving to the Mainland Chinese market in recent years, the majority of them answered along the lines of 'they don't need us'. Asked to elaborate, they explained that the competitiveness of the enormous labour market in the PRC brings with it significant uncertainty, further exacerbated by the fact that Singaporean producers do not have an obvious production niche within regional cultural production. This response seems to echo experiences of precariousness commonly felt amongst creative workers globally (Curtin & Sanson 2016). Conventionally conceptualized as a condition suffered under the neoliberalization of creative labour, it is worth unpacking the precarious experiences

of those who pursue transnational work coming from a much smaller industry such as Singapore's.

Singapore's creative workers are not unfamiliar with precarity in global creative labour. Fung (2016) has called cultural labourers from Singapore 'skilled conformers' who willingly navigate precarious conditions in subcontracted jobs from Hollywood and elsewhere because they take pride in being the 'Asian arm of Hollywood' (2016: 210) with the 'know-how' to navigate between the 'East' and 'West'. The rise of the PRC in regional cultural production, however, raises ambivalent feelings that combine a sense of ethnic pride that they no longer only look to the West for collaborations of such scale, with a simultaneous distancing from full identification with Sinocentric aesthetics, styles and standards. This ambivalence is not surprising because part of the postcolonial Singaporean state's ideological management of Singapore's multi-ethnic – albeit majority Chinese – population after the war involved largely looking to the West in its nation-building efforts and carefully divorcing ethnic pride from the formation of its national identity. Multiple waves of Chinese immigration from the PRC to Singapore, intersecting with decades of changing popular cultural mediations, have also had complex effects on experiences of co-ethnicity and what Ien Ang has called 'entangled racisms' (2022) between Singaporean and Mainland Chinese. Alongside recent surveys that indicate macro tensions between elite and popular dispositions towards an increasingly powerful and visible China (Yong 2021; Seah et al 2022), I

have also noticed through my own long-term research with Singaporean media producers how such dispositions have shifted on the ground. For instance, while producers articulated widespread rejection of the use of actors from the PRC in local production in 2012, they spoke with more enthusiasm towards that in 2022. At the same time, lingering Sinophobia amongst ethnic Chinese Singaporeans against their PRC counterparts persist in everyday lived experiences (Ang, S. 2022).

These geopolitical entanglements mirror Singapore media producers' relationship with the PRC media industries, which have changed drastically over the years. Having engaged and co-opted the expertise of the Hong Kong media industry in the 1980s, Singapore's television industry obtained the production capabilities of the more technically advanced media industry at the time almost a decade ahead of the PRC. This led to a period in the 1980s and 1990s when Singapore not only consistently exported drama serials to the PRC but also served as a sought-after co-producer for aspiring Chinese television stations. However, the gradual opening up of media production in China in 2008 brought an end to Chinese television stations' eagerness to co-produce with Singapore (Liew & Yao 2019). Without Taiwanese producers' experience in variety shows and idol dramas (Zhao 2018); the above-the-line creative talents of Hong Kong's long-established media industries; or the regional star power of their celebrities, Singaporean media workers have been slower in tapping on the huge Mainland Chinese media market.

Changing geopolitics, shifting sentiments on the ground, and the reversal of the power relationship between Singapore and Mainland China's media production industries, all compound producers' experiences of precarity when working with the PRC. Many of my interlocutors tell me, at times incredulously, how their PRC counterparts command much higher pay than the Singaporeans now, a stark contrast to the situation twenty years ago and a testament to their industry's rapid development in the past decade. 'Even [referring to one of Singapore's most famous scriptwriters] is now not good enough (*bei xian qi*) for them', a producer said to me with frustration in 2022. When I ask about their experiences working with their colleagues from the PRC, their first answers are often full of nostalgia and self-reflection:

> More than twenty years ago when we went to China to shoot, they still felt that Singaporean dramas are good, special and something they want to watch. Now, it's not that way. Perhaps even the other way around. We can feel it. So having been through that, I feel emotional (*gan chu*). Why did we stagnate when they moved so quickly? I feel quite a bit. (Producer A, April 12, 2021).

> I just feel a sense of pity. Look how far they have come. It is not that we do not have the money. But we kept missing the boat, again and again. I feel so much pity. (Producer B, April 11, 2021).

> They are big IPO companies and they're big giants in China, you see. Seriously, we are nothing, you know? (Producer C, March 6, 2020).

This kind of response was particularly common amongst the producers who had been in the industry for several decades. Whether talking about how the Chinese no longer want to watch Singaporean productions or exclaiming that ‘we are nothing’, these comments reinforce the underlying message that ‘they don’t need us’, thereby revealing their strong feelings of insecurity and precariousness. Notably, their experiences of precariousness, which were articulated in a distinctly affective manner, are underpinned by vivid memories of how things used to differ merely years ago. These affective responses from emotional nostalgia, pity to the exasperation seeping from the comment ‘seriously, we are nothing, you know?’ therefore reveal a sense of temporal dissonance in witnessing the changing relationship between the media industries of Singapore and the PRC. This affective experience that form a core part of feelings of precarity for my interlocutors go beyond individual experiences of neoliberalism and are inflected by a sense of temporal disjuncture around changing geopolitical configurations.

This temporal dissonance is further complicated by a sense of spatial disjuncture that they are confronted with. While the Singaporean producers were working with Mainland Chinese media enterprises that are technically established in Singapore since mid-2010s to expand on their regional presence, they quickly realized that their target market remains firmly on Mainland China. This spatial dissonance also manifests on set. Despite shooting Nanyang (Sinocentric term for Southeast Asia) themed dramas in Singapore and Malaysia, and both Singaporean and Malaysian workers being much

cheaper to hire, these productions still preferred flying in a mostly Mainland Chinese crew. My interlocutors tell me how their productions usually featured only a Singaporean Director, Assistant Director and a Production Manager amidst a roughly 200 people crew hailing from the PRC. In such instances, the team essentially had to recreate a Mainland Chinese production set in Malaysia (including housing all crew in hotel rooms and flying in chefs from the PRC to cook three meals a day) to cater to the crew. There is a felt sense to being confronted with the work and scale that go into reproducing a PRC production set in Malaysia. As a popular co-production locale for Hollywood productions in Southeast Asia, Singaporean media workers are used to the more cost-efficient way of working with a largely local production crew while flying in a small number of above-the-line producers from Hollywood (Fung 2016). The small number of Singaporean producers working on an essentially Mainland Chinese production set situated in Southeast Asia therefore reinforces the feelings of precariousness of my interlocutors. A director I spoke to explained:

> 'Even though they are set up here, they are a China company… They are all from the PRC… In the past, we go to China for the setting and their crew assisted us. But now, it's the other way around… If we don't think so much, it is okay… I may be the director but the ultimate say lies with the Chinese.' (Director A, April 12, 2021)

This insecurity, of not being 'needed' as creative labour even on home ground, is not just a result of production conditions but also affective in the embodied felt sense of everyday confrontations with Chinese dominance on set. 'I am the only one here,' exclaimed one creative worker about being the only Singaporean on set as she explained the difficulties of adapting to the working habits of her PRC counterparts. This is an experience of precariousness that is felt – an affective dissonance of being in the geographical centre but cultural periphery when working with a Mainland Chinese production in Southeast Asia.

In this sense, these Singaporean transnational creative workers' experiences of precariousness are marked by a spatial-temporal disjuncture stemming from changing geopolitical relations and everyday experiences on set. This experience of precarious work is therefore, I argue, distinctly *affective* – an embodied precarity that is felt in the everyday and through evoked emotions about the past.

'They will never get it' – Emotional labour and critique on set

If the collaborative production work transnational producers in Singapore do is characterized by a sense of 'affective precarity', how do my interlocutors cope? The account of one particular creative worker, whom I shall call Daisy here, is instructive. I spoke extensively with Daisy, who had spent months working and living on set in

Malaysia with her colleagues from the PRC. As a Singaporean, she took on the role of mediating between the predominantly Mainland Chinese labour force and local work conditions in Malaysia. She told me that since most of her colleagues are Chinese, she felt the need to 'be in their culture' to manage the administrative side of things.

> But they will feel we are very troublesome, that we have so many rules and regulations. A lot of times, they are like *snaps finger* I tell you now means make it happen. But sorry, this is not your father's land. And my father is not the boss here. So you have to wait. (Daisy, March 28, 2021)

I hear her drumming her fingertips on the table as she tells me about how she has to deal with her Mainland Chinese counterparts' annoyance at the differences in rules and regulations, working hours and speeds in Malaysia, and how they often demanded that things worked like in the PRC. 'This is something that we keep arguing, quarreling and disputing about … I keep reminding them, telling them, but they will never get it. Until now, we still encounter this problem', Daisy told me. Daisy's affective account reveals her frustrations about her Chinese counterparts' refusal to adapt to the practicalities of a different work culture.

Such confrontations with the dominance of the PRC in day-to-day administration are accompanied by reminders of being 'inexperienced'. Daisy recounted being told by her Chinese art director that she should comply since Singaporean producers are inexperienced. 'But this does not mean we are worse! Perhaps we don't

do this kind of work often, and so to them, we are inexperienced. But I do not think we will lose to them', she exclaimed to me. To metabolize these negative feelings, she talked about putting in extra effort to personally research the cultural details (such as food, costumes, set and practices) of Nanyang as a way to vet the more Sinocentric imaginations of her Chinese team. Admitting that this preparatory work goes beyond her job scope, she emphasized, 'I am like a guard to overseas… I'm like a guard telling them "sorry, things are not like this in Nanyang"'.

Despite the complaints, Daisy kept reassuring me throughout our conversation that it was all about communication and that everything was fine. Being the minority in the situation, Daisy felt the onus of engaging in much emotional labour – whether coping with her PRC colleagues' annoyance or her own frustrations derived from their working conditions – in order to manage the practices that constantly threaten to rupture the veneer of harmonious collaboration, which could potentially cost her the job. While Daisy's account is particularly illuminating, I have heard various versions of it from many of my other interlocutors. Assuming the role of an 'expert' in matters related to Nanyang is a common theme in their accounts. Writing about the increasing demand on workers to conduct the emotional labour of 'managing, internalizing and obscuring the contradictions of capital and precarity as they are experienced at an individual level' (2020: 12), Veldstra argued that such emotional labour is 'productive of a socioeconomic belonging that enforces compliance with punishing norms' (2020: 12).

Building on Veldstra's work, I further argue that Daisy's emotional labour practices were productive beyond mere compliance. On one level, Daisy's repositioning of herself as being a 'guard to overseas' to justify her unique contribution to the team was the outcome of her emotional labour of internalizing her negative feelings. This outcome constitutes a form of affective labour as it facilitated extra work that benefitted the production in a neoliberal sense. On another level, however, I argue that these work practices also play other functions in excess of being lubrications for the capitalist order.

I wish to make use of Foucault's ideas about critique as 'how not to be governed like that' (Foucault 1997: 28-32) to elaborate my point here. For Foucault, critique is a form of technique of self or self-care where subjects de-subjugate themselves through the critical attitude. Butler further extended Foucault's idea of critique beyond judgment since judgments 'subsume a particular under an already constituted category, whereas critique asks after the occlusive constitution of the field of categories themselves' (Butler 2001). From this perspective, Daisy's re-articulation of her position from 'inexperienced' to 'guard to overseas' constitutes a 'critical de-subjectivation' in relation to the 'norms of recognition that make the subject be, and which only make it be on the basis of a sphere of alterity that finds itself excluded' (Ong-Van-Cung 2011: 148-161). In other words, by reformulating her subject position within the production to 'guard', Daisy refused to be defined by her PRC colleagues' more Sinocentric 'norms

of recognition' through questioning precisely the criteria of those norms. In that sense, Daisy's affective labour – reimagining herself as 'guard to overseas', itself the outcome of her emotional labour of internalizing the bad feelings of being called 'inexperienced – constitutes an 'art of voluntary insubordination' (Foucault 1997: 32) that was productive not merely in the neoliberal sense but also as creative critique. This critique involves two interrelated dimensions: 'on the one hand, it is a way of refusing subordination to an established authority; on the other hand, it is an obligation to produce or elaborate a self' (Butler 2009: 787). Daisy's refusal to subordinate to established authority then opened up the space for self-invention that reconstituted her as performative subject (Boland 2007) within transnational production work.

Being an 'affect alien' at the periphery of 'Pop Culture China'

Daisy, along with the majority of my interlocutors, engaged in affective and emotional labour to manage their experiences of precariousness in transnational media work. Writing about how 'feeling the right way' works as a disciplinary regime, Ahmed (2010) described the 'affect alien' as someone who fails to or refuses to do the emotional labour required to close the gap between the 'right way to feel' and how one actually experiences that expectation. Put in this context, the creative worker who cannot or will not abide the pressure both to express the self in terms of economically valuable affects and to subordinate unprofitable feelings is a form of 'affect alien'

(Veldstra 2020: 5-7). This raises questions about what happens when bad feelings are expressed by precarious transnational workers who are expected to perform affective labour – such as showing enthusiasm towards creative compromise to facilitate collaboration – when seeking employment with more dominant partners.

An ethnographic encounter I witnessed when I attended the 'Chinese pitch' at the Asia Television Forum held in Singapore in December 2019 could perhaps provide some food for thought. Pitching events such as this one are an important part of transnational media work as Singaporean producers seek opportunities to enter the wider Chinese-speaking media markets. This particular event was a closed-door session intended for writers to pitch their concepts for online dramas and movies for the global Chinese-speaking market to a panel of three judges, all of whom were Mainland Chinese men, including the VP of Chinese streaming platform *iQiyi* and the head of a Chinese production company based in Singapore. Through some personal connections, I obtained permission from the organizer to observe the session. As the event was organized by the Singapore-based Chinese production company in collaboration with Singapore's media authority, most of the working crew and audience in the room were locals apart from the three judges. I sat in the back of the room behind the three judges as the finalists entered and pitched their projects one at a time before receiving questions and comments from the judges.

One particular finalist, a Singaporean whom I shall call Ling, stood out. Ling's concept, albeit set specifically in Singapore, drew on themes of postmodernity and memory that she hoped would translate across localities. During her presentation, she made clear attempts to draw links between the Singaporean settings, themes and characters in her project to parallels in the PRC so that the judges could understand the nuances. After she finished her presentation, the panel of judges began asking questions about how her concept could fit within existing genres established in the PRC market. As the judges debated her idea, it became clear to me that while the session was marketed as a pitch for the global Chinese-speaking market, the judges had very specific ideas about what would work for a general Mainland Chinese audience. Sensing the attempts to Sinicize her work, Ling broke down in tears as she revealed what she felt was the main value of her idea – to document and preserve the ephemeral locality and uniqueness of Singapore – which she explained was inspired by her own father. Ling's emotional outburst silenced the room. Through her tears, she explained that her emotions stemmed from her desire to preserve a fast-disappearing aspect of Singaporean culture. However, the three male judges were quick to dismiss that by reducing her feelings to the personal family connection.

Realizing that her point was not getting across to the judges, Ling broke out in another emotional appeal at the end of her session. I reproduce the scene here based on my handwritten notes.

> Shifting her gaze away from the judges to look around room, Ling called out, 'IMDA (referring to Singapore's government agency, Infocomm Media Development Authorities), anyone from IMDA here? If you're around, please support this!'
>
> Confused, the head of the Chinese production company based in Singapore stood up. 'What is IMDA?', he asked.
>
> There was a moment of awkward silence. Ling hesitated but did not answer him. Sensing the tense moment, the organizers walked up to Ling to politely invite her off stage as the Chinese producer asked again what she was referring to. Visibly embarrassed, one of the Singaporean organizers softly whispered to him.
>
> As she was ushered away, Ling switched from Mandarin to English and pleaded while looking around the room, 'This is for Singapore, really!' to a continuing silence in the room.

Later that evening, I walked over to Ling at a networking session and introduced myself. She was clearly still emotional from the pitch and seemed glad to have someone to rant to. Unprompted, she explained why she appealed to the IMDA at the end of her pitching session. 'If they are just buying for the PRC market, what is the point? Why are we selling our local content?' she exclaimed. I met up with Ling in April 2021 and she explained more about her disappointment over lunch.

> Because they are already so big, they are not listening... I just really felt "don't brush people off like that. Don't brush ordinary lives and their value off like that" (Ling, April 11, 2021).

Ling's response was accompanied by her perception that the judges were dismissive of her work because it fell outside of what they thought worked for the dominant Mainland Chinese market. Underlying that was her discomfort with the assumption that the PRC market represented global Chinese-speaking audiences, reflecting discourse that was prevalent throughout the sessions I attended at the Asia TV Forum 2019, where most presentations made by Mainland Chinese broadcasters and platforms articulated ambitions to counter Western hegemony on behalf of Asia.

In a way, Ling was the 'affect alien' (Ahmed 2010) in this particular encounter. In terms of maximising profits, it made sense to target the pitch at a mainland Chinese imagined audience as the largest market. However, since the event was marketed as a pitch targeting a global Chinese speaking audience, there was clearly a mismatch between the expectations of Ling and the judges – a mismatch that I observed from many of the other participants too. As I watched these participants' awkward smiles while enduring similar questions that put them on the spot, it was evident to me the emotional labour it took for them to keep up appearances. By refusing to close that gap between how she felt and the economically productive affects expected of her in that situation, Ling became the 'affect alien' in quite a spectacular manner.

While I dismissed the incident at the time, this interaction stayed with me and I found myself revisiting the encounter repeatedly while reviewing my field notes. In particular, the affective aspects of this encounter offer interesting insights into understanding transnational media work under the dominance of a rising China. Ling's highly affective performance, which was earlier dismissed by the judges as 'being too personal', that then culminated in her striking emotive appeal to the IMDA in English, captured the room. In an attempt to counter the dominance of the PRC in the room, Ling appealed to the Singaporean authorities for support only to be met with an obliviousness to what the IMDA was from the Chinese producer. During the encounter, I remember feeling quite shocked to hear that the head of the production company was unaware of Singapore's media authority, not only because his company was based in Singapore, but the event he was attending was also organized by the IMDA. This obliviousness betrays an ignorance that stems from the dominance of the Mainland Chinese market in Asia. There was a felt sense of dissonance here amongst the Singaporeans in the room, of being marginalized despite being the majority on that occasion and being situated on home ground. While the Chinese producer mentioned may have shrugged it off, this felt discomfort was not lost on others in the room as we sat in dead silence. In that moment, the unequal power relationship between the center and periphery of Chinese-language media production in Asia emerged clearly through the affective interactions between the emotional Ling, the oblivious Chinese judges and the embarrassed organizers,

exacerbated by the evidently different ways in which the different people involved experienced this encounter. Ling's refusal to conduct the emotional labour required – internalizing negative feelings – in that social situation made Singaporean workers' location within wider power structures hyper-visible in that moment. This kind of situated embodied knowledge (Laszczkowski 2019: 505) can be productive as a form of critique within strategic political processes and encounters (Barnwell 2020). Drawing from Butler's definition of critique as 'the very practice that exposes the limits of that epistemological horizon itself, making the contours of the horizons appear… in relation to its own limit' (2001), the refusal to conduct emotional labour, in these instances, work as critique by making visible precisely those difficult feelings that are implicated in the emotional labour we often take for granted, thereby illuminating the very power structures that underlie these conditions. In other words, by indicating 'subjective depletion and thus the limits of the emotional work embedded in affective labour' (Veldstra 2020: 21), Ling's refusal to conduct emotional labour in this encounter made visible the invisible tensions between the unequal partners in transnational collaborative production work.

Critical labour and agency

In the last two sections, I have discussed two different ways in which my interlocutors' emotional labour practices (one through working with affective labour

demands, and the other through refusing to do so) can function as forms of critique. Such practices point to the producers' refusal to surrender their agency through submission to consanguinity (Ang 1998: 240). Relatedly, this also raises broader debates around agency in creative labour studies. Rather than assuming the subsumed passivity of workers in emotional and affective labour, or a wholly radical and autonomous agency, how might ambivalent feelings signal a form of 'suspended agency' (Ngai 2007) that interfere with other emotions to resist easy assimilation into the affective economy?

In Butler's account, Foucault's 'critique' does not stem from absolute freedom or agency but instead is a 'practice' that is formed and situated in particular exchanges between a set of precepts and a stylization of acts (which extends and reformulates that prior set of rules) (Butler 2001). In that sense, critical labour agency lies in the two types of situated practices discussed earlier. The first set of practices where producers participated in the emotional labour required to facilitate smooth collaboration is illustrated by Daisy. Her re-invention of herself as 'guard to overseas' exemplifies the creative ways in which producers situated in the margins of Western and Chinese hegemony carve out a space for themselves amidst a contested public (Barnwell 2020). Such acts of self-reformulation are precisely where agency is exercised through the

constitution of new subjectivities and alternative norms outside of the boundaries of established authority (Butler 2009; Ong-Van-Cung 2011).

In the second instance, producers refusing to do the affective labour required, as examined through Ling's spectacular performance, reveal a different set of potentialities. Gestures betraying affective alienation can open up alternative possibilities of living and struggle (Ahmed 2010: 218-222; Berlant et al 2022: 367). However, bad feelings do not present a straightforward path to a counter-politics that challenges the hegemony of affective labour. Rather, it provides a critical lens through which to understand, and to performatively indicate to others who share these bad feelings, how emotional labour is complicit in the reproduction of the status quo. It is in this shift in frames of reference (Hynes 2013) that the affect alien's practices possess potentialities as a form of critical labour agency from the margins.

Critique goes beyond what we may traditionally understand as resistance against the potential Sinicizing forces of the dominant PRC workplace, which assumes participants have diametrically opposed interests (Hollander and Einwohner 2004: 539). By focusing on practices of critique, we sidestep debates on whether intent and outcomes should qualify an act as resistance (Vinthagen and Johansson 2013), particularly since affect could either possess the radical potential for change or be captured by relations of power for control. In this sense, the critical agency of the

emotional labour practices discussed in this article perhaps lie precisely in the ambivalent potentiality of these emotions as sites of contestation (Schick 2019).

Conclusion

In this paper, I examined the experiences of precariousness and emotional labour of a group of media producers situated in a margins of the mainland Chinese media industries to make two arguments. First, these producers' precarious experiences extend beyond precarity's economic connotations and are distinctly affective, characterized by a felt sense of temporal and spatial disjuncture stemming from changing geopolitical relations. I elaborated on the kinds of emotional labour producers performed to cope with such affective precarity. Second, I then considered how such emotional labour practices constitute forms of critique – or creative insubordination – of the 'mainlandization' of their workplace. In deliberating the critical potential of producers' emotional labour practices, I hope to articulate how the affective aspects of creative workers' subjective experiences have the critical agency to move beyond merely lubricating the neoliberal order.

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