

## A Revealing “Confession” or Another Publicity Stunt? Reflections on Social Media Entrepreneurship on Weibo

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The rise of capital alliances and persistent state governance have profoundly shaped social media entrepreneurship in China. Through a qualitative analysis of 294 confession posts on Weibo, this study explores the self-disclosure of Chinese bloggers' entrepreneurial experiences. Considering Foucault's contention on confession, I argue that this wave of blogger confessions reflects bloggers' submissions to the Chinese digital creative industry. Bloggers' confessions are essentially scripted performances to construct an image of a diligent, self-enterprising entrepreneur to legitimize their growing profit motives. In their confessions, Chinese bloggers exhibit what I refer to as neo/non-liberal entrepreneurial subjectivity that embodies neoliberal entrepreneurial principles and market rationality while aligning with state governance. These bloggers fail to resist state governance and the precarity caused by China's digital creative industry. Instead, they attempt to harness positive energy and attribute entrepreneurial failures to a lack of personal competitiveness. Chinese bloggers have largely internalized the risks associated with social media entrepreneurship, rendering them precarious laborers in the industry.

*Keywords: social media entrepreneurship, multi-channel networks (MCNs), China, digital creative industries, bloggers*

Bloggers now have become an integral part of China's digital creative industries. In this article, the bloggers that I refer to are known as bo zhu in Chinese. With substantial following and online influence, Chinese bloggers are not only content creators but also play a significant role in China's vibrant online culture and act as key opinion leaders (KOLs) or influencers in the wanghong economy<sup>1</sup> (Han, 2021). Since the mid-2010s, a growing number of bloggers could sustain their livelihoods and pursue career paths through traffic monetization (Guan, 2021). Bloggers' identities are gradually recognized as social media entrepreneurs or “self-media content producers” (Yu, Xu, & Sun, 2022, p. 254), exhibiting entrepreneurial spirit, skills, and dedication to influencer marketing.

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<sup>1</sup> Wanghong economy falls under a broader digital creative industry and social media entertainment (SME) industry in China (Craig, Cunningham, & Lin, 2021). It is characterized by the rise of wanghong, namely individuals who have gained influence on digital platforms. Their popularity allows them to monetize traffic through advertisements, endorsements, and other commercial opportunities (Abidin, 2018).

Notably, starting around 2021, a popular trend called #BloggerConfessions (博主坦白局) went viral on Chinese social media, where bloggers shared reflections on their entrepreneurial paths. In bloggers' confessions, an array of bloggers revealed the harsh reality of social media entrepreneurship, reminding the public that this was a risky entrepreneurial field where success could not be achieved solely through talent display and self-branding. Although previous scholarship has addressed a range of precarity that can be associated with bloggers ranging from government censorship to class/gender biases (e.g., Han, 2022; Yang, 2021; Yu et al., 2022), this article primarily focuses on two precarity revealed in bloggers' confessions: the capitalist, platformed industry and ongoing state governance.

First, with the rapid growth of Chinese Internet giants and the promotion of national policies, such as the 13th Five-Year Plan, there has been a strong momentum in China toward the convergence of technological innovation, the digital economy, and cultural creativity (Keane, 2016). Since the mid-2010s, Chinese creative industries have witnessed a rapid process of digital transformation and transitioned to what many scholars refer to as digital creative industries (Craig, Cunningham, & Lin, 2021; Keane, 2016). This descriptive term broadly refers to "a collection of industries that engage in creative cultural content, production, circulation, and services based on Internet technology and core digitization" (Xie, Xie, & Martínez-Climent, 2019, p. 504). In this sense, Chinese bloggers fall within the umbrella of digital creative labor, as they create and/or disseminate cultural creations and profit from these works on digital platforms. Their labor encompasses elements of creativity, digital marketing, and audience engagement on digital platforms, making bloggers integral contributors to the broader landscape of Chinese digital creative industries.

It is important to note that China's digital creative industry is inherently capitalist and platform-driven, meaning that it is deeply rooted in platform hegemony and capitalist nature (Keane, 2016; Lin & de Kloet, 2019). The global rise of platformization has significantly shaped the digital creative industries and social media market. As Nieborg and Poell (2018) note, "the penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems, fundamentally affecting the operations of the cultural industries" (p. 4276). China is no exception. Like their Western counterparts such as Google, Apple, and Microsoft, Chinese Internet giants such as Alibaba, Tencent, and Bytedance, along with rising private platforms like Taobao and WeChat, play a dominant role in the Chinese digital space (Davis & Xiao, 2021). Most Chinese platforms are owned by these giants, and they exercise considerable power over bloggers' visibility, creator agency, and income. Chinese bloggers, too, are precarious creative laborers who are expected to adhere to "platform adhesion" (Sun, 2019, p. 314) and face risks and exploitations from the hegemonic governance of the platforms (Han, 2022).

In addition, perhaps the most significant transformation of the Chinese digital creative industries lies in the comprehensive "marketization and commercialization of culture production" (Keane, 2016, p. 70). Therefore, it is not hard to imagine that Chinese bloggers operate their social media entrepreneurship within an industry deeply rooted in capitalist logic. The rise of Multi-Channel Networks (MCNs) in bloggers' entrepreneurship is a clear example of the capitalist digital creative industries. Since the mid-2010s, Chinese bloggers' entrepreneurship and the broader wanghong economy have undergone "a professionalized and institutionalized process with the fast development of Multi-Channel Networks" (Guo, 2022, p. 304). According to Gardner and Lehnert (2016), MCNs refer to "any entity or organization that partners with content creators or

directly produces a variety of distinctive content and works to perform business and marketing functions" (p. 294). With substantial profitability, MCNs have attracted various stakeholders ranging from platforms to brands, leading to a trend of capital alliances (Liu, 2020). The resulting industry changes have greatly crowded out formerly self-directed bloggers, making bloggers' entrepreneurship highly industrialized and commercialized (Han, 2021). Instead of being independent entrepreneurs, a growing number of Chinese bloggers become "precarious proletariats with potentialities" (Yu, 2022, p. 23) who are drawn into alliances with capital companies. Whether willingly or not, bloggers are a part of the apparatus promoting the capitalist digital creative industries, particularly through the consumer market (Guo, 2022). The infiltration of capitalist forces and rampant commercialism has sparked a reputation crisis among bloggers, placing their identities as "cultural creators" under increasing challenge (Craig et al., 2021; Shi, 2020).

Beyond the capitalist, platformed industries, the role of the state also prominently shapes Chinese bloggers' entrepreneurship. Despite decades of implementation of neoliberal policies and participation in global capitalism, state governance and macro-control remain integral aspects of Chinese society (Yang, 2021). Wallis and Shen (2018) use "neo/non-liberal China" to capture the contradictions of contemporary Chinese society, where "the state still plays a large role in guiding what it calls 'market socialism' and in trying to shape subjectivities" (p. 379). In China's market-state nexus, a central paradox remains, that is, "dynamic entrepreneurial activities have taken place alongside continued state planning, coordination, even participation in the economy" (Zhang & Yuan, 2022, p. 290). Unlike the West, Chinese bloggers, MCNs, and platforms operate under a top-down governance model, where the state plays a dominant role in political control and the party-controlled digital economy (Xu, Qu, & Zhang, 2022). As such, Chinese bloggers and their entrepreneurship go beyond capitalist exploitation and are shaped by ongoing state governance. To be clear, I do not position bloggers in the West as a "typical" neoliberal process without much state intervention while considering Chinese bloggers as a distinct group where state intervention is central to their uniqueness. Neoliberal processes involve state intervention to a greater or lesser extent. However, the critical question is how and to what extent the state intervenes. The deep imbrication between the state and the digital creative industries adds nuances around Chinese bloggers, which is a key aspect of understanding bloggers' entrepreneurship in China.

Drawing on 294 confession posts, I focused on a popular trend, #BloggerConfession on Weibo. I examined 119 Chinese bloggers' reflections on their entrepreneurship and addressed bloggers' defenses in response to controversies surrounding their commercial attributes. In light of Foucault's (1978) contention on confession, the findings reveal that this wave of blogger confessions was a scripted performance rather than a genuine disclosure. The goal of bloggers' confessions was to construct an image of a diligent, self-enterprising entrepreneur to legitimize their growing profit motives. In their confessions, Chinese bloggers exhibit what I refer to as neo/non-liberal entrepreneurial subjectivity that embodies neoliberal entrepreneurial principles and market rationality while aligning with state governance. These bloggers have largely internalized the risks associated with social media entrepreneurship and attributed entrepreneurial failures to a lack of personal competitiveness, rendering them precarious laborers in the industry.

### **Bloggers' Entrepreneurship in China**

As Zhang (2020) and others contend, China is no exception to platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2016). China's digital creative industries, too, have evolved into a hegemonic place, where "platforms have the overwhelming power in setting the rules while the users only have the 'right' to opt-out" (Han, 2022, p. 23). Previous scholars have extensively explored the concept of digital creative labor and its broader implications in the entrepreneurial field, mainly through perspectives such as creator agency, the politics of visibility, and capitalist exploitation (e.g., Guo, 2022; Lin & de Kloet, 2019; Sun, 2019). As digital creative laborers, individual bloggers inevitably find themselves in a subordinate position in an algorithm-driven industry, facing precarity from the capitalist market to platform hegemony.

Beyond that, however, bloggers' entrepreneurship in China exhibits several distinct dynamics. First, while platforms maintain a dominant position, the success of platforms within the digital creative industries heavily relies on the contributions of creators and their abilities to engage audiences and attract advertisers. To foster mutual growth, major Chinese platforms have established partnerships with MCNs to varying extents or invested in their own agencies. For example, e-commerce giant Alibaba has formed partnerships with MCN Ruhn and Weibo (Han, 2021). Although MCNs' business model initially originated with YouTube, MCN was regarded as a failed case in the U.S. platform-dominated contexts. Most of MCNs' promised services proved to be redundant, and platforms themselves have "elbowed them out of the way with automated and low-touch management services, like YouTube's Creator Academy" (Craig et al., 2021, p. 125). Differently, in the Chinese digital creative industries, MCNs not only provide affiliated creators with content production and marketing services but also act as intermediaries to facilitate collaborations between platforms, creators, and advertisers (Han, 2021; Liu, 2020). Since the mid-2010s, MCNs have quickly attracted various stakeholders, leading to the rapid growth of capital alliances, and dominating much of the management of content creators in the Chinese digital creative industries (Craig et al., 2021).

These industrial changes have correspondingly shaped bloggers' entrepreneurship. One major notable impact is that the rise of capital alliances has placed increasing pressure on bloggers to meet commercial demands. While many Anglocentric regions where the identity of cultural creators occupies a central position in bloggers' entrepreneurship, Chinese bloggers assume more of a salesmanship role geared toward monetization goals (Abidin, 2018). The rampant commercialism has sparked a reputation crisis among Chinese bloggers. Frequent scandals and "tea" being spilled, such as the promotion of low-quality products and the release of overpriced collaborations, raised concerns about bloggers' authenticity and creative integrity (Shi, 2020). This trend is particularly harmful to bloggers' entrepreneurship, as they are essentially visible, relation labor required to curate positive presences and maintain affective online communities to secure paid work (Abidin, 2018; Baym, 2015). Despite the well-known industrial mechanism, bloggers' reputation crisis suggests that the public expects bloggers to "[place] great value on the performance of authenticity which, in the instance of MCN management, includes transparent business practices" (Craig et al., 2021, p. 126). For Chinese bloggers, finding venues to preserve authenticity and creative integrity becomes a key concern in their entrepreneurship.

Another major difference in Chinese bloggers' entrepreneurship lies in the prominent role of the state. Perhaps, in China, governmental scrutiny is no longer new revelations. Through data exchange with

technology capital, censorship, and state-led platformization, the state has absolute control over the Chinese digital space (Yang, 2021). Platforms, MCNs, and bloggers operate under a top-down, state-centric model of governance (Xu et al., 2022). Under this model, the state intervenes in the party-controlled digital economy, simultaneously deploying political agendas and exerting ideological control. In these processes, Chinese platforms are positioned as "pillars in state marketization projects" (Davis & Xiao, 2021, p. 107). Both economically and politically, platforms play dual roles in "both the linchpins of capitalist expansion and the nation's economic upheaval in the information age, and as the intermediary pivotal to state's success of inserting control in daily online practices" (Jia & Han, 2020, p. 305).

Take Weibo, one of the most influential Chinese platforms, as an example. Like other major platforms, Weibo is the engine of a party-controlled digital economy, attracting private capital from both domestic and global markets, particularly through burgeoning consumerism. However, at the same time, Weibo also serves as a vital instrument for the state to strengthen political control and social governance (Benney, 2014; Jia & Han, 2020). Starting in 2012, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) and several other national institutions released a series of measures targeting content creators and MCN agencies. These regulations primarily focused on monitoring the cultural production and marketing activities of creators and MCN agencies through platform management, such as censorship and blacklist systems (Sun, 2022). Overall, the state's goal was to cleanse information chaos, ensure creators and MCNs "behave well," and strengthen its political grip on the Internet. In response, Weibo quickly updated its platform governance, introducing new rules including real-name registration, user credit system, and MCN management (Gao, 2017; Millward, 2012). In this context, bloggers inevitably faced escalated surveillance, and they were also encouraged to upload personally identifiable information such as national identity cards and cell phone numbers to gain access to higher-level features (Jia & Han, 2020). These platform changes not only "helped generate traffic and greater knowledge of Weibo users . . . also make Weibo a more effective tool to the state" (Jia & Han, 2020, p. 309). In essence, Weibo's adaptation to state-level regulation exemplifies a classic Chinese survival logic, where adhering to the "party line" is the "bottom line" (Yang, 2021, p. 7). To achieve sustainable development, not only Weibo but most Chinese capital entities, such as Alibaba, constantly need to navigate between profitability and economic viability while complying with state directives.

However, state governance is not solely coercive. In different scenarios, it can be "extractive," involving strict restrictions and user bans, or "paternalistic" (Zhang, 2020, p. 118), with the state providing supportive guidance, encouraging individuals and businesses to develop within specific frameworks. In the post-Mao era, the state's neoliberal technologies, such as discourses of happiness and therapeutic governance, served as a crucial governing apparatus, contributing to the establishment of "a kind of socialism at a distance, in which privatizing norms and practices proliferate in symbiosis with the maintenance of authoritarian rule" (Ong & Zhang, 2008, p. 4). More recently, there also has been a rise in state-led patriotic campaigns on Chinese social media, where local authorities and state-owned enterprises collaborate with platforms, creators, and MCNs to create patriotic content, thereby promoting political propaganda while monetizing traffic (Zhang & Ma, 2023). Nevertheless, digital creative labor in China not only "[participates] in the Chinese platform creative economy, appropriating the algorithmic digital system" but also embodies a "state/platform governance to achieve their own creative and financial aims" (Lin & de Kloet, 2019, p. 10).

### **Blogger Confessions**

Foucault's conceptualization of confession has been widely applied to analyze practices of self-disclosure and confession on social media and digital transparency (Stypinska, 2022). According to Foucault (1978), confession, as a normative means to generate discourse about selfhood, serves as "one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth" (p. 59). The act of confession involves disclosing oneself to both self and others, allowing individuals to gain self-awareness, and insight into how they are perceived. As noted by Marwick (2013), "audiences often expect micro-celebrities to be more 'authentic' than traditional celebrities" (p. 119). Especially for bloggers, self-disclosure or presenting themselves as transparent to others is a critical aspect of their self-branding practices. However, the so-called truth essentially points to "a set of rules by which truth is produced" (Foucault, 1997, p. 296). In other words, the truth "is arrived at via simulation—simulation that takes on the form of a strategic gamble" (Stypinska, 2022, p. 28). Indeed, in most digital environments, bloggers have control over what others can see and mostly engage in purposeful self-exposure. To maintain a positive online presence, bloggers often perform perceived interconnectivity (Abidin, 2015), where they offer "the impression of exclusive, 'intimate' exchange through digital and physical space interactions" (Stypinska, 2022, p. 32) and eventually manipulate followers to evoke affection for them. In bloggers' confessions, although bloggers claim to expose industry secrets and clarify the murky sides to the audience, their confessions can be understood as a performative ritual, where the bloggers manipulate self-disclosure to construct "the branded self, with subjectivity shaped by and for the market" (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017, p. 201). In this sense, bloggers' confessions serve as a form of self-making that is essential for the maintenance and promotion of their entrepreneurship, which has the potential to explore how bloggers' subjectivity is understood and articulated in the Chinese digital creative industries.

Furthermore, although confession tends to ostensibly indicate the need for "truth" to be liberated from hidden secrets and implies a natural desire for disclosure, confession is essentially a social practice shaped by power relations (Foucault, 1978). According to Foucault (1997), confession serves as a lens to understand how power is exercised through the production of knowledge about oneself. Instead of being autonomous agents, the act of confession reflects how individuals monitor and regulate their thoughts and actions to conform to power. In many cases, then, confession captures how thoughts and actions are transformed "from bad to good, from outside law and truth to inside" (Alcoff & Gray, 1993, p. 270). In this sense, bloggers' self-disclosures provide a lens to gain insight into how bloggers negotiate with the power structures, key stakeholders, and audience expectations in the Chinese digital creative industries.

Despite the growing attention, previous studies on Chinese confession practices primarily focus on forced televised confessions and political propaganda in relation to Chinese authoritarianism (Fiskesjö, 2017; Liu, 2018). There remains a gap in the practices of confession on social media, particularly in relation to influencer culture and social media entrepreneurship. In addition, much of past scholarly discussions on digital creative labor center on "a critique of neoliberalism," but such "neoliberalization and precaritization . . . may not be pertinent to describing politico-economic conditions in non-western contexts" (de Kloet, Lin, & Chow, 2020, p. 349). China's different industrial mechanisms and state-centric model animate possibilities and raise controversies for bloggers' entrepreneurship. Taken together, this study seeks to answer the following questions: How do Chinese bloggers reflect on their entrepreneurship and respond to industry

change and their growing commercial attributes? What insights can be gained from analyzing blogger confessions about social media entrepreneurship in China?

### Method

In this article, I conducted a qualitative analysis of confession posts on Weibo. By blogger confessions, I refer to a collection of posts in which bloggers openly discuss social media entrepreneurship. Confession posts include, but are not limited to, reflections on entrepreneurial experiences, industry challenges, and responses to criticism/questions about social media entrepreneurship. Confession posts can vary in terms of content, format, and duration. They range from well-made content creation with clear themes, such as sharing blogger experiences and entrepreneurial insights, to informal posts that include responses to criticisms and interactions with followers.

Weibo holds an annual Super Celebrity Festival (超级红人节) to honor influential Hong Ren.<sup>2</sup> Hong Ren is recognized based on various factors such as commercial value and number of followers. They come from diverse fields and vary in the number of followers (from tens of thousands to tens of millions) and the length of entrepreneurial time (from one year to more than 10 years), representing a broad range of social media entrepreneurs. Therefore, I chose the Top 100 Hong Ren of 2020 and 2021 published by Weibo and screened Hong Ren to select the bloggers who fit my research goal. Then, I followed them to avoid any missing posts that were only visible to followers. Data collection was guided by the following categories: (1) entrepreneurial reflections/experience/difficulties; (2) discussion related to the state, MCNs, platforms, and brands; (3) complaints/responses to criticisms/haters; (4) interactions with followers/Q&A (Question and Answer)/giveaways. In addition, while searching through the data, I noticed a popular trend, #BloggerConfessions (博主坦白局) that many bloggers attached to their confession posts. Using the same criteria and time frame, I included another 36 posts. The final sample consisted of 294 confession posts published by 119 bloggers from 2020 to 2021. By the end of the data collection, the followers of selected bloggers ranged from 462 to 15.378 million, including 87 top bloggers and 32 microlevel bloggers with less than 1 million followers.

For data analysis, I followed a grounded theory approach. This approach guarantees the sufficiency and relevance of collected data for interpretation by adopting a critical perspective toward existing theoretical explanations while remaining receptive to various theoretical possibilities (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). Given that confession posts include both textual and video content, it is important to consider the multimodality of the sample. For video content, I analyzed the bloggers' narratives and the written portion of the posts, as well as any accompanying text, such as captions or titles. For textual content, I analyzed the written content in the posts. After multiple rounds of reading, a coding schema was developed: (1) authenticity/realness; (2) self-branding/persona; (3) discourses related to ads, sponsorship, and partnerships; (4) narratives about stakeholders (the state, platforms, and MCNs); (5) entrepreneurial experiences/achievements/challenges; (6) narratives related to followers. Guided by the coding schema, I

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<sup>2</sup> According to Zhang and de Seta (2022), hong ren refers to the person who is popular on the Internet and is widely used to describe online celebrities with grassroots popularity.

continued rereading the data and created preliminary labels to summarize my observations. Then, I developed broader themes and organized them into categories. To achieve theoretical saturation, I continued the circular process and refined these categories into the main themes below. For privacy protection, pseudonyms were used in the writing-up.

### **Neo/Non-liberal Entrepreneurial Subjectivity**

Given the intertwining of China's state governance, capitalism, and neoliberalism, I draw inspiration from Wallis and Shen's (2018) concept of neo/non-liberal China to capture the entrepreneurial endeavors and subjectivity of Chinese bloggers revealed in their confessions. Chinese bloggers exhibit what I refer to as neo/non-liberal entrepreneurial subjectivity. On the one hand, neo/non-liberal entrepreneurial subjectivity captures the neoliberal self-governance among Chinese bloggers, where they actively use market rationality and a series of self-conscious efforts in their entrepreneurship. On the other hand, neo/non-liberal entrepreneurial subjectivity highlights bloggers' deviations from the traditional neoliberal entrepreneurial notions, specifically how the state shapes the subjectivity of Chinese bloggers.

### ***Precarious Neoliberal Self-Reliance***

In bloggers' confessions, most bloggers presented themselves as self-driven entrepreneurs and highlighted the importance of *zi li geng sheng*.<sup>3</sup> Different modes of self-governance run through bloggers' entrepreneurial paths, ranging from self-persistence in the early days to vigilance against exploitation from MCNs. During the initial phase, most bloggers experienced a dark period of being unrecognized, and they used a range of terms, such as "patience" and "silver lining" to stress the importance of self-persistence. As Miao (personal communication, March 14, 2021) recounted, he faced daily setbacks in his early career. To pursue his entrepreneurship, Miao purchased expensive equipment to improve the quality of his videos and saved money on makeup classes by moving back in with his parents. Thanks to his persistence, Miao finally gained attention after three years of waiting. Differently, another blogger Qiaoyi (personal communication, June 8, 2021) regarded the initial phase as a precious time to polish her work. She equated entrepreneurial uncertainty with self-tests and the inability to persist might actually demonstrate a lack of sufficient passion for social media entrepreneurship. Similar to venture labor described in the West (Neff, 2015), most Chinese bloggers operate in conditions of radical uncertainty during the early stages of entrepreneurship, but they are willing to rationalize entrepreneurial risks, investing their time and capital to optimize their envisioned future without collective support.

Since the mid-2010s, the Chinese MCN market has experienced explosive growth. By 2018, Weibo announced collaborations with over 2,000 MCNs, covering 46,000 accounts and 60 industries (*China Daily*, 2018). According to Sina Tech (2016), Weibo has established a systematic MCN management system by launching services such as MCN business cards and the creator advertising sharing program. Bloggers who join the Weibo MCN can enjoy exclusive service privileges, access to premium resource packages (i.e., traffic, and e-commerce resources), and platform-organized activities, thereby gaining more opportunities for visibility and monetization. When MCNs and bloggers facilitate

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<sup>3</sup>. *Zi li geng sheng* (自力更生) translates into self-reliance in English.



collaborations through Weibo, Weibo charges a commission. In this context, a growing number of bloggers have found themselves caught in an institutionalized process on Weibo, with MCNs becoming indispensable participants in their entrepreneurship. As demonstrated in bloggers' confessions, MCNs were frequently mentioned in their entrepreneurial experiences. It is important to note that most bloggers did not initially collaborate with MCNs when they embarked on their entrepreneurial journeys. However, if they aspired to expand their online visibility and economic benefits, signing with an MCN seemed to be an inevitable step. In their confessions, bloggers almost unanimously recognized the importance of MCNs, with many mentioning the "traffic help" (personal communication, May 14, 2021) and "improvement of marketability" (personal communication, April 15, 2021). As Bukun (personal communication, August 16, 2021) mentioned, it was only after collaborating with her MCN that she realized the mistakes she had made in her previous operations. Even details such as the timing of posts or post titles could have a significant impact on traffic effectiveness.

But MCN is by no means a panacea. Given that partnerships with MCNs often carry the risk of compromising entrepreneurial autonomy, these bloggers emphasized important self-conscious efforts against exploitation. For example, Hannah (personal communication, June 19, 2021) deemed that partnership with MCNs was where the real battle began. Hannah noted that although there were numerous job postings seeking ambitious entrepreneurs, the unspoken reality was that MCNs were looking for actors to fit their scripts. She regarded this as the worst scenario, where bloggers ventured into business but found themselves lacking creative freedom, and the MCN took the lion's share of the revenue. Although not providing extensive details, bloggers' experiences with MCNs largely aligned with the common disputes between MCNs and contracted creators, particularly about contract terminations, ownership of intellectual property rights, and uneven income distribution (Craig et al., 2021). Despite the risks involved, bloggers seemed to have little choice but to proceed with caution. The most frequently emphasized antiexploitation technique, and perhaps the only one, was to carefully read and negotiate details of workload and revenue distribution before signing up.

Apart from MCNs, another enduring challenge arises from the ongoing precarity brought by platforms. According to media scholar Guan Zexu's (2021) culture report, the operational model of most Chinese platforms differs from platforms like YouTube, which compensate content creators based on the number of views. Weibo lacks a similar compensation mechanism, making it challenging for bloggers to sustain themselves solely through content creation. In addition, Weibo refrains from disclosing its database and algorithm details to users, leaving bloggers with only limited access to interactive data through the user interface (Jia & Han, 2020). Furthermore, through collaborations with other platforms, advertisers, and celebrities, Weibo has witnessed a rampant commercialization process, with its commercial ecosystem spanning from short videos and live streaming to finance (*China Daily*, 2018). In this context, previous individual efforts at platform management and commercial activities seem to be negligible on Weibo. In bloggers' confessions, many bloggers, therefore, opted to purchase algorithm features and technical services offered by Weibo or establish connections with MCNs. Regardless of the approach, Weibo took a share of bloggers' income. Partly because of the asymmetrical revenue distribution system, these bloggers often made extra effort to enhance their commercial value to maintain revenue. Although bloggers seemed to be aware of their subordinate positions, their confessions did not reveal any resistance. Instead, most bloggers maintained that actively appealing to algorithms and platforms was the key to securing "the central axis of

power and resource exchange" (Duffy, Pinch, Sannon, & Sawey, 2021, p. 3). These bloggers viewed algorithms as neutral and platform-induced anxiety as a normal part of social media entrepreneurship. For example, blogger Awen (personal communication, May 14, 2021) mentioned that data anxiety occurs to everyone. Platform rules were a required lesson for every blogger.

To better adapt to platform precarity, bloggers' confessions revealed a range of vocabularies that highlighted self-adaptation, such as "market sensitivity" (personal communication, May 14, 2021), "trial and error" (personal communication, May 27, 2021), and "always be willing to embrace changes" (personal communication, October 29, 2021). For example, two years ago, fashion blogger Rebecca (personal communication, July 18, 2021) encountered a prolonged period of stagnation in her click-through rates. She deemed that her previous text-based content was no longer compelling as the market was moving toward video-based content. In response, Rebecca quickly established her video team. Likewise, many bloggers also shared their experiences of marketing investment, as beauty blogger Nan (personal communication, April 15, 2021) believed that purchasing "data packages" and "follower profiles" was particularly beneficial in gaining a fuller understanding of her audience. To a large extent, bloggers' self-conscious efforts reflect that they have cultivated themselves into adaptive agents who incorporate market principles and ethos of self-enterprise into their entrepreneurship.

### ***Positive State Governance***

Perhaps because of the ubiquitous government scrutiny in the digital space, almost all bloggers refrained from explicitly discussing state regulation. On Weibo, platform functionalities are "modular" and its interface "is deconstructable at the will of the state" (Benney, 2014, p. 182). For bloggers, openly commenting on state governance is highly risky, which may result in selective deletion of sensitive content or even suspension of their accounts. Nevertheless, two frequently used discourses reveal the influence of state governance among Chinese bloggers.

The first noteworthy aspect is bloggers' repeated use of zheng neng liang (正能量) in their confessions. Zheng neng liang is a popular discourse that translates directly into "positive energy" in English. This term is commonly used to support state ideology or national patriotism (Chen, Kaye, & Zeng, 2020). Not only is zheng neng liang used to convey overt conformity to the state, but it has evolved into a pedagogy "central in the state's disciplinary apparatus" to flexibly depict positive sentiments and Chinese happiness (Hizi, 2021, p. 24). In bloggers' confessions, zheng neng liang was often used in conjunction with vocabularies such as "optimistic," "aspiring" and "happiness" to describe their desired content creation and self-image. For example, when discussing the value of her work, fashion blogger Lili (personal communication, January 2, 2021) wanted to bring zheng neng liang to the world, even if it was just temporary. Another blogger, Yun, posted her New Year's resolution was to "be more zheng neng liang," as she did not need much negativity to disrupt her work (personal communication, January 3, 2020). Not only top-tier bloggers but Sherry (personal communication, October 12, 2021), a blogger with only 400 followers, also echoed that it was imperative to maintain a positive mindset in every minute of life. Starting a blogger career with zheng neng liang was her way to avoid having regrets in her 30s.

Bloggers' repeated emphasis on zheng neng liang is not coincidental. From January 27 to February 3, 2018, Weibo underwent a week-long state-sponsored rectification process. Following that, Weibo started featuring zheng neng liang as hot searches on its trending page to promote state propaganda and positive news about Chinese society (Jia & Han, 2020). This is a classic example of how Weibo uses its platform features to project state power and accommodate state-controlled propaganda. Not limited to Weibo, many other platforms, such as Kuaishou, have also incorporated the concept of zheng neng liang into platform features to highlight pro-state ideologies (Lin & de Kloet, 2019). Platforms' promotion of zheng neng liang helps "foster the platformization of political indoctrination by applying the cultural logics of the Chinese Internet" (Chen et al., 2020, p. 105). More importantly, it promotes the political literacy of bloggers and encourages them to participate in the state's call for positive energy. In recent years, whether it is the "big stomach" influencers promoting the nationwide "Clean Plate Campaign" or rural bloggers supporting the state's agenda of rural revitalization, it has become increasingly common for bloggers and influencers to support positive energy on Chinese platforms (Xu et al., 2022; Zhang & Ma, 2023). In addition, some bloggers, when sharing their experiences to increase their online visibility, also mentioned using zheng neng liang as a hashtag to enhance exposure. Admittedly, the state-centric platform ecosystem renders these bloggers "vulnerable within China's state-controlled digital economy, caught between risks and opportunities this governance affords" (Xu et al., 2022, p. 537). Even if not genuinely, aligning with zheng neng liang potentially helps bloggers mitigate the risk of censorship and safeguard their visibility by complying with platform rules.

Moreover, bloggers' emphasis on zheng neng liang also reflects the state's paternalistic indoctrination. Although China's reform has achieved rapid economic growth, it has been controversial and led to prominent social issues. Like zheng neng liang, the state has extensively used discourses centered around "happiness, optimism, and therapeutic governance" to promote economic reforms and manage social issues by appealing to "affective modes of engagement or individual desires and feelings" (Yang, 2014, p. 6). In the post-Mao era, such therapeutic governance has been successful in cultivating citizens into "self-responsible, self-enterprising, and self-governing subjects" (Ong & Zhang, 2008, p. 3). In the challenging world of social media entrepreneurship, bloggers' emphasis on positive energy echoes the neoliberal imperative for entrepreneurial optimism. The wide use of zheng neng liang points to a moment of "market-driven self-cultivation . . . provides spaces for transient optimism in compensation for the futility of some of their ambitions" (Hizi, 2021, p. 25). In their confessions, bloggers refrained from addressing structural issues such as platform hegemony and capitalist exploitation, choosing instead to underscore the positive aspects of self-regulation. Especially when they reflected on their entrepreneurial difficulties, many bloggers attempted to alleviate entrepreneurial pressures with zheng neng liang. For instance, travel blogger Yoki attributed data anxiety to her "mindset issues" and decided to adopt zheng neng liang to combat feelings of discouragement (personal communication, March 2, 2020).

Another similar discourse among bloggers is suzhi. In China, suzhi refers broadly to human quality (Kipnis, 2007) and in this context, bloggers' emphasis on suzhi primarily relates to personal competence, skill enhancements, and mental strength in their entrepreneurship. Although its meaning has undergone changes under the shift of state propaganda, the inherent essence of suzhi points to "the neoliberal logic of autonomy, choice, self-improvement and entrepreneurship" (Yu, 2011, p. 44). At its core, suzhi discourse embodies the "blame the victim" logic (Kipnis, 2007, p. 389). According to Kipnis (2007), suzhi has been

widely used to attribute failures, poverty, and marginalization to personal shortcomings, such as low educational attainment or socioeconomic status, implying that individuals lack competitiveness in the market. Whether applied to the birth control policy or marginalized urban migrant workers, *suzhi* discourses functioned as the state's neoliberal techniques to shift structural issues into personal responsibility (Yu, 2011). This approach helped mitigate the grievances of marginalized groups and, in turn, bolstered authoritarian governance (Kipnis, 2007). In bloggers' confessions, *suzhi* discourses centered on the individualization of precarity resulting from platform hegemony and the capitalist market, with bloggers attributing entrepreneurial failures to a lack of "quality" or personal competitiveness within the industry. When reflecting on the early stages of their careers, several bloggers mentioned that entrepreneurial success was built on "raising *suzhi*." For example, Wang (personal communication, April 15, 2021) mentioned that she lacked the formal education and aesthetic sense to be a qualified blogger. To raise her *suzhi*, she paid for classes at a professional art school and sought guidance from experts in the fashion industry. In another stance, Vivi (personal communication, November 18, 2020) highlighted the importance of *xinli suzhii* (心理素质), a "mental quality," or a kind of psychological resilience and adaptability required by bloggers when facing entrepreneurial setbacks. According to Zhu (2022), neoliberal transformation in China is essentially a project of cultivating self-governing subjects that shift structural issues into individual responsibility to solidify authoritarian rule. In a similar vein, bloggers have embraced the neoliberal techniques promoted by the state and internalized the risks associated with their entrepreneurship.

### **Bloggers' Defense: Legitimate Business Role and Calculated Persona**

After recounting their entrepreneurial hardships, bloggers' confessions mostly converged on a common theme: legitimizing their growing commercial attributes. Facing growing criticism of *qia lan fan*<sup>4</sup> (Shi, 2020), most bloggers dismissed such accusations and tried to dispel any doubts that followers may have. One tactic used by bloggers was the classic passion-payout solution to "justify sponsor-provided goods with affective sentiments of passion and love" (Duffy, 2017, p. 183). Reiterating "love and passion" is indeed a tried-and-true trick. However, as netzines have grown accustomed to the clichés of true love in influencer marketing, more bloggers adopted a different approach. In a passionate tone, bloggers portrayed their commercial activities as hard-earned milestones. They repeatedly expressed their gratitude for followers' long-term companionship and framed sponsorship as a joint achievement with their supporters. For instance, food blogger Ming (personal communication, May 2, 2020) recalled how her followers celebrated her first sponsorship, expressing their joy that she was finally receiving the recognition she deserved. Certain bloggers also expressed gratitude for the understanding they received from their followers in light of the pressures they encountered during their entrepreneurial journeys. For example, when faced backlash for "too much advertising," Cui (personal communication, October 29, 2021) mentioned that many of her supporters spontaneously defended her. Based on bloggers' confessions, because of external pressures, bloggers might be compelled to engage in commercial promotions in many cases. If posts containing promotional content fail to generate a certain number of clicks, algorithms might detect it and decrease the

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<sup>4</sup> *Qia lan fan* (恰烂饭) is a buzzword on the Chinese Internet, originating from the southwestern dialects of China. It commonly refers to the unethical behavior of *bo zhu* or influencers, particularly excessive or false commercial promotions inserted into their cultural creations.

blogger's visibility. Cui was grateful that her followers understood that bloggers sometimes needed to fulfill KPIs (key performance indicators) set by brands and platforms.

Alongside the humble attitude, there were also bloggers who demanded equal recognition for their commercial practices. As a tit-for-tat response to qia lan fan, bai piao<sup>5</sup> was coined by bloggers to accuse those netizens who consume their cultural creations without compensating the creators and expressed their longstanding desire for equal treatment. For example, Cui noted that the "invest now, earn later" entrepreneurial model followed by most bloggers puts them at a disadvantage from the outset (personal communication, October 29, 2021). Echoing this, another blogger YCC (personal communication, June 26, 2020) addressed that most netizens took bloggers' cultural works for granted and were accustomed to receiving them for free, which resulted in hostility toward sponsorships. YCC thus implored netizens to empathize with hardworking entrepreneurs who deserve fair compensation for their efforts. Furthermore, when faced with malicious comments from haters, some bloggers chose to step up their fightback accordingly and expressed frustrations with unfair accusations around qia lan fan. For example, Xiaohai mentioned that she had to counter some haters with: "Fine, I won't do sponsorship anymore, but will you pay my bills?" (personal communication, September 9, 2021).

Admittedly, bloggers' self-defense, though superficial, creates an appearance of an uncompromising attitude that adds a sense of "integrity" to their online presence. Given that bloggers are heavily dependent on capital forces (e.g., brands and platforms) for necessary resources in their entrepreneurship, directly challenging these interests is unwise. Therefore, for bloggers, expressing the hardships to followers becomes a strategic move with minimal risks, as it does not directly challenge the interests of stakeholders at the upper echelons of the industry.

Another key theme in bloggers' confessions revolves around the controversy surrounding inauthentic personas. Most bloggers acknowledged the importance of authenticity in social media entrepreneurship, but they also made it clear that the "authentic self" and "social media persona" were not a simple dichotomy. Bloggers maintained that the value of authenticity lies in its potential to create an engaging online persona. According to their confessions, bloggers' preferred personas were authenticity-based, carefully crafted personas that could provide value to their content creation. Sometimes, even seemingly fake personas were intentionally crafted to create exceptional outputs, rather than to deceive. For example, Bao (personal communication, October 10, 2021) pointed out that most people did not care about the so-called realness but rather how bloggers' creations make them laugh. After being criticized for exaggerating the efficacy of products in her monthly favorites, Bao explained that it was a misunderstanding of her language. In her defense, she deliberately highlighted her "big personality" to make her content more engaging for the viewers. Likewise, beauty blogger Ruby (personal communication, May 27, 2021) revealed that her online persona was crafted based on her educational background in chemistry to appear more professional. Ruby did not support lying, but she understood why some bloggers embellished their backgrounds and experiences to appear more appealing to their audiences.

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<sup>5</sup> Bai piao (白嫖), which translates into "whoring without paying," is derived from Chinese slang for "eating without paying" and is used to describe the act of taking resources from others for free.

As Marwick and boyd (2010) note, authenticity is "a localized, temporally situated social construct that varies widely based on community" (p. 124). Especially in social media entrepreneurship, authenticity is indeed a slippery concept. Capital forces have significantly intensified the commercial attributes of Chinese bloggers, compelling them to develop engaging personas that align with marketing discourses. For these bloggers, absolute authenticity seems unrealistic, and everywhere else for that matter. Bloggers' authenticity has been infiltrated into their self-promotion, as Banet-Weiser (2012) describes, "the separation between the authentic self and the commodity self not only is more blurred, but this blurring is more expected and tolerated" (p. 12). Nevertheless, bloggers' self-disclosure about their personas is valuable, as it serves as a buffer against accusations of inauthenticity. Even if bloggers face backlash sometime in the future, their carefully crafted personas are less likely to be interpreted as a deception.

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

The findings of bloggers' confessions reveal that Chinese bloggers embody a neo/non-liberal entrepreneurial subjectivity that not only reflects the classic neoliberal logic of entrepreneurialism but also showcases their compliance with state governance. Similarly, Chinese bloggers represent a form of venture labor that "actively [shapes] choices and conditions through interpolation of entrepreneurial subjectivity but is unable to access the structural causes" (Neff, 2015, p. 184). Keeping Foucault's contention on confession in mind (Foucault, 1997), I acknowledge that although bloggers might be honest about their experiences, this wave of blogger confessions was a scripted performance rather than a genuine disclosure. The ultimate goal was to construct a diligent, self-driven image of entrepreneurs to legitimize their growing profit motives. These bloggers fail to resist state regulation or the precarity caused by the capitalist, platformed industry. Instead, they attempt to harness positive energy and attribute entrepreneurial failures to a lack of personal competitiveness. Bloggers' confession, in essence, is an act of desperation, their submission to the upper power structure in the Chinese digital creative industry.

Considering that this study mainly selected top-tier bloggers as the data sample, it implies to some extent that the examined bloggers may have established connections with capital forces, such as MCNs and brands. This may partially explain the lack of bloggers' critiques on the ultimate culprits of their struggles. But perhaps more importantly, the intricacies of Chinese platform ecology have made it challenging for bloggers to express their resistance against the upper echelons of power in the Chinese digital creative industries. Whether they are top influencers or early bloggers, social media entrepreneurship in China heavily relies on alliances with capital entities while also being subject to state governance. These bloggers need to meticulously navigate between the risks and opportunities presented by the interplay of the state and capital market. For them, deviating from platform rules or openly criticizing government policies carries significant risks. This situation prompts Chinese bloggers to use confessions as a socially acceptable channel to express their suffering imposed by asymmetric power in a disguised form, while also succumbing to it.

Perhaps from the outset, it is challenging for Chinese bloggers to achieve their desired status as entrepreneurs. Not only bloggers but also a broader range of digital creative laborers in China are more akin to docile labor. These laborers are prompted to adhere to "a calculated conformity to the state-led technonationalism and an imposed false entrepreneurial identity by the disciplinary power of the state-platform/capitalism duopoly" (Yu et al., 2022, p. 255). Given the rapid growth of the Chinese digital

economy, future research should continue to explore the entrepreneurial obstacles and societal implications linked to labor issues in the Chinese digital industries.

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