

# **Labour in the Chinese internet industries**

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## Declaration of Authorship

The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own, except where work which has formed part of jointly authored publications has been included. The contribution of the candidate and the other authors to this work has been explicitly indicated below. The candidate confirms that appropriate credit has been given within the thesis where reference has been made to the work of others.

A version of Chapter Seven of the thesis is due to appear as follows:

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I was responsible for building the main arguments, based on empirical data that I collected. The contribution of the other author was structuring the arguments and correcting English.

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## Abstract

Cultural production and labour have been the subject of considerable research in recent years. But relatively little research has paid attention to workers in the internet industries, especially the Chinese internet industries. This thesis uses ethnographic research to examine the quality of the working life of Chinese internet workers and asks: What is working life like in the Chinese internet industries? And how do workers themselves understand and evaluate their experiences of working life?

This thesis examines three main inter-related issues in order to answer these questions. First, the work quality of these workers is evaluated via a framework consisting of work effort or intensity, autonomy and security. Empirical data, collected from three months' covert observation in a Chinese internet company and two periods of interviews in the industries, shows inequalities and injustices in working life. Second, the social class of internet workers provides a crucial context for understanding their working conditions. Chinese internet workers are understood as part of the lower middle class in contemporary Chinese society. They face 'proletarianisation': they suffer a worsening of their working conditions and their collaborative acts of agency show close relationships with those of the working class. Thirdly, the agency of these workers is analysed, including their negotiation with, and resistance to, the state and businesses. A key argument is that proletarianisation is the result of exploitation, which is understood from a neo-Marxist perspective here: the bureaucratic capitalist class appropriates the labour efforts of the working class and skills of the middle class through ownership of means of production and exercise of the political authority to allocate these resources. The notion of exploitation is a fundamental mechanism to understand the quality of working life in the industries, as it explains why workers suffer poor working conditions. Workers' acts of agency explain why workers still work in the industries, despite such poor conditions, and how they strive to improve them. This research also argues that such acts indicate a 'bottom up' force in contemporary China, which suggests the potential to create better working conditions and a better China.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction

In recent years, according to some media reports, the Chinese internet industries have enabled thousands of individuals, especially ambitious young people, to realise their dreams of being millionaires. For example, Peasant Dai<sup>1</sup> – an ordinary Chinese university graduate who successfully set up his own business via the internet – was reported by *Southern Weekly* (one of China's most popular newspapers, owned by the independently minded Southern Daily Group, China's influential liberal newspaper) as a model of a successful youth in the internet era. In 2006, when Peasant Dai was a fresh university graduate, he worked for a small company to sell a local-made brand of facial mask, which was rich in minerals, on Taobao, the most popular online commerce website in China. This brand of facial mask soon became so popular among online users that it enabled Peasant Dai to develop two hundred franchisers.<sup>2</sup> After two years, Peasant Dai developed his own company, which produced facial masks, based on his successful online sales of the facial mask. At the time of my writing, Peasant Dai's company is one of the leading businesses in the Chinese facial mask market.

Likewise, Xinhua News reported that the listing of Baidu – the dominant search engine company in China – in the USA NASDAQ stock market in 2005 enabled 400 workers in the company to become millionaires, because they were given some stocks before the listing.<sup>3</sup> Since then, a lot of media reports have focused on the benefits of working in these internet companies. For example, Figure 1.1-1.3 show the most popular pictures adopted by several newspapers to show the benefits of working in Baidu. All these reports centred on key words such as 'freedom', 'autonomy', 'cool', 'enjoyable', 'prestige' and 'relaxed'. It seems that working in internet companies brings considerable freedom and rewards.

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<sup>1</sup> Peasant Dai is the user name of the youth

<sup>2</sup> *Southern Weekly*, 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2009

<sup>3</sup> Xinhua News, 8<sup>th</sup> August 2005

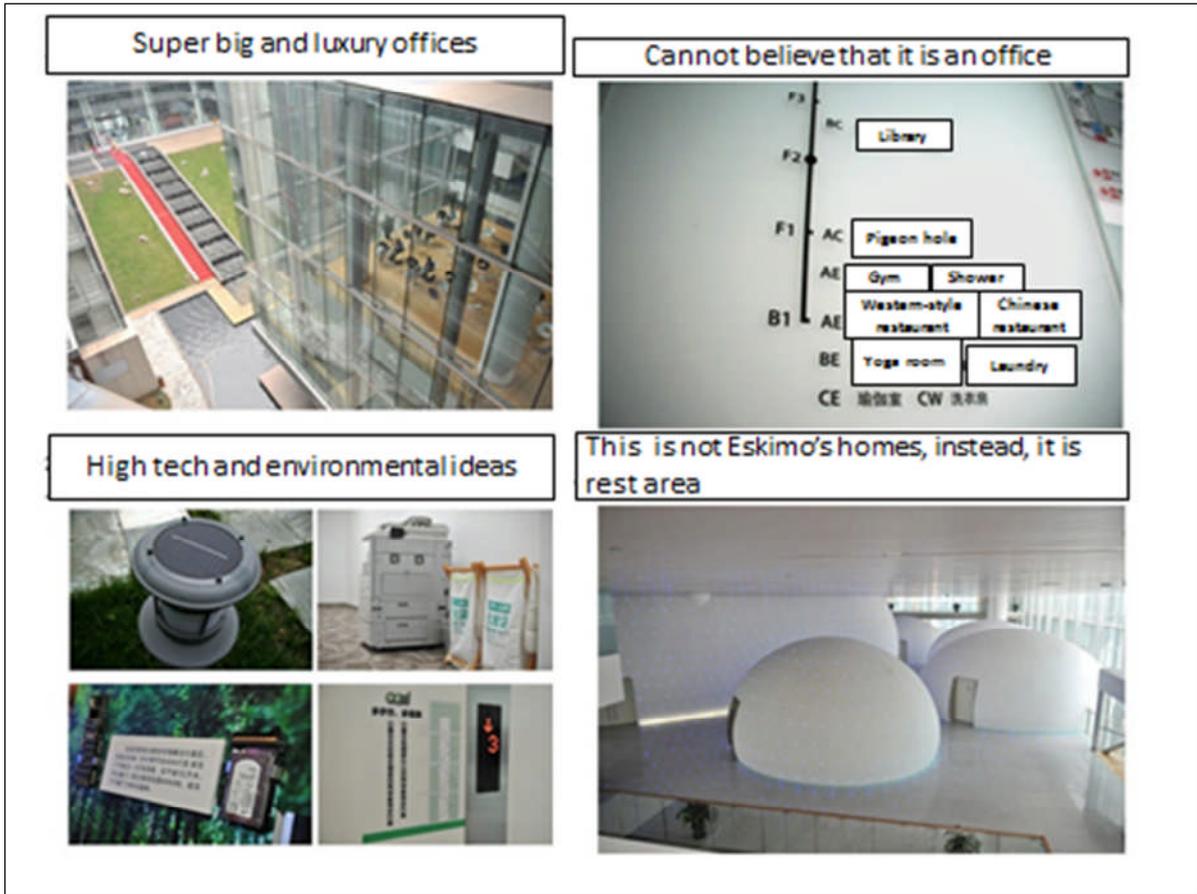


Figure 1.1: Working in Baidu

Source: Wenzhou Daily news, 2011

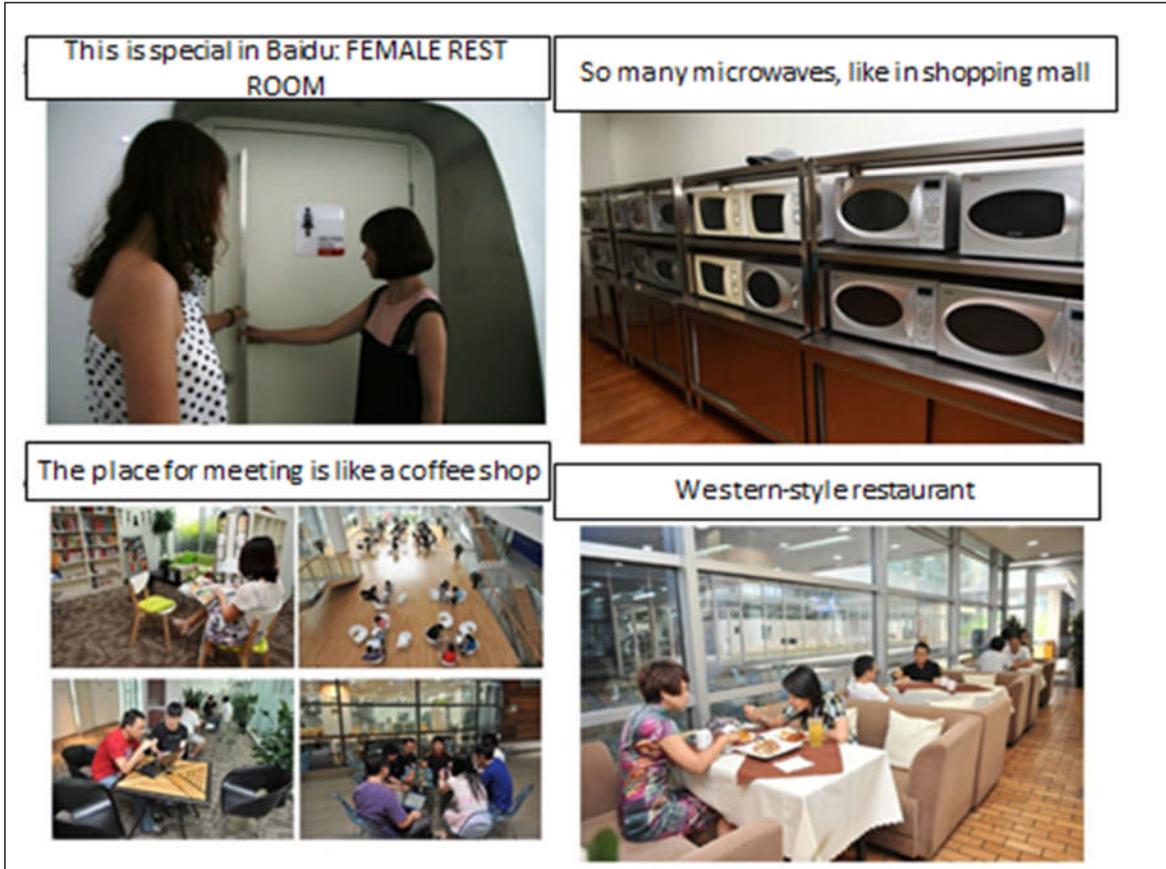


Figure 1.2: Working in Baidu

Source: Wenzhou Daily news, 2011



**Figure 1.3: Working in Baidu**

**Source: Wenzhou Daily news, 2011**

However, this is only one side of the story; some media also pay attention to poor working conditions in the internet industries. For example, a few years ago, there were two events reported by the Chinese media in Huawei Technologies – one of the best known telecommunications companies in China – concerning workers' working experiences. In October 2007, the company was reported to have bribed 7,000 full time employees to resign and re-join the company signing short-term contracts. It aimed to avoid unlimited contract provisions under the new Labour Contract Law – the primary source of labour law in China, which was issued on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2008, in order to push domestic companies that did not apply labour contracts to their workers to comply with China's labour law – which would benefit most workers in the company.<sup>4</sup> In March 2008, an employee was reported to have jumped to his death because of high stress in his work. This was the sixth employee to commit suicide or die from exhaustion in the company.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, other

<sup>4</sup> China Labour Bulletin, 27<sup>th</sup> May 2008

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

media reports revealed a common phenomenon in the internet industries – *karoshi*, a Japanese term meaning to die of exhaustion, which will be explained in Chapter Six.

These different stories about the Chinese internet industries and Chinese internet workers suggest the need to question working life in the industries: what is working life like in the Chinese internet industries? What is the quality of their working-life experiences? And how do internet workers themselves understand these experiences?

In recent years, cultural production and labour have been the subject of considerable research (Kennedy 2010, Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010, Banks 2010, Terranova 2004, Barbrook 2005, Gill and Pratt 2008, Oakley 2011, Garnham 2005, O'Connor 2000). Internet workers, like workers in the cultural industries, carry out meaningful activities such as programming and coding, designing and promoting, and some unskilled administrative work. Some research in the field of creative labour or cultural production has paid attention to internet workers (Gill 2002, Kennedy 2012). However, relatively little research has paid attention to workers in the Chinese internet industries: how they work and live in the industries and how they themselves understand and evaluate their working life experiences.

As I shall discuss in section 1.2.2, internet workers have joined a big and growing set of industries, yet the vast numbers of people working here have not been studied. As an important part of the contemporary Chinese middle class, internet workers are particularly highlighted here. This is based on a number of reasons.

First, these contradictory media messages make it necessary to explore what these workers' working life like. As I showed above, some media reports appreciated benefits of working in the internet industries, such as freedom and autonomy, as well as the enjoyable working environment. However, some media messages showed the poor working conditions in the industries, such as some suicide cases resulted by high stress from the work. These contradictory media reports address a necessity to look at the internet industries in order to discuss how workers are living and working there.

Second, internet workers form an increasingly significant proportion of workers in China. For example, the number of Chinese internet workers had increased to 12.3 million by the end of 2009.<sup>6</sup> However, this big group of workers has not been studied in the academic field – it is hard to find an academic report investigating these internet workers, such as their education background, wages and working hours, etc. I will discuss this issue later in section 1.2.2.

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<sup>6</sup> Liaoning Research Institute of Industry and Information Sciences 2013

Third, the fast growth of the internet industries, and therefore the growing importance of the internet workers, in China, addresses the necessity to explore the working life. For example, in 2012, the annual internet market value had reached 385.04 billion RMB (£38.5 billion), and according to a report from Xinhua News, internet-related consumption of information and services would be one of the biggest drivers of China's economic growth in the next ten years.<sup>7</sup> The fast-growing industries thus become a new field for research to explore Chinese economy and high technology. The emerging internet content market – the internet industries I focus on in this research, also becomes a significant field to discover Chinese political dynamics and cultural transformation, which I will discuss later in section 1.2.2. Therefore, I argue that it is necessary to explore the group of workers – who contribute to this fast growth of the industries – the Chinese internet workers. I will say more about the significant of the internet industries in China later in section 1.2.2.

Forth, it is important to focus on the internet workers, because these workers – a significant part of the lower middle class (I will further discuss their class location in Chapter Two) – are different from other Chinese middle class members. For example, some of their acts have political motivations, such as acts of negotiation with and resistance to the state and internet companies regarding the low quality of working life and the desire to create a better online space for ordinary Chinese people to speak out in, which I will introduce with empirical data in section 1.2.2 and in Chapters Seven and Eight. Such differences thus suggest a necessity to look at these internet workers' acts of agency and to ask where these acts come from.

This research, therefore, is an ethnographic study, of an active group of Chinese internet producers, aiming to distinguish these particular kinds of professional workers from general cultural/knowledge workers in other geographical and political contexts by highlighting their particular working-life experiences.

In order to examine the quality of these internet workers' working-life experiences, I conducted covert participant observation in a large internet company, Grand, which provides online entertainment services, such as online gaming and online novels. I also conducted fourteen interviews in Grand and another internet company, Campus, which provides social networking services (SNS). I was able to invite one of the interviewees from Campus to keep a self-observational diary, according to a check list I provided him with. In order to protect these participants, I use pseudonyms to refer to all participants in this thesis.

Based on the data I collected via the methods listed above, I argue that working conditions in the Chinese internet industries are not as good as some

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid

media reports suggest, compared to conditions in other industries, such as State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) – most internet companies in China are not state-owned. The quality of working life in Chinese internet industries is poor, but internet workers are able to exercise acts of agency, such as negotiation with and resistance to the state and internet companies, in order to gain a better working life. Both the quality of working life and acts of worker agency are assessed via a discussion of class problems, such as inequalities and injustice between classes in contemporary Chinese society. I consider this in the next chapter and argue that such discussion of the class problem in China, although complicated and contradictory, is fundamental to understanding working life in the internet industries.

In the following section, I illustrate the contexts for evaluating internet workers' subjective experiences: Chinese society and the Chinese internet industries. In section 1.2, I introduce theoretical discussions of contemporary Chinese society and the Chinese class structure. I focus on the Chinese internet industries, where I explain why the internet industries, in particular workers in the industries, are an important case for concern. I point out that the internet industries have become a field for the emergence of new political dynamics in contemporary Chinese society. It is because of these emerging dynamics that we should pay attention to these particular industries, I argue. In section 1.3, I highlight my research aims. I stress that this research is an ethnographic study of daily working life experiences that expands upon existing research into creative labour in other geographical contexts. In section 1.4, I outline the research questions that the thesis seeks to address. In section 1.5, I explain the main arguments in Chapters Two to Eight.

## **1.2 The context of the study**

### **1.2.1 Contemporary Chinese society**

David Harvey (2005) defines neoliberalism as 'a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade' (p.2). Some consider this concept highly relevant to the introduction of market principles into the Chinese economy in the 1980s. Some economists, such as Huang (2008), approve of this change, because they consider that it improved social welfare. Mok and Lo (2007) claim that 'the policy of decentralization and marketization being adopted to reform the social policy domain has significantly reduced the state provision and financing

in social service and social provision' (p.2). In short, neoliberals appreciate the reform and opening up policy because they believe it emancipates the Chinese market and develops the Chinese economy. Zhang (2001) introduces several cultural and economic issues in Chinese society in the 1990s to explore the impact of neoliberalism. For example, he regards the economic reform in 1992, when Deng Xiaoping visited southern China and proclaimed 'Let some people get rich first', as the resumption of neoliberalism after its first shock in the crackdown that occurred after the Tian'anmen Square Protests (the student-led demonstration, which took place in the spring of 1989 in Beijing's Tian'anmen Square. It received various support from different social classes at the time, such as the working class. But it was forcibly suppressed by the Party leader, who ordered the military to suppress the protests).

Wang Hui (2003) writes that neoliberalism is problematic in the context of China because it denies 'the close relationship between the market and the political process' (p.100). He claims that the state plays a significant role in the Chinese economic system, since the political system in China is highly centralised. As Wang Jing (2008) suggests, the Chinese market is still controlled by the 'party-state'. Wang Hui (2003) enriches the concept of neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics: it is 'a combination of notions of market extremism, neo-conservatism, and neo-authoritarianism' (p.81). Here, neoliberalism is understood to accelerate the process of delegating economic and political power from the central government to regional governments in a stable manner, to build an authority to guarantee the process of marketization, as well as to help the retreat of the state in the process of globalisation.

Some scholars use the concept 'crony capitalism' (Andres 2010) or 'crony communism' (Dickson 2003, 2008) to understand the close relations between the Chinese state and the market. Andreas (2010) claims that contemporary Chinese society is a 'state-led urban decade' (p.65). Dickson (2003, 2008) unpacks the reliance of a capitalist economy on close relationships between business and the state by the concept of crony communism. He argues that crony communism in China is different from other contexts, because the political hierarchy is dominated by all levels of officials, rather than a ruling family or central leader as in other East Asian countries, such as Burma. As a result, he calls ruling officials 'red capitalists', as many of them are involved in the economic system: 'many of the most wealthy entrepreneurs formerly held high-level party and government posts, and some are even the offspring of China's leaders; a far larger number of private entrepreneurs are former mid-level officials, or simply rank-and-file party members who did not hold formal posts but left their previous jobs to go into business...' (Dickson 2003: 4-5). Chinese crony communism is also distinctive because capitalists emerge from the bureaucracy: 'those who were co-opted into the party after demonstrating their entrepreneurial skills and business success' (ibid.).

Some theorists choose postmodernity and postsocialism, rather than crony capitalism, as key concepts by which to understand contemporary Chinese society. For example, Zhang (2008) argues that the theoretical description of contemporary Chinese society could not neglect the 'mutual determination of the Chinese nation-state and the global capitalist economy in the specific Chinese context' (p.13). According to Zhang (2008), crony capitalism is a good term for the entanglement of Chinese state and market; but the concepts of postmodernism and postsocialism usefully supplement it by focusing on the intimate connection between, on the one hand, the place of the Chinese mixed economy in the global capitalist economy, and on the other, social transformation and new cultural forms.

Such discussion of the Chinese context is helpful to grasp a sense of what contemporary Chinese society looks like, and is a useful way to understand the background to people's working-life experiences. Some of the discussion also has a bearing on the quality of working life. But, as I stressed earlier, it is also important to discuss class structure as a fundamental issue in exploring Chinese working life.

Some theorists (Andreas 2008, So 2003, Zhang 2000) argue that Chinese class structure became complicated after 1992, because the middle class and working class expanded and a new bureaucratic capitalist class emerged based on the close relationships between cadres (party members who hold managerial positions in party and government) and capitalists. Additionally, present in the Chinese social hierarchy in the post-1992 period were various other classes, 'between' these three classes (the working class, the middle class, and the bureaucratic capitalist class), such as the petty bourgeoisie and small employers. This very complex social class structure can only be adequately understood in historical perspective; in Chapter Two, I attempt to situate it in such a historical context.

In addition to a complex social structure, the Chinese context is also special due to the particular importance of personalised networks (*guanxi*) in society. Bian (2002: 107-108) claims that *guanxi* facilitate all aspects of occupations in the Chinese context: from entry into a job to internal mobility at work. He argues that *guanxi* benefit *guanxi* users by promoting job opportunities to them, whilst constraining people who are 'poorly positioned in the networks of social relationships' (p.107). Gold et al (2002: 3-20) argue that *guanxi* is an essential factor of Chinese culture, which relates to some important issues in Chinese society, such as '*ganqing* (sentiment), *renqing* (human feelings), *mianzi* (face), and *bao* (reciprocity)' (p.4). These issues are indeed important for understanding *guanxi*. For example, Gold et al (2002) argue that *ganqing* cultivates *guanxi*, which gives the intrinsic enjoyment of the ongoing personal relationship to people and successfully 'creates a basis of trust in a relationship' (p.8). *Renqing* refers to the exchange of favours (The

word *renqing* is a Chinese term to refer to a good turn or a favour for someone, rather than human feelings in the authors' translation). *Mianzi* is an effective result or 'symbolic capital' (p.7) of the successful practice of *guanxi*. *Bao* refers to the return in social relations (The word *bao* in fact is *huibao*, if the authors explain it as reciprocity). It is widely believed in China that it is necessary to have relatives as officials in order to work in SOEs and civil services, as people from ordinary families have fewer chances of promotion in these sectors.

However, according to my interviewees, workers in the Chinese internet industries seem to have simpler social networks than those in other industries. For example, it is not necessary for the workers to socialise with colleagues and superiors after work, such as going to pubs or restaurants, in order to gain the chance of promotion. Workers can get by with simpler and more limited social networks in the industries. Technical workers (often known as geeks, in China as in Britain and North America, a slang term used to describe people heavily interested in technologies – prefer to focus on technological innovation rather than socialising. Their simpler social networks are partly a result of the intense and long working hours undergone by technical workers. There is little time and energy for socialising.

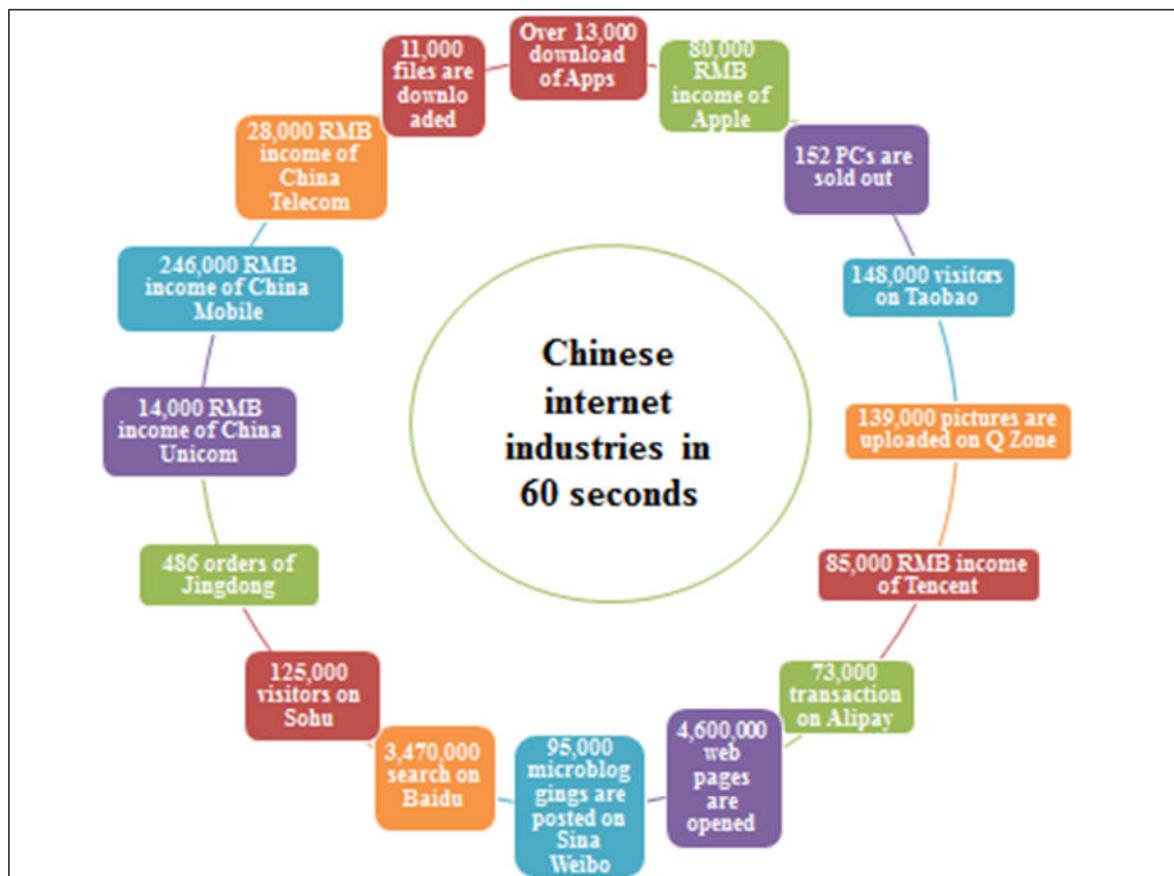
This raises the question: are the growing Chinese industries less influenced by *guanxi* than older industries? Do they provide more opportunities for workers? Can internet workers with weak *guanxi* do as well as those with strong *guanxi*? The answers to these questions are not as simple as yes or no. I answer these questions with data from the two internet companies in Chapter Five.

## **1.2.2 A field for the emergence of new political dynamics**

The internet market can be divided into four parts: the hardware market (including companies producing computer hardware, such as Apple); the software market – including companies producing computer software, such as Microsoft; the service market – including companies providing internet services, such as Google; and the content market – including companies producing contents or converging contents provided by internet users, such as Facebook. The internet industries I focus on in this research, are part of the emerging content market, like Facebook and YouTube, and Chinese equivalents like Weibo and Youku, which accumulate massive economic and cultural capital by providing online content.

Whilst there is clearly a close relationship between the hardware market, software market, service market and the online content market, the online content market differs from other parts of the internet market. The online market is considered an important online field to discover social problems and seek transformations in the Chinese context. The production and accumulation of capital in the internet industries is similar to the cultural industries, such as music, performing arts, TV, film, design and architecture: capital is produced via artistic resources, knowledge, and skills, and it is accumulated via labour efforts. But the internet industries are distinct in terms of production forms. First, production in the internet industries is based on the integration of information flows and social networks. Second, internet users—once distinguished from internet workers and outside the production process—are to some extent absorbed into the production process, by sharing and creating online content. Third, the production process is not only based on artistic resources and knowledge, but also on advanced technologies.

The Chinese internet content market has developed exponentially since the end of 2002, when the market was revived from the dot-com crash in 2001. At that time, some portals in the industries, such as Sina, Netease and Sohu began to make profits and lead the market into a golden era. In 2003, the market was developed with the blooming of varied content services, such as search engines (Baidu), online gaming (SNDA), instant messaging (Tencent), and online commerce (Alibaba). In 2012, the annual market value had reached 385.04 billion RMB (£38.5 billion), an increase of 54.1% from 2011 (*iResearch* 2013). By contrast, in 2012, the annual investment in Chinese real estate, which was evaluated as an overheating industry by most Chinese media, was 7180.40 billion RMB (£718.04), only 18 times more than the internet industries (Xinhua news 2013). Some indication of the size of the Chinese internet industries is provided in Figure 1.4.



**Figure 1.4: What happens in Chinese internet industries in 60 seconds?**

**Source:** translated from <What happens in Chinese internet industries in 60 seconds>, <http://it.sohu.com/20130322/n369907395.shtml>

The capital accumulation enabled by this growth largely depends on the labour efforts of internet workers, and huge numbers of workers are involved in the production process. The number of Chinese internet workers had increased to 12.3 million by the end of 2009.<sup>8</sup> Little academic attention has been paid to these workers. We know little about their practices and experiences, or their educational background, socioeconomic status, and social locations. In order to fill this gap, this thesis provides ethnographic research on internet workers. However, before discussing the working lives of internet workers, it is important to recognise that the internet industries have become a field for the emergence of new political dynamics in contemporary Chinese society, which influences the working life in certain ways.

The tendency to ‘learn from the West’ has been found in Chinese society for more than a century. In the late Qing dynasty, an official, Wei Yuan, first pointed out the idea of learning from the West, with a dictum ‘learn about the

<sup>8</sup> Liaoning Research Institute of Industry and Information Sciences, 21<sup>st</sup> January 2013

advantageous skills of the barbarians in order to deal with them' (*shi yi zhi changji yi zhi yi*) (Wang 2000: 34). But it was only in 1978, when Deng Xiaoping, the leader of Chinese market reform, issued the reform and opening-up policy, that China officially opened its door to the West, and the West's influence on Chinese society – such as the individualisation of culture – deepened.

Influenced by the West in certain ways, the current Chinese individualisation process is characterised by the 'management of the party-state' (Yan 2009: 290) and 'the absence of cultural democracy, a welfare state regime and classic individualism' (ibid.), yet the results of individualisation are more or less the same in different geographical and political contexts: individuals are living in a precarious and fluid environment where they are encouraged to be self-reliant and able to deal with risks and uncertainties. As some writers have suggested, this is part of a problematic set of developments in modern societies. Ross (2005), for example, is critical of how individuals are required to shoulder uncertainty, risk and precariousness in post-industrial societies, such as the USA and China.

The individual shouldering of risk and precariousness has permeated contemporary Chinese society: the government encourages rapid growth of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) by reducing social benefits. As a result, there has been a large-scale migration of peasants into cities. These peasant workers survive without land, which historically supported their lives. Business organisations seek economic profits at the expense of the environment; universities are denigrated because of the low employment status of their graduates, and, because of their low salaries, teachers in universities are forced to take part in business rather than focus on research; and workers have lost their iron rice bowl (*tie fanwan*) – a Chinese term to describe an occupation with steady income and benefits, and guaranteed job security – which had been guaranteed since Mao's era, and now are pushed into the fluid labour market with flexible work contracts and few social benefits. As Ross (2005) points out, almost overnight, Chinese workers' lives have suddenly jumped from an iron rice bowl to an uncertain and precarious market.

Admittedly, the Chinese economy has seen rapid growth. Foreign investors have rushed into the Chinese market since China's accession to the WTO (World Trade Organisation) in 2001. However, social problems and tensions are generated from the ongoing economic reform: inequality between the rich and poor has got worse, and there are more cases of injustice between the bureaucratic capitalists and workers. Chun (2006) distinguishes Chinese socialism from utopian socialism and Marxist socialism because of the inequalities in contemporary Chinese society. These inequalities surround issues of class location and regional economy: huge gaps exist between the rich and the poor, between rural peasants and urban workers, and between

the working class and bourgeoisie. Zhang (2001: 10-12) points out that the distribution of wealth in contemporary Chinese society is unequal, notwithstanding the rapid overall economic growth: 'more than 80 percent of national private savings are in the hands of a tiny nouveau riche class who likely drive government-supplied cars, live in multiple, over-subsidised housing, hold foreign bank accounts, and yet, despite their lavish spending, rarely help the national economy' (p.12), and, in contrast, 'more and more urban dwellers no longer can afford health care and education for their children, not to mention rural dwellers — still comprising more than 70 percent of the Chinese population — who are left to fend for themselves' (ibid.). Compared with the economic boom, politics, especially large-scale social movements, such as the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976, and the Tian'anmen Square Protests in 1989, seem to have exited from the stage of Chinese history.

The internet industries occupy a unique position in this new Chinese context. They serve as an essential case study for understanding the rapid economic development and the precarious work status in the economic boom, and through which to discuss the new political dynamics in contemporary China. The new political dynamics here are different to both the large-scale social movements in Chinese history (the Cultural Revolution and the Tian'anmen Square Protests) and the democratisation process in contemporary Western countries (Europe and the USA). As Qiu (2009) points out, the bottom-up techno-social dynamics under structural constraints are the important political power in contemporary Chinese society, which has the potential to initiate social changes in the future. He argues that the main problem of studying contemporary Chinese society is to understand 'class formation, collective identity, and political power under the structural parameters of a large, developing country' (p.7). The bottom-up techno-social dynamics show the emergence and formation of a new working class, which consists of the subordinate people in society, who are named the 'information have-less' (a term I will discuss in detail in the next chapter) in his work. This new lower class mobilises low-cost ICTs (Information and Communications Technologies) to exercise a bottom-up political power under the structural constraints of society. Here, I argue that such bottom-up political power is evident in the internet industries, as they serve as a space for ordinary Chinese people to speak out against the contemporary structural constraints.

It has been widely acknowledged that the structural constraints in China are a result of the strong power of the party-state. Ross (2005) shows the various impacts of the Chinese state on the IT industries (the hardware market). For example, he points out that Shanghai Pudong Software Park – a national software base and software export base in Shanghai, which has a large number of domestic and foreign software enterprises, such as Infosys from India and SAP from Germany – is the result of the collaboration between Shanghai local government and the information industries, as the local

government attracts investments by tax exemptions and low rents. The same collaboration can be found in the case of Beijing Zhongguancun Science Park – a technology hub in Beijing, which is named ‘China’s Silicon Valley’ – where similar policies were applied in the mid-1990s. Due to this, the Chinese state is involved in the techno-social transformation process in varied ways: it modifies the market by developing intellectual property rights and promoting technical standards; it incubates new enterprises and attracts foreign investments by issuing new policies; and it stimulates the labour market by connecting firms to universities and training students.

Likewise, in the internet industries, the state intervenes with certain policies, but it also intervenes by surveilling, censoring and controlling internet users’ online speech and activities, in order to avoid any speech and practice against the state and the Party. For example, at the end of 2011, the Beijing government issued a policy entitled ‘Several Provisions of the Beijing Municipality on the Administration and Development of Microblog in Beijing’ (*Beijingshi weiboke fazhan guanli ruogan guiding*)<sup>9</sup> to force Internet users registering for microblog platforms to use their real names and identity cards, in order to control Internet users’ online activities. Such policies indicate strong intervention by the state in the newly developing internet industries. However, it is not simply the case that such policies operate without resistance and negotiation from workers and citizens.

As the sector develops at high speed, the internet is increasingly recognised as an important space for freedom and resistance in contemporary Chinese society, because it permits certain kinds of autonomy for ordinary Chinese people. Take microblogging services as an example: ordinary Chinese people are given more chances to discuss public issues and push the state to improve public services in this new space. For example, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2011, two high-speed trains collided in the suburb of Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province, China. Several hundred people were injured or died in the accident and it was the first high-speed train crash in China. Officials at the Ministry of Railways blamed the crash on technological problems and hastily ordered the derailed cars to be buried, which elicited strong criticism from Chinese people, both online and offline. As a response, the government restricted media coverage, but could not control the online forums where much debate was taking place. Eventually, the online criticism, such as criticism in microblog platforms, forced some officials in the Ministry of Railways to resign. Such online practices have led to a change in government strategies. At the same time, local governments have also been pushed to be transparent about certain issues, with over 10,000 local government departments setting up microblog accounts to make their services transparent.<sup>10</sup> In such new media

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<sup>9</sup> Beijing Municipality, 16<sup>th</sup> December 2011

<sup>10</sup> China National Information Infrastructure, 11<sup>th</sup> January 2011

events, the internet industries open a new space and provide new chances for ordinary Chinese people's freedom of speech, which indicates a bottom-up political power in the current structural constraints.

Indeed, the bottom-up political power in China centres on pursuing a society with equal chances and just social benefits for ordinary Chinese people. As Qiu (2009) concludes, the techno-social transformation in contemporary Chinese society opens up the rare chance for people at the bottom to achieve equality and justice. I argue that the internet workers play an important and positive role in this transformation for ordinary Chinese people. I will further discuss this potential in Chapter Eight.

In the special context of Chinese society, and more specifically, the Chinese internet industries, this research has three main aims. First, I seek to critically understand the Chinese internet industries by assessing the daily working experiences and practices of the people who create the industries. Second, I intend to expand the present discussions of creative labour and cultural labour, especially surrounding internet workers (Gill 2002). The third aim is to enrich present discussions by more fully recognising the agency of internet workers. I discuss these three aims in more detail below.

### **1.3 Research aims**

My first aim is to be concerned with the people who work in? the internet industries, which have economically, culturally and politically changed Chinese society. Compared to many everyday discussions of new media, which have fetishized internet work as a cool, well paid and prestigious job, I seek to open a space for these internet workers to talk about and evaluate their own working-life experiences. I adopt a critical perspective to explore these subjective experiences. I think that such critical discussion of the working life can contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the Chinese internet industries. The significant growth of the industries has not brought good working conditions and justice to the people who created them. It is important to recognise the quality of working life in the industries, because it relates to a large number of people's well-being.

As I pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, much research pays attention to cultural labour, and internet workers in particular (Kennedy 2012, Leung 2008, Gill 2007, Christopherson 2004, Neff *et al.* 2005, Ross 2005), in different geographical and political contexts, such as the UK (Kennedy 2012), the USA (Christopherson 2004, Neff *et al.* 2005), the Netherlands (Gill 2007), and China (Ross 2005). But existing research has not yet paid attention to

workers in the Chinese internet content industries,<sup>11</sup> who contribute to the capital accumulation (both economic capital and cultural capital) in the internet industries and in society. Therefore, this study of Chinese internet workers' daily experiences and practices offers the possibility to expand the present discussions of internet workers.

The Chinese internet workers' experiences and practices are important, because they suffer difficult working conditions. Although the internet industries have experienced a rapid growth both economically and culturally, little attention has been paid to the poor working conditions found there. However, I recognise that Chinese internet workers show their negotiation and resistance towards the difficult working conditions via their daily practices. They also aspire to certain internet idealisms – such as benefiting vulnerable communities via their products and opening new spaces for ordinary Chinese people to speak out, which will be discussed in Chapter Seven – via their daily practices of resistance and negotiation. These acts of agency expand the present discussions of worker agency, by linking traditional perspectives approaching worker agency (such as the sociological approach), to new media workers' practices that take place in both the workplace and in society.

## 1.4 Research questions

The main research question of this study is:

What is the quality of working life in the Chinese internet industries?

The subsidiary questions are as follows:

- (1) What are the main features of working life in Chinese internet industries?
- (2) What is internet workers' class location in Chinese society?
- (3) To what extent do internet workers suffer injustice and inequality in their working lives, and why?
- (4) How do the workers themselves understand these experiences?
- (5) To what extent do the state and companies seek to control workers?
- (6) To what extent can we describe workers' experiences as exploitation?
- (7) What are the responses of workers to the state and companies' control?
- (8) Why do workers work in the industries, despite the difficult working conditions?

In order to answer these questions, I interviewed fourteen workers from two internet companies, Campus and Grand. I also participated in the work in Grand to observe how internet workers work and live. I was aware that it was

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<sup>11</sup> Ross deals with Chinese high-tech workers, rather than workers in the internet content market, as this thesis focusing on.

also important to observe workers' daily working life in Campus, but due to the difficulty of access and the limited budget and time of my research, I did not do another participant observation there. As an alternative, I invited a worker in Campus to conduct self-observation – he recorded his daily working life according to a check list I provided him with.

## **1.5 Summary of the thesis**

I divide the following seven chapters into four parts: Chapter Two will provide a theoretical background, in which I locate internet workers in the lower middle class, and build up a framework of understanding exploitation in the Chinese context, especially in the internet industries. I argue that internet workers, as part of the lower middle class in society, face the problem of proletarianisation, which stresses their difficult working conditions. I also argue that a neo-Marxian approach to exploitation, applied in such a way that takes into account both economic factors and non-economic practices in the production process, needs to be applied in order to understand the forces behind the internet workers' subjective experiences. Meanwhile, I also develop a framework to discuss the agency of internet workers, in a way that in some respects challenges or qualifies theories of exploitation. Chapter Three is the methodological chapter, which explains how I designed and conducted my research, and clarifies some ethical issues.

Chapters Four to Seven are the empirical chapters, which discuss workers' subjective experiences in the industries. In Chapter Four, I discuss workers' working hours and tensions to claim that most workers in the industries are not well rewarded for their hard work. In Chapter Five, I talk about workers' subjective experiences of autonomy, in order to acknowledge what autonomy means to them, and to what extent they pursue autonomy. This chapter echoes some research concerning creative labour by discussing whether such cultural-related work (work in the internet industries) is 'good work' because it provides a certain space and freedom for creativity and innovation. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010) for example, define high levels of autonomy as one characteristic of good work. In Chapter Six, I point out the risks and precariousness of working life in the internet industries. I argue that the rapid growth of the Chinese internet industries and the Chinese economy, have led to an unsafe and precarious working life. Internet workers are exploited by being forced to shoulder responsibilities, which had previously belonged to companies and the state. Chapter Seven illustrates workers' responses to this exploitation, which includes workers' practices of negotiation with and resistance to companies and the state. I argue that this indicates certain agents initiated from the humanistic account of workers. Chapter Eight

is the conclusion, where I discuss my findings in light of the debates about Chinese social problems and tensions. I argue that there is the possibility that workers' practices in the internet industries are regarded as part of the emerging bottom-up power in contemporary Chinese social hierarchy, which has the potential to initiate social transformation in the future.

## **Chapter Two: Framework for evaluating working life**

### **2.1 Structure of this chapter**

In the last chapter, I introduced the contexts for evaluating working life in the Chinese internet industries, and highlighted my research aims. This chapter now develops a theoretical and conceptual framework for examining the empirical data discussed in Chapters Four to Eight. This framework begins with a discussion of social class, in which I clarify the class analysis approach adopted in this study, and provide a historical discussion of the Chinese class structure, and an analysis of the Chinese middle class. I locate internet workers in the lower middle class position, and point out that this class face the problem of proletarianisation. I argue that the discussion of the class problem in Chinese society is the basis of understanding important terms of exploring the working life in Chinese internet industries, such as exploitation and domination. Thus, in section 2.3, I introduce Marx, because of his fundamental contribution to the understanding of labour and work. His concept of exploitation directs my attention to the fact that the labour efforts of many people in the Chinese internet industries are appropriated by the state and firms – and therefore by the bureaucratic capitalist class. However, as Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010) remind us, Marx was not a sociologist, and his main concern was not analysing workers' subjective experiences. Thus, a Weberian approach and a neo-Marxist approach to analysing exploitation follow in section 2.4, in order to develop my own approach to understanding working life in the Chinese internet industries. In section 2.5, I specify how exploitation might be understood in the Chinese context, aiming to build up my normative framework for evaluating experiences of working life in the Chinese internet industries. In section 2.6, this framework is developed by using the following elements: work effort, security, and autonomy. In section 2.7, the agency of internet workers, is explored as a part of working life. This framework including work efforts, security, autonomy and agency, which I later apply to my empirical findings, aiming to arrive at some conclusions about the quality of working life of Chinese internet workers, and hopefully to recognise a potential that might lead both to reform of the Chinese internet industries and a better China; by this I mean improved working conditions in the internet industries and the creation of a certain free space for ordinary Chinese people to speak out via the internet.

As suggested above, the social class of the internet workers closely relates to their quality of working life in the industries, because their class location is the basis to understanding the notion of exploitation. Therefore, below I introduce the Chinese class structure from a historical perspective.

## 2.2 Social class

As Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010: 67-69) point out, it is complicated to consider the class location of cultural producers, because of the complex constitution of this group, which includes managers, professionals and unskilled workers carrying out routine tasks. They suggest considering the problem of creative workers' class location via Erik Olin Wright's work on 'the problem of the "middle class"— people who do not own their own means of production, who sell their labour power on a labour market, and yet do not see themselves as part of the "working class"' (p.67). As with any cultural industry,<sup>12</sup> there are different classes working together in the internet industries, and these groups are likely to have very different working conditions and experiences. Workers in the internet industries include managers (such as executives), professionals (such as technical workers, HR (Human Resources), and engineers) and unskilled workers (such as cleaners). Therefore, it is necessary to clarify the approach I adopt to analyse the internet workers' class location.

### 2.2.1 The class analysis approach

Erik Olin Wright (2009) illustrates three approaches relevant to class analysis: one is stratification research, which defines classes with 'the attributes and material life conditions of individuals' (p.102); the Weberian approach, which centres on 'the ways in which social positions afford some people control over economic resources while excluding others' (ibid.); and the Marxist approach, which regards classes as 'being structured by mechanisms of domination and exploitation, in which economic positions accord some people power over the lives and activities of others' (ibid.).

The stratification approach focuses on class background, which consists of attributes such as sex, race, religion, age, education, and material life conditions, which refers to adequate income, dire poverty, and pleasant suburban houses. This approach identifies the middle class as people who 'have enough education and money to participate fully in the vaguely defined "mainstream" way of life (which might include particular consumption patterns, for example)' (p.103). But, as Wright acknowledges, this approach lacks serious consideration of the injustice and inequalities between different social positions, such as why some jobs are better than others.

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<sup>12</sup> Some may argue internet industries as the information technology industries, the 'neighbouring industries' of cultural industries.

The Weberian approach focuses on the unequal 'opportunity hoarding' (p.104), which highlights the restricted access to certain positions. For example, high levels of education are restricted to the upper classes, because of the high tuition fees. Good education then further benefits the upper classes, as it usually relates to good jobs. In other words, unequal locations within market relations are causally connected to unjust opportunity hoarding among different social positions. According to Wright (2009), this approach is usually adopted by sociologists to analyse American society, where the middle class is defined by 'mechanisms of exclusion over the acquisition of education and skills' (p.106). In Wright's discussion, the Weberian approach has a critical difference to the stratification approach, as it indicates that 'the economic advantages gained from being in a privileged class position are causally connected to the disadvantages of those excluded from such positions' (ibid.). Put simply, the upper class's economic advantages are causally related to the lower class's disadvantages.

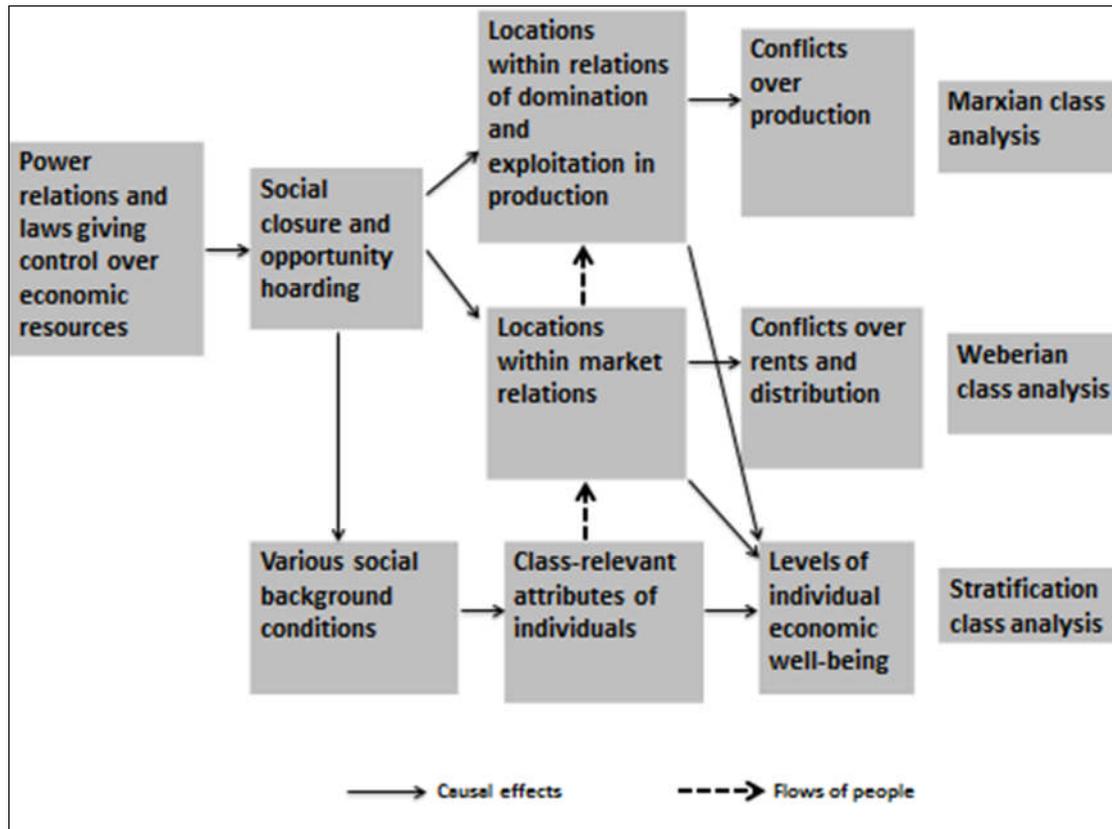
The Marxist approach focuses on mechanisms of exploitation and domination. Unequal opportunity hoarding does not only involve restricted access to certain positions and resources, but also depends on the ability of the exploiting/dominating group to control the labour of the exploited/dominated group. Put simply, this approach highlights 'an ongoing relationship between not only the *conditions* but also the *activities* of the advantaged and disadvantaged' (p.108). The traditional Marxist approach distinguishes three class locations based on ownership of means of production: the capitalist class, the petty bourgeoisie and the working class.

Some theorists have argued against this Marxist approach to class locations, stating that the working class has diminished or even disappeared in capitalism, especially the manual working class, which only occupies a small part of the workforce, and that white-collar workers are already in the position of the middle class. However, Callinicos (1983: 193-195) is among those who claim that many people still occupy the position of the working class, even though they are not engaged in manual labour in the way that most workers in Marx's industrial capitalism were. For example, because of the industrialisation of office work, clerical workers are doing similar work to manual workers and suffering from a similar working condition to manual workers, with the massive introduction of new technologies. Therefore, they are in the same position as the working class, as manual labourers, because they are 'compelled to sell their labour-power in order to live' (p.193), even if they do non-manual work. As a result, Callinicos argues that the change in class location and class relations since Marx's period is 'a shift in the structure of the working class, not its abolition' (p.195). In later work, Callinicos (2004) introduces Wright's work on class to explain the fragmentation of class structure in contemporary capitalism. As Wright (1985) argues, class locations in modern capitalism are contradictory, as some positions share properties of both labour and capital,

notably the middle class. For example, managers perform some functions of capital by directing others' work, but still sell their labour-power in order to live.

In his book *Classes*, Wright (1985) explicitly introduced his framework of contradictory class locations and fragmented class structure. He argued that Marxist criteria for class are an approximate framework for class structure in capitalism, rather than an elaborated classification. He then develops a much more complex typology of class in capitalism, but still based on ownership and non-ownership of the means of production. Among these non-owners, their locations are divided by organisation and skill/credential assets. The class locations of wage labourers in a capitalist society are classified into expert managers, non-managerial experts, and non-skilled managers, etc. Wright (1996) further modified this typology of class locations in his later work by specifying three dimensions that clarify class relations: property, authority, and expertise/skill. The property dimension consists of employers, the petty bourgeoisie, and employees; the authority dimension is divided into managers, supervisors, and non-managerial employees; and the expertise/skill dimension contains professionals, skilled employees, and non-skilled employees (p.704). The latter is where questions of symbol making and manipulation, crucial to understanding the information technology industries (and the cultural industries) come in.

Wright (2009) aims to move beyond the traditional Marxist approach to class analysis by developing a detailed typology of class locations. He identifies certain key aspects that constitute the new class structure of his model: the mechanism of exploitation and domination in the traditional Marxist approach, the mechanisms that sustain the privileges of advantaged classes in the Weberian approach, and the individuals' class locations in the stratification approach. He argues that a completely elaborated class analysis needs to combine the 'macro-model of conflict and transformation with the macro-micro, multi-level model of class processes and individual lives' (p.111) (see Figure 2.1). Put in another way, Wright argues that individuals' lives depend not only on the micro-model of attributes and material life conditions, but also on the macro-model of social conflicts and transformations where their lives take place.



**Figure 2.1: Combined class analysis: macro and micro processes**

**Source: Wright 2009, p.111**

Wright's work (2009) then suggests a necessity to analyse class locations by locating individuals' lived experiences, such as 'class background', in the context of social conflicts and transformations. It is no longer the problem of individuals who fill these positions, but rather, it is important to recognise the mechanisms shaping the privilege of certain class positions. As Wright points out, the middle class problem is not who is excluded from the position, but is the fact that 'there are mechanisms of exclusion that sustain the privileges of those in middle-class positions' (p.109). Likewise, I adopt an approach that is similar to Wright's, which combines both the macro model of transformation and the macro-micro model of individual lives. It is not my interest to just identify the scope of the Chinese middle class, by clarifying who is excluded from the position; rather, my aim here is to recognise the important and unique positions of internet workers in the general Chinese social structure, and to clarify the mechanisms that sustain and change their unique positions (probably privileged positions) in the Chinese context, by assessing workers' subjective experiences.

As Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010) point out, discussing the class location of creative workers is quite complex, because of the varied

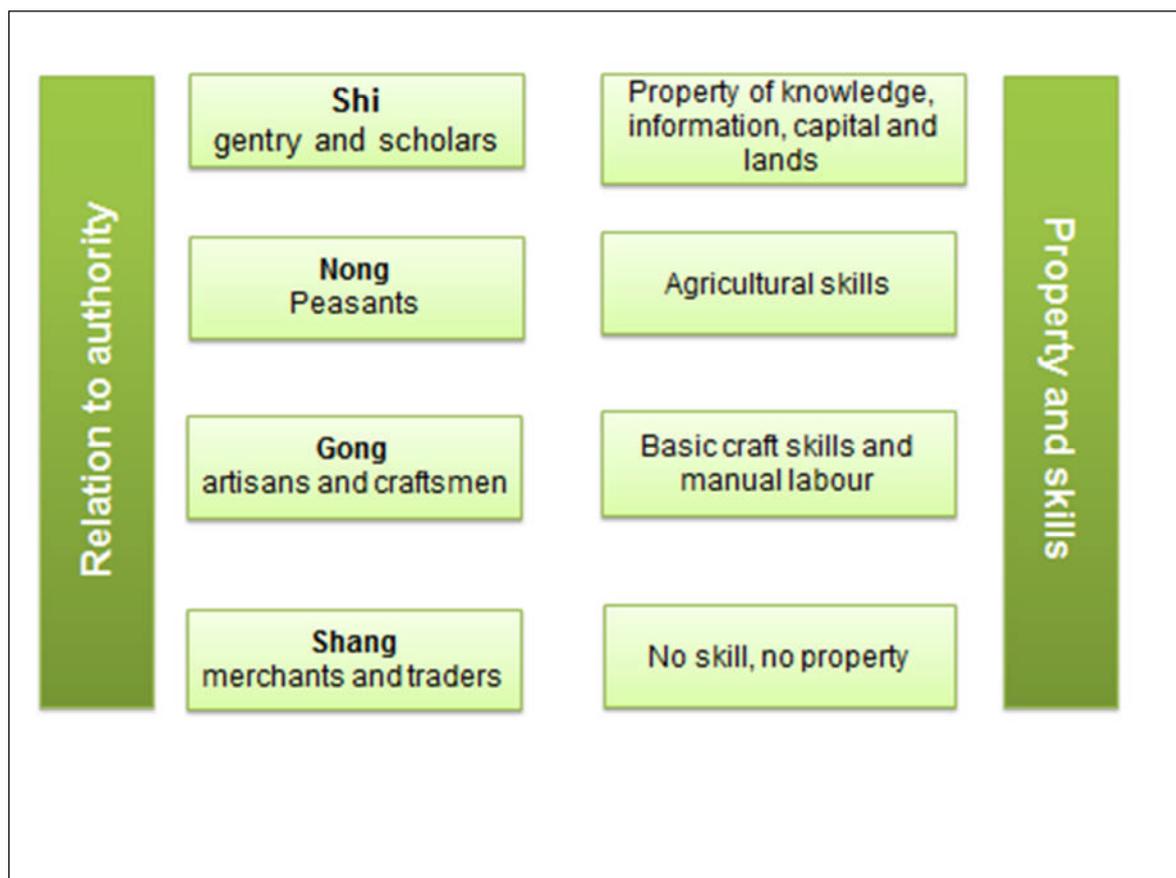
occupations of these workers. Indeed it becomes more complicated to consider the internet workers' class location in the Chinese context, not only because the workers occupy various locations, but also because of the transformation of the Chinese social structure over the centuries. For this reason, I discuss the historical changes of occupations and class locations in Chinese society in the next section.

## 2.2.2 The Chinese class structure

As far back as the Zhou Dynasty (1046-256 BC), occupations in feudal Chinese society were divided into four categories: gentry and scholars (*shi*), peasants (*nong*), artisans and craftsmen (*gong*), and merchants and traders (*shang*). This represents a hierarchical order in Chinese society, where certain occupations have a higher social status than others, because unequal power relations give some groups greater control over economic resources. The gentry and scholars occupied the highest social status, with peasants, artisans and craftsmen in the middle, and merchants at the bottom of the hierarchy. In the four occupations, it was only the *shi* that were educated and controlled the information of the imperial government, which enabled them to be the bureaucratic stratum.

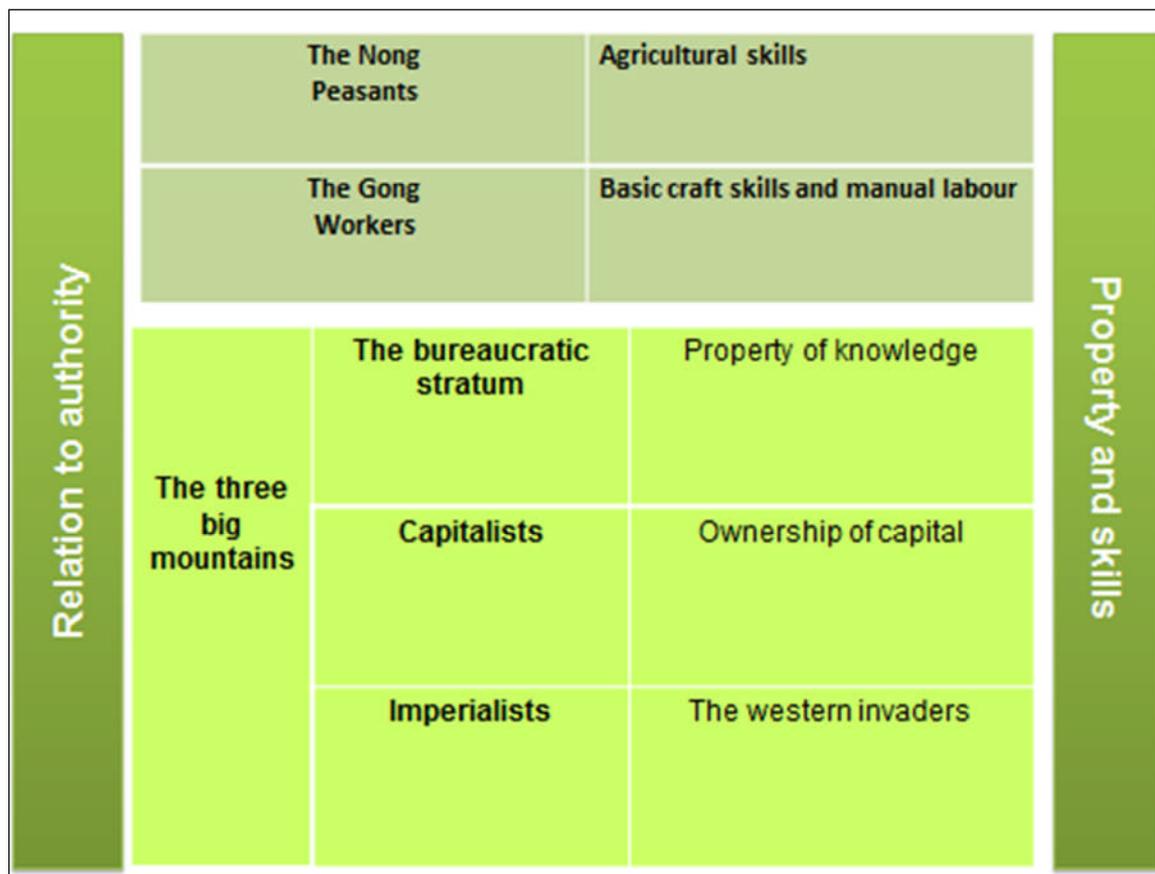
Globally, peasants are often regarded as the lowest class in the social hierarchy, and this is reflected in contemporary Chinese society. But, in ancient China, peasants were highly regarded because of their skills in cultivating lands, which provided food to all other classes. However, most of them did not own the lands. The artisans and craftsmen (*gong*) were regarded as an important class in the hierarchy because they provided basic skills and labour for production. Artisans and craftsmen were known for being experienced in producing goods and crafts, which were essential for social development. Merchants and traders (*shang*) were the lowest class in the social hierarchy. Although the *shang* were an essential part of Chinese society, they were distrusted and despised by the public, especially by the *shi*.

Put simply, in feudal Chinese society, social hierarchy was divided by the ownership of certain property and skills. The *shi* occupied the top of the hierarchy because they owned knowledge and land; the *nong* and the *gong* were in the middle of the hierarchy because they owned basic skills, such as being able to cultivate land produce crafts, and labour; and the *shang* were despised because they lacked these basic skills and had no property. These occupations were inherited from fathers to sons, which made it difficult for individuals to move from one occupation to another. This stable, class-divided society existed in China for around two thousand years, even though the dynasties changed.



**Figure 2.2: Social hierarchy in feudal Chinese society**

This social order remained largely unchanged until 1949, when Mao announced that ‘The Chinese people have stood up’. Here, ‘the Chinese people’ in Mao’s statement were ordinary Chinese people, especially the *nong* and *gong*, who occupied the social location of the *shi* from 1949. As Mao claimed, all Chinese labourers were proletariat, and faced exploitation from ‘the three big mountains’ (*sanzuo dashan*): the bureaucratic stratum – the *shi*; capitalists – the *shang*; and imperialists – the Western invaders since the end of the Qing Dynasty. In other words, at the beginning of Mao’s era, peasants and manual workers became the most powerful class in the social hierarchy, as they owned the essential skills for reconstructing a new China. Individuals’ class locations were still historically inherited: if a person’s father and grandfather were manual workers, then he would be located in the ‘proletariat’, with a job as a manual worker. This system of inherited individuals’ class locations and occupations peaked in the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), when individuals were categorised based on their family backgrounds.



**Figure 2.3: Social hierarchy in Chinese society from 1949 to 1965**

Bian (2002) summarises the Chinese social structure in the pre-reform period (1949-1978) according to four characteristics: '(a) a rural-urban divide in residential status, (b) a state-collective dualism in economic structure, (c) a cadre-worker dichotomy in occupational classification, and (d) a "revolution-antirevolution" split in political-characterisation' (p.92-93). The fourth point particularly refers to the special social hierarchy during the Cultural Revolution, when all individuals were politically divided into Five Categories of Red Elements (*Hongwulei*) and Five Categories of Black Elements (*Heiwulei*). The former comprised workers (*Gongren*), poor peasants (*Pinxia zhongnong*), revolutionary cadres (*Gemin Ganbu*), revolutionary soldiers (*Gemin Junren*) and revolutionary martyrs (*Geming Lieshi*). The latter was comprised of landlords (*Dizhu*), rich peasants (*Funong*), counterrevolutionists (*Fangeming Fenzi*), bad elements (*Huaifenzi*) and rightists (*Youpai Fenzi*). Intellectuals and artists were categorised into the Five Categories of Black Elements (*Heiwulei*), and in comparison, the privileged position of manual workers meant they were categorised into the Five Categories of Red Elements (*Hongwulei*). Millions of individuals were located in these differently coloured class positions and were allocated to the respective coloured occupations based on their inherited

family backgrounds: the workers' offspring held the occupation of workers, and occupied the position of *Hongwulei*; whilst the rich peasants' offspring were located in the position of *Heiwulei*, and suffered from public humiliation and seizure of property.

Relation to authority	Five Categories of Red Elements	Workers	Basic craft skills and knowledge	Property and skills
		Poor peasants	Agricultural skills and certain knowledge	
		Revolutionary cadres	Property of knowledge and information	
		Revolutionary soldiers	Military skills	
		Revolutionary martyrs	-	
	Five Categories of Black Elements	Landlords	Property of lands	
		Rich peasants	Property of lands, ownership of capital	
		Counterrevolutionists	-	
		Bad elements	-	
		Rightists	-	

**Figure 2.4: Social hierarchy in Chinese society from 1966 to 1976**

This coloured class structure has changed since the reform period, which started in the 1980s, when Deng's reform and opening up policy was issued. As Bian (2002) points out, the most significant changes from Mao's era to Deng's reform era were in manual workers and intellectuals' class locations. The working class was regarded as the leading class in Mao's era, whilst it was separated into several parts during the market reform: 'private-sector wage labour' (p.96), who were not guaranteed definite working hours, social insurance and labour contracts; 'unprotected labour in the state sector', who regarded themselves as proletarians; 'layoff' labour struggling in finding a job; 'migrant peasant-labour', who moved to the cities in large numbers to search for jobs; and a large number of 'collective-sector labour' and 'retired labour' (ibid.). Intellectuals, most conducting mental work, were called 'stinky old ninths' (*chou lao jiu*) and ranked in the *Heiwulei* in Mao's era, were recognised

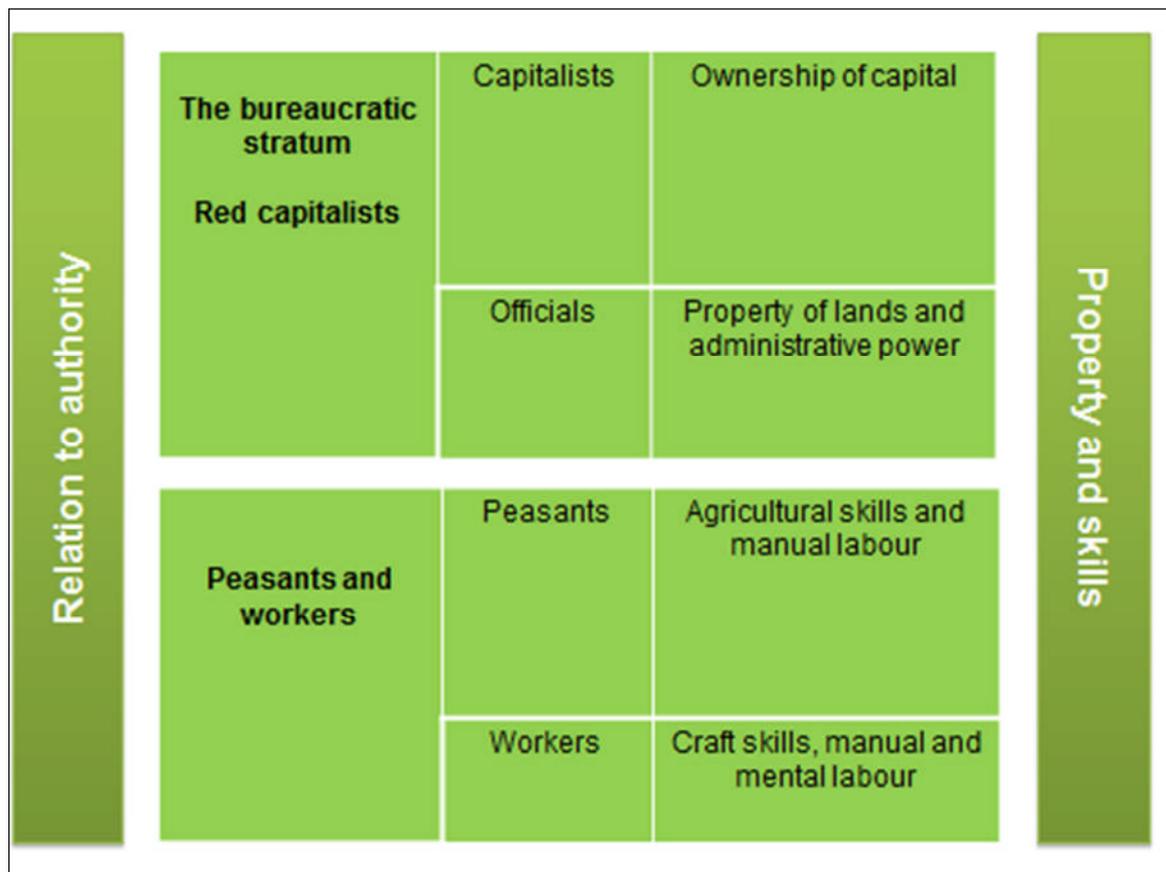
as the middle class by Deng in 1979, during the beginning of the reform, which gave the intellectuals a privileged position.

Zhang (2000) further differentiates the intellectuals' social status from that of the manual workers: in the post-reform period, mental workers (including intellectuals) occupied more privileged class locations than the manual workers, who were generally recognised as the working class, whilst their locations were still lower than the cadre, who later transferred to become the bureaucratic capitalists. It seemed that mental workers had privileged positions, and were likely to be in the middle class in post-reformed Chinese society. At this stage, individuals' class locations were less influenced by their family backgrounds, and it was possible to have a different class location from family members. There was more free space for individuals to change their class locations via different ownerships of skills and property.

Andreas (2008) pays particular attention to the transformation of social classes in the post-Mao society. He claims that the reform era needs to be discussed by paying attention to two particular periods, 1978-1992 and post-1992, in order to clarify the change of class structure in Chinese society. Andreas entitles the period from 1978 to 1992 'non-capitalist market economy' (p.127), because the public sector, which was based on socialist production relations, still dominated the economy. The significant transformation happened in 1992, when privatisation became the theme of society: large numbers of SOEs were sold to private owners, and millions of SOE workers were laid off. The whole country entered the global capitalist market as the world's workshop, by offering cheap labour and resources; large amounts of private sector businesses bloomed, whilst millions of peasants lost their land and jobs. But the CCP still controlled the main resources, such as banking, oil, steel, telecommunications and armaments, despite the large number of privatised SOEs. Workers in these party-controlled enterprises (the new SOEs after reform) still benefitted from the stable and high valued jobs.

So (2003) points out that the middle class expanded during this period, with new corporate professional members, such as 'mid-level managers and accounts' (p.366), and service professionals, such as 'teachers and journalists' (ibid.). The working class also expanded, with an increasing number of peasant workers and temporary migrant workers. By contrast, a new dominant class emerged during the process of privatisation of SOEs: cadres set up their own businesses, which at times cooperated with foreign capitalists, by usurping resources from SOEs where they had executive positions. Capitalists also joined the existing structure using bribery to access to the market and gain resources. Since then, a new bureaucratic capitalist class has emerged. The new partnerships between cadres and capitalists enabled the new private sectors to 'save on the additional costs of pension schemes, health and

welfare insurance, environmental protection facilities' (p.368), which ultimately led to the deterioration of working conditions in these private enterprises.



**Figure 2.5: Social hierarchy in Chinese society after 1980s**

Put simply, in the post-1992 period, the middle class and working class expanded, and a new bureaucratic capitalist class emerged based on the close relationships between cadres and capitalists. This bureaucratic capitalist class had a more privileged class location than others, because of its ownership of economic resources and political authority. Also, present in the Chinese social hierarchy in the post-1992 period were various other classes, between these three classes, such as the petty bourgeoisie and small employers. The class typology in the contemporary Chinese context is complex, but the main social inequalities, one focus of this research, are between the bureaucratic capitalist class, the middle class, and the working class.

From a Weberian perspective, sociologists may state that unequal opportunity hoarding – a social closure where the middle class have privileged

access to economic resources – ultimately results in unequal locations within market relations. However, in the Chinese context, the emergence of the new bureaucratic capitalist class changes the argument: the huge wealth of this class is not only based on the ownership of economic resources, but also depends on control of others' labour and skills; the political authority of this class leads to its dominance over the middle class and the working class, which enables its acquisition of economic benefits from the labour and skills of others. For example, 'joint enterprises' (the association between officials and capitalists), which are controlled by the bureaucratic capitalist class, benefit from cheap labour and resources. This is the way the neo-Marxists approach class and inequality: by not only focusing on the causal relationships between unequal opportunity hoarding and unequal locations in the market, but also on the domination and exploitation process. Here, I intend to focus on exploitation and domination, as per the neo-Marxist approach, although I use some Weberian concepts in the thesis.

This review of historical changes in the Chinese social structure addresses some significant issues in discussing class locations in the Chinese context: the influence of family background, the structural change of the middle class and the working class, the emergence of the bureaucratic capitalist class, and the privileged position of party-controlled enterprises. This then provides the background to understand internet workers' social class, and ultimately leads to questions concerning the quality of their working life, based on a neo-Marxist approach.

### **2.2.3 The Chinese middle class**

Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010: 68-69) place creative workers in a middle class location, and reproduce the map of middle class locations based on Wright's work (see Figure 2.6), although they acknowledge that there are various classes involved in creative labour. They claim that most creative workers in the cultural industries occupy the lower-authority, higher-skilled positions (such as skilled workers with little managerial powers).

<b>Relation to means of production</b>				
<b>Owner</b>	<b>Employees</b>			
<b>Capitalists</b>	<b>Expert managers</b>	<b>Skilled managers</b>	<b>Nonskilled managers</b>	<b>Managers</b>
<b>Small employers</b>	<b>Expert supervisors</b>	<b>Skilled supervisors</b>	<b>Nonskilled supervisors</b>	<b>Supervisors</b>
<b>Petty bourgeoisie</b>	<b>experts</b>	<b>Skilled workers</b>	<b>Nonskilled workers</b>	<b>Non-management</b>
	<b>Experts</b>	<b>Skilled</b>	<b>Nonskilled</b>	

**Figure 2.6: Elaborated class typology**

**Source: Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010, p.68**

This map can only be partly applied to the Chinese case, because of the specificity of Chinese class locations.

There is a debate amongst Chinese sociologists about the middle class in China. Zhou (2008: 110-114) points out that such debate is due to a number of factors. First, it is based on a misinterpretation by Chinese academia of the English term 'middle class' – the Chinese translation of middle class overemphasises the amount of assets owned and ignores the occupational characteristics of middle class. Second, Chinese academia usually confuses the term 'middle class' with 'middle class society'. Zhou (2008: 114-117) defines the modern Chinese middle class as a group of people with middle-career positions,<sup>13</sup> middle-incomes and middle-consumption practices. According to these indexes of middle class, Zhou further claims that the modern Chinese middle class includes 'the owners of newly-born private and township enterprises'; 'other kinds of self-employed people like petty proprietors and small trades people'; 'some officials and intellectuals who

<sup>13</sup> A term that is problematically used by the author refers to intellectual jobs.

serve, directly or indirectly, the Party and the government, as well as the leaders of state-owned enterprises'; 'Chinese people who work in white-collar and senior managerial occupations in joint ventures'; 'managers of enterprises and social organisations'; 'high-income people working in the hi-tech professions' (p.115-116).

Zhou quotes a sample survey conducted in urban and rural China in 2003 to specify what is meant by middle-income in her definition, though she does not give quantitative definitions of middle-consumption. In 2003, the annual income of an individual in the middle class location was £1,000-£10,000. This figure was updated by the famous business magazine, *Forbes* in 2010, when it showed middle-income in Chinese society as £4,000- £40,000.<sup>14</sup>

Based on the large amount of research about Chinese middle class, Li (2008) provides a table that includes the most significant research on the modern Chinese middle class, as follows, which provides a context of considering individuals' position in the Chinese social hierarchy and the population of Chinese middle class.

Year	Author	Publication	Rate of population of middle class in the country	Index of division
1997	Zhang J., Hong D. etc.	Zhongguo chengshi zhongjian jieceng de xianzhuang jiqi weilai fazhan	-	Education level, income, occupation
1999	Lu X.	Shekeyuan xuezhe chen 2020nian zhongguo 1/3 shi zhongchan	15%	Occupation
2000	Xiao W.	Zhongguo zhongjian jieceng de xianzhuang yu weilai fazhan	20-25%	Income and family-owned properties
2001	Zhou X.	Zhongguo zhongchan jieji: xianzhuang yihuo huanxiang	-	Income, occupation, education level

<sup>14</sup> China Net, 2010

2001	Li C.	Duanlie yu suipian: dangdai zhongguo shehui jieceng fenhua shizheng fenxi	4.1%	Occupation, income, consumption, identity
2003	Oxford Analysis	Zhongguo: zhongchan jieji	4.5%	Income
2004	Liu Y.	Zhongchan jieji de jieding fangfa ji shizheng cedu – yi zhujiangsanjiaozhou wei li	-	Income, occupation, consumption
2005	Li Q.	Guanyu zhongchan jieji de lilun yu xianzhuang	15%	Occupation
2006	Li P.	Zhongguo zhongchan jieji de guimo he renting	32.9%	Occupation, income, education level
2007	Lu X.	Shekeyuan xuezhe chen 2020nian zhongguo 1/3 shi zhongchan	22-23%	Occupation

**Table 2.1 Literature on modern Chinese middle class**

**Source: translated from Li 2008, p.3**

Such figures provide some indices for considering Chinese internet workers' location in social hierarchy – for example, most internet workers have good education background, occupy intellectual positions, and have middle-level income, which fit most conditions in table 2.1 (I will say more about internet workers' job types and wages in section 2.2.4). However, Wang (2006) points out that class in China does not rely on ownership of property and means of production, but rather, is a political issue that depends on 'the revolutionary party's appeal for mobilization and self-renewal' (p.36). The concept indicates 'the attitudes of social or political forces toward revolutionary politics' (ibid.), instead of 'the structural situation of social class' (ibid.). This approach is not adopted in this research; rather, as I stated earlier, I prefer an approach which combines concepts drawn from Marxist, Weberian and

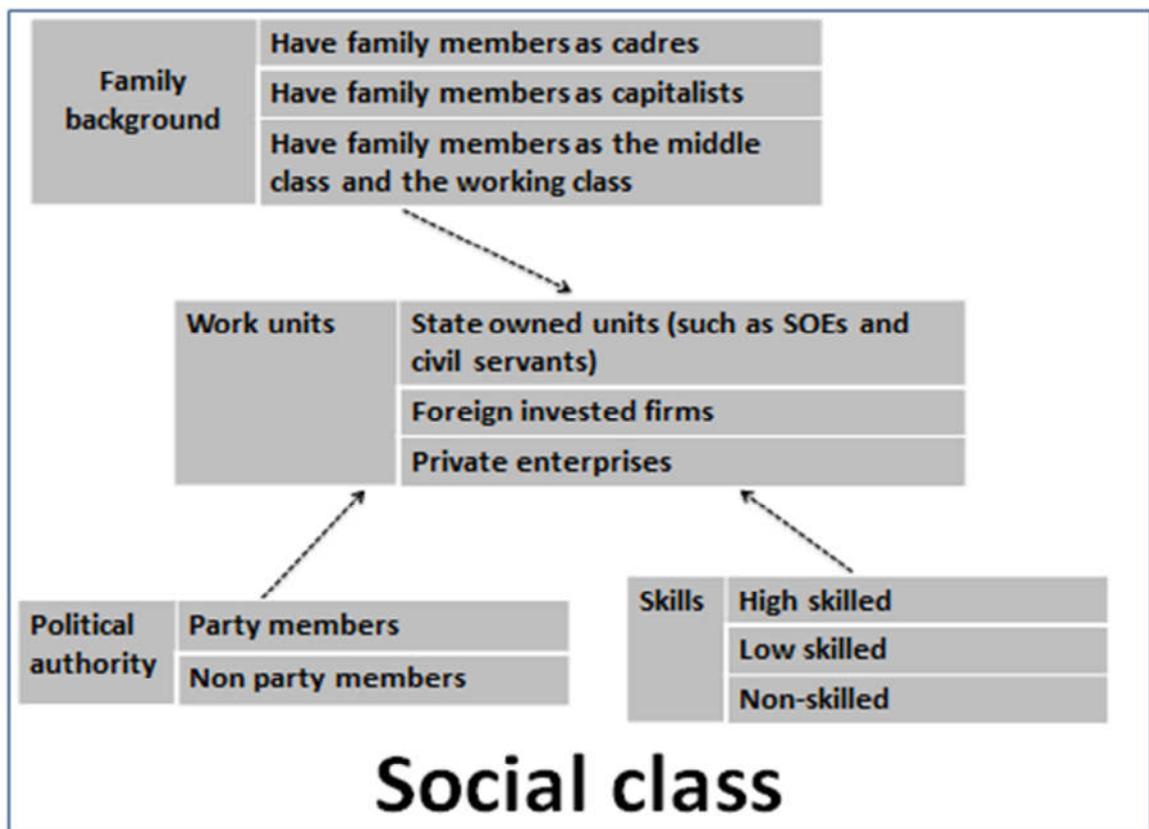
stratification approaches. But Wang's work is still helpful in drawing attention to questions of political authority, such as the greater political authority held by the bureaucratic capitalist class. Likewise, some occupations in the middle class have greater political authority than others, which leads to their privileged positions in the social hierarchy. For example, party members (most are in the party-controlled SOEs, such as bank and oil industries) are in privileged positions, unlike non-party members (most gather in private enterprises, such as the internet industries) in the middle class locations.

Bian (2002) discusses the work unit (*gongzuo danwei*) – a Chinese term to refer to the workplace in China, which was widely used in Mao's era. It is still used in contemporary Chinese society to distinguish different workplaces, such as state-owned enterprises and private enterprises, as the key Chinese measure of social status. Work units played a significant role in Chinese people's lives in Mao's era, when people lived and worked in collective forms. He points out that the state allocation of resources leads to important differences between state and private work units: SOEs achieve greater rewards, stability, than private enterprise workers. This indicates that workers in SOEs have a privileged social status, which ultimately guarantees them a better quality of working life. By contrast, most internet workers are in private enterprises, rather than these privileged SOEs, therefore, are likely to be marked by a lower quality of working life than SOEs' workers.

The family background, which I explained earlier, also plays a significant role in middle class locations. Although individuals' class locations are less influenced by their family backgrounds in the post-reform era than in Mao's era, the historical heritage of family background still has an impact upon social class. Indeed, in the middle class sections of the 'map', certain family backgrounds still influence individuals' privileged positions. For example, the offspring of private enterprise workers have limited chances to access SOEs and civil servant positions, because they lack the necessary personal networks (*guanxi*) in the field, which is quite important in the Chinese context as I will explain in the latter chapter. This then contributes to the inferior social status of these individuals. Even in the SOEs, workers who have family members as cadres have more opportunities for promotion than those who do not. Admittedly, individuals in contemporary Chinese society have greater opportunities to change their class location, such as from the working class to the middle class via access to higher education and better work units. But family background still guarantees certain individuals' privileged positions in the social hierarchy, especially in the middle class. The family background here is different from the one in the stratification approach, which focuses on the education levels of parents. In fact, a key aspect of family background in the Chinese context is political authority: whether family members are in the bureaucratic capitalist class positions, such as cadres and capitalists (see Figure 2.7). Workers with family members in low classes are likely to be

excluded from certain privileged positions, due to lack of political authority. This then becomes a force behind their subjective working-life experiences.

As Bian (2002) concludes, social status in contemporary Chinese society is measured by three issues: the inherited family class background, party authority (the membership of CCP), and the status of work units. Based on the neo-Marxist approach (opportunity hoarding and relation to means of production) and the Chinese context, I now develop a new map of the middle class in Chinese society, as follows (Figure 2.7),



**Figure 2.7: Typology of Chinese middle class**

Family background, political authority and skills influence the positions of workers in the work units and society: workers who have family members as cadres, workers who are party members and workers with high skills have more advantageous positions than others in the work units and society. These three factors and work units generally decide individuals' positions in the middle class: workers in SOEs and civil servants have higher positions than private enterprise workers; workers who have family members as cadres have privileged positions; party members are more likely to be guaranteed stable work and lives than others; and high-skilled workers have more possibility to

have well-paid jobs than others. It is hard to quantitatively evaluate the influence of these four factors on individuals' locations in the middle class, such as whether individuals who are not party members but have high skills have higher positions than individuals who are party members but work in private enterprise, and it is not my aim to do so here. Instead, I highlight these issues to give a sense of the complexity of analysing Chinese internet workers' social class. The framework above gives some idea of class location, but, like Wright, I recognise that it is more complex than this. And I am trying to discuss the complexity of the Chinese context and in particular the Chinese internet workers below.

## **2.2.4 Chinese internet workers: the lower middle class face proletarianisation**

According to iResearch, a leading company focusing on in-depth research on Chinese internet industries, all the top 21 internet companies in the Chinese market (see figure 2.8) are privately owned. For example, the top 5 companies, Tencent, Baidu, Netease, Sohu, and SNDA, are all owned by individuals, who are widely portrayed as having pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps, to use the English expression. So most internet workers in China are working in private enterprises, and as established above, they are therefore excluded from certain advantages available for employees of SOEs. In other words, the work unit of most internet workers is private enterprises. Due to the inequality between SOE workers and workers in private enterprises, which I will illustrate in the empirical sections of the thesis, it is possible to say that large numbers of internet workers do not have family members in the bureaucratic capitalist class, who have priority to obtain beneficial jobs for their offspring, such as SOE work and civil servant positions.

Rank	Name of companies	Services provided by companies	Profits in 2011 (in billions of dollars)	Market value on 26 <sup>th</sup> June 2012 (in billions of dollars)
1	Tencent	Portal & instant message	4.52	51.75
2	Baidu	Search engine	2.3	38.78
3	Netease	Portal	1.2	7.4
4	Sohu	Portal	0.85	1.53
5	SNDA	Online entertainment	0.77	1.13
6	Ctrip	Online travel agency	0.59	2.37
7	Dangdang	Online bookstore	0.52	0.49
8	Sina	portal	0.48	3.46
9	Changyou	Online travel agency	0.48	1.08
10	Wanmei	Online game	0.43	0.37
11	Soufun	Online real estate	0.34	1.3
12	Ztgame	Online game	0.26	1.06
13	51job	Online recruitment	0.22	1.18
14	M18	Electronic commerce	0.22	0.06
15	Qihoo 360	Software (antivirus software)	0.17	2.04
16	21 Vianet Group	Carrier -neutral Internet data centre services	0.16	0.63
17	Kongzhong	Online entertainment	0.16	0.22
18	Jinshan software	Software (antivirus software)	0.15	0.53
19	Youku	Online video	0.14	2.4
20	Ifeng.com	Online news	0.14	0.38
21	Renren	Social networking services	0.12	1.79

**Figure 2.8. Main players of the Chinese internet industries**

**Source:** Translated from iResearch 2012

Most of these workers still conduct intellectual work, though based in private enterprises, which are considered to be inferior to SOEs, due to their limited access to certain advantageous resources. As I pointed out earlier, in the existing media reports and academic research, there is no survey conducted amongst internet workers to report their education background and income. Instead, according to a sample survey conducted amongst IT workers (workers in the hardware market) in some big cities (such as Shanghai, Beijing, Wuhan and Dalian) in 2010, 97.13% workers were educated at college level (Li 2010: 128). This figure enables us to deduce that a large number of internet workers are also educated at colleges. Indeed, according to my qualitative

research, all the participants and interviewees in my research are educated at college level, which might help us recognise that generally most Chinese internet workers are highly educated.

Likewise, as little research investigates internet workers' income, it is hard to provide authoritative figures concerning internet workers' income – I will show some relative figures from my fieldwork in Chapter Four. However, according to an annual report about salary information in various industries, which was conducted by a professional HR service company, PXC, in 2013, the increase in salary rate in the internet industries was 16.2%, which was the highest among all industries (excluding SOEs and civil servants' positions).<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, according to Sina Economy, one of the largest portals, annual salaries of fresh graduates who find jobs in the top 5 internet companies are between £10,000 and £15,000, which is a middle-level salary for most jobs.<sup>16</sup> This indicates that internet workers have a high-level salary among jobs in private enterprises. But all these surveys did not include figures from SOEs and civil servants, who have much higher salaries and better benefits than private enterprises' workers (I will discuss this comparison in details in Chapter Four), such as internet workers here. Therefore, internet workers' middle-level income partly forms their middle class position.

Although CCP attempts to control big private enterprises via subsuming employees there into its party system, as its managerial slogan in the cultural industries indicates: 'control the big, let go the small' (O'Conner and Gu 2012: 4), it is hard to find large numbers of Party members in the internet industries. For example, according to one of CCP's official magazines *Oriental Outlook*, only 9 internet companies in Beijing had organised Party Committees until 2011, and there were only 2,680 Party members in all internet companies in Beijing, who were mostly in Baidu and Sina. Most of these members joined the Party after 2010.<sup>17</sup> In other words, large numbers of internet workers are non-Party members. As most internet workers are based in private enterprises, they do not have family members in the bureaucratic capitalist class.

Just as many cultural workers have relatively high levels of education (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010), internet workers have high levels of professional or technological skills. Most workers are college-educated with low levels of political authority, as they are non-Party members. They earn high salaries among people in the middle class location, as most of them are highly skilled. As I stated earlier, it is hard to evaluate internet workers' location in the middle class with any sophistication using the very sparse data on income. The data suggest that the internet workers occupy an inferior position

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<sup>15</sup> GRlib 2013

<sup>16</sup> Sina Economy 2013

<sup>17</sup> *Oriental Outlook* 2013

to SOE workers and civil servants, but this does not indicate that these workers have an inferior location in the Chinese social structure. Internet workers still occupy more privileged locations than those in working class locations. In other words, most internet workers tend to occupy the lower position in the middle class.

The special location of the internet workers in the social hierarchy then answers a question here: why focus on the internet workers when there are others in the lower middle class and the working class? Some points were addressed earlier to answer this question: the internet industries are a big and growing set of industries, and the large group of people working there have not been studied. Another point is addressed here: internet workers are different from other Chinese middle class members. Both Chen (2002) and Anagnost (2008) define the Chinese middle class as a group of people who have a high educational level, receive good pay, have particular consumption habits, and live comfortably. Some of these features are shared by many internet workers, such as high educational level, but some of the internet workers do not have comfortable lives. Bian (2002) suggests that the Chinese middle class do not share a commonly recognised image of the middle classes in the advanced capitalist societies – ‘a stable lifestyle, mainstream values, and active political participation’ (p.97-98). Bian describes the Chinese middle class as a group of people who have an unstable life; who are without the middle-class identity and political motivations to fight for a civil society. This general characterisation of the Chinese middle class is not entirely shared by internet workers: they do have a political motivation to fight for a better China, although they suffer an unstable life. I will explain this political motivation and activity later, in Chapter Seven, where I discuss the internet workers’ acts of negotiation with and resistance to the state and firms.

Put simply, internet workers are distinctive. They share common features with other middle class workers in China, but they also have particular characteristics. For example, most of them have good education, and some receive good pay, as other people in the middle class do. However, some of them have a consciousness and act relating to politics, through negotiation with and resistance to the state and firms regarding the low quality of working life. I will further explain this unique political motivation in Chapters Seven and Eight. Here, the key point is that internet workers are an important part of the Chinese lower middle class.

In the cultural industries, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010) point out that the current ‘middle class problem’ of creative workers is their insecure and unstable working conditions, such as dropping in and out of temporary and permanent employment. This aspect of creative work has been conceptualised as proletarianisation, which highlights the increasingly difficult working conditions of the middle class. Cohen (1978) explicitly points out that a

proletarian refers to a person who needs to obtain his means of living by selling his labour power, rather than one who lacks the means of production. It is possible for a proletarian to own certain means of production, but this ownership is useful only when he places it in the capitalist's service. Put in another way, the proletarian still needs to sell his labour power in order to support his life, even though he owns certain means of production. Wright (1976) shows the proletarianisation process of white-collar workers, which emphasises the deterioration of white-collar employees' working conditions, along with the expansion of the group. He interprets that the working conditions of white-collar workers is deteriorating; that this group of people tend to be classed as proletarian.

This is certainly true in the case of Chinese internet workers. As I explained above, internet workers seem to be more privileged than most workers in the working class, such as the large number of peasant workers, because of their better education and higher skills. But they obviously do not occupy powerful positions in contemporary Chinese society. The working conditions in the industries, which I will illustrate in the empirical part of this study, from Chapter Four to Chapter Six, show the deterioration of the quality of their working lives. Internet workers own certain means of production, such as professional and technical skills, but this ownership is only helpful when they place it in the capitalists' service. Ownership does not provide them with a privileged position in the middle class; on the contrary, they face the same poor working conditions as the working class.

Internet workers, like the middle class in most social hierarchies, suffer precarious and uncertain work status. Most of them experience economic pressure, because of their precarious work status, although their pay is higher than that of people at the bottom of social hierarchies, such as peasants. Qiu (2009) points out that since most necessities for Chinese urban life, such as education, health care and housing, have become privatised and commercialised, millions of workers from diverse backgrounds have to share common experiences of precariousness and uncertainty. He marks the three pillars of urban China: education, health care and housing, as the new 'three mountains' (p.239) for millions of ordinary workers in contemporary Chinese society.

The workers in this research also have the 'three mountains' on their shoulders, as most of them live in big cities, where most internet companies are based.<sup>18</sup> It then becomes incredibly hard for these workers to buy houses,

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<sup>18</sup> Among the top ten internet companies in the Chinese market, seven of them are based in Beijing (Baidu, Sohu, Ctrip, Dangdang, Sina, Changyou, Wanmei), one is based in Shanghai (SNDA), one is based in Shenzhen (Tencent), and one is based in

or guarantee their children's education and families' health care, because of the household registration (*hukou*) in big cities. The household registration (*hukou*) in China relates to people's work and life in varied ways, such as education, health care, housing, work and social benefits. For example, the household registration in Beijing (*Beijing hukou*) is quite an attractive benefit for all workers in Beijing, as it allows people to purchase houses in Beijing, to drive cars with Beijing license plates, to have priority in terms of their children's education, to have enhanced pensions, etc. But as quotas are limited, millions of workers, including some internet workers, do not have the household registration in Beijing (*Beijing hukou*), which leads to a lower quality of life.

According to Wright (1997), this is the general problem of the middle class, who sell their labour power as they lack the means of production, whilst they do not regard themselves as the working class. Under the movement towards globalisation, precarious and uncertain work and life status are shared by workers in different social contexts, both in socialism and capitalism. The severe economic pressure faced by Chinese internet workers is shared by workers in Western societies, as it becomes a general problem of the middle class, to use Wright's terms. But the Chinese case is special because of the exploitation issue in these precarious and risky experiences. Qiu (2009: 12-13) argues that the neo-Weberian approach is the way to understand the lives of Chinese workers at the lower end of the class spectrum, because it conceptualises the differences between classes as 'a stratified distribution of life chances' (p.13). Based on this Weberian understanding, I argue that the neo-Marxian approach to exploitation, which combines both Weberian and Marxian aspects, helps us to understand the inequalities between different classes in the Chinese context in a better way, especially in terms of understanding the workers' severe economic pressures.

Both the Weberian and neo-Marxian approaches criticise the inequalities between different classes, whilst the central difference between these approaches is the neo-Marxian approach highlights the unequal ownership of resources in the production process. In the Chinese internet industries, because of the complicated relationships between the state, internet companies and workers, the corruption problem and state allocation of resources enable the bureaucratic capitalists' well-being to be based on the efforts of the middle class (including workers in the internet industries) and the working class (including the low-end workers in Qiu's research), which will be explained in the empirical chapters in this thesis. Evidently, the debates of exploitation, which are adopted in this research to explain the internet workers' low quality of working life, need more sophisticated work, which will be carried out in the next section. Thus, the internet industries become a useful field

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Hangzhou (Netease). All of them have subsidiary companies in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Hangzhou.

through which to discuss the exploitation of workers in a Chinese context, and to apply the mechanistic concept of exploitation to understand the subjective experiences of workers there. It is worth asking whether the Marxian concept of exploitation, which was raised in relation to industrial capitalism, is still valuable in the high-tech era, and to what extent we can use the concept to understand subjective working life experiences.

However, proletarianisation of the lower middle class – ‘the problem of the Chinese lower middle class’ in this research – does not only refer to the difficult working conditions in the internet industries, but also the collaborative activities between internet workers and people in the lower middle class and the working class. Internet workers strive to open a free online space for ordinary Chinese people to speak out with their productions, which I discuss in Chapter Seven. Most of the ordinary Chinese people here are in the lower middle class and working class, and need a free space to speak out, in order to protect themselves from the inequalities and injustice in their work and lives. Internet workers collaborate with these people in the form of initiating online activities to protect them; surveilling the state by commenting on its acts; pushing the state to pay attention to the inequalities and injustice in these people’s work and lives; and even pushing the state to self-reform. These are acts of agency which I talk about in Chapters Seven and Eight.

Because of the collaboration between internet workers and people in the lower middle class and the working class, internet workers tend to stand much closer with these ordinary Chinese people than those in the upper middle class (such as workers in SOEs and civil servants) and the bureaucratic capitalist class. Internet workers tend to stand with the working class as they suffer from the same inequalities and injustice caused by the upper middle class and the bureaucratic capitalist class. The activities which result in the inequalities and injustice are understood from the neo-Marxist approach as the process of exploitation, which will be explained later in the next section.

Here, by showing the collaboration between the internet workers and the ordinary Chinese people, I intend to enrich the term of proletarianisation by evaluating the agency of the lower middle class in a Chinese context. The proletarianisation problem here does not only show the difficult working conditions, which are nearly at the proletarian level, but also shows the collaboration between the lower middle class and the working class in a Chinese context. Put in another way, ‘the lower middle class problem’ in this research, proletarianisation, refers to the difficult working conditions of the internet workers (from Chapter Four to Chapter Six) on the one side, and acts of agency of these workers (in Chapter Seven), which indicate the close relationships between the lower middle class and the working class, on the other.

Therefore, the class problem of internet workers becomes an important issue to be addressed in order to understand the quality of their working lives. As I suggested earlier, the unique social class of internet workers indicates the exploitation problem in this lower middle class and ultimately results in the deteriorating working conditions of these workers, though there are other mechanisms of power dynamics influencing these subjective experiences, which I will discuss in the empirical section. This exploitation problem is important for understanding the quality of working life in this research and I explain it below.

## 2.3 Marx on work and exploitation

The core of Marx's work on labour is the concept of exploitation. The 'classical' Marxist understanding of exploitation focuses on the surplus value produced by one group, labourers, that is taken by another group, capitalists. Marx argued that surplus value could be increased in two ways: by prolonging the working day in order to create absolute surplus value, and by improving technologies in the conditions of production in order to create relative surplus value (Callinicos 1983:116-117). Absolute surplus value refers to the surplus value accumulated via increasing the surplus labour time. And relative surplus value refers to the surplus value accumulated via reducing labourers' necessary labour time corresponding to the surplus value extracted. Cohen (1995) argues the capitalist exploitation in Marxist understanding is rooted in 'an unfair distribution of rights in external things' (p.119). Workers' labour efforts are appropriated because they do not equally share the external world, especially the means of production. Put in another way, Marx's concept of exploitation identifies 'inequalities in material well-being that are generated by inequalities in access to resources of various sorts' (Wright 1996: 696). Wright (1996) also points out that these inequalities in material well-being are not simply generated by 'what people have' (p.696), but also by 'what people do with what they have' (ibid.). Wright identifies further three conditions that constitute Marx's concept of exploitation:

(i) The material welfare of one group of people causally depends on the material deprivations of another.

(ii) The causal relation in (i) involves the asymmetrical exclusion of the exploited from access to certain productive resources.

(iii) The causal mechanism that translates exclusion (ii) into differential welfare (i) involves the appropriation of the fruits of labour of the exploited by those who control the relevant productive resources' (ibid.).

Thus, as Wright (1996) concludes, the distinctive issue in Marx's analysis of exploitation is that the welfare of one group of people, exploiters, depends not simply on their control of assets and resources in (ii), but also upon the appropriation of efforts of the exploited as (iii) indicates. Put simply, exploitation as a traditional Marxist term does not only refer to the relations between people and means of production, but also explores relations between different groups of people and classes. There is a traditional Marxist term relating to these class relations: alienation.<sup>19</sup> Alienation refers to that a person is alienated from his humanity because being a mechanistic part of a social class. According to Marx, workers are separated from the products they produce and lack the ability to determine their destinies, because they are directed to goals that are set up by capitalists, who own the means of production, in order to extract the maximal amount of surplus value from workers. This concept implies not only that certain people's labour efforts are appropriated by others, but also that their lives are controlled by others (Burawoy and Wright 2002: 472).

This could be related to other traditional Marxist terms, such as domination and subordination. Burawoy and Wright (2002) explain domination as a situation in which some people control the activities of others because they own and control productive resources (p.472). Wright (2009) explains domination as the ability to control others' activities, such as the exploiter controlling the activities of the exploited. He claims that all exploitation involves certain kinds of domination, whereas not all domination involves exploitation. Cohen (1978) explains the relation of subordination with three principles: 'They [Subordinate] all produce for others who do not produce for them; within the production process they are commonly subject to the authority of the superior, who is not subject to their authority; their livelihoods depend on their relations with their superiors, they tend to be poorer than the latter' (p.69).

On the one hand, all these terms surrounding Marx's central work on exploitation demonstrate the importance of examining class relations and class locations; on the other hand, they lead to a question: did Marx think that capitalist exploitation was unjust? Cohen (1995), Callinicos (1989) and Roemer (1982) have answered this question by thoroughly examining Marx's

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<sup>19</sup> According to Burawoy and Wright (2002), the concept of alienation has a much broader sense. It often refers to a situation where one's life is controlled by impersonal forces, such as 'market'. In this sense, capitalists could also be understood as being alienated in capitalism since their lives maybe controlled by 'alien' forces, such as market. See footnote on page 472. A sophisticated theoretical work on alienation and creative workers' experiences could be found in Hesmondhalgh and Baker's book '*Creative Labour*' (2010, chapter two). But the concept of alienation is not central to my thesis. I put it here to further understand Marx's explanation of exploitation, especially exploitation in capitalism.

work. Callinicos (1989), along with Marx, condemns capitalism for its oppressions, unfreedom, and injustices. Referring to the central concern of the Marxist term capitalist exploitation, he states that 'the appearance of free exchange between worker and employer is nullified by the unequal distribution of the productive forces' (2000: p.68). In other words, he regards all exchange activities between workers and employers as unjust exploitation, even though some exchange does not involve money, because of the unequal ownership of productive forces.

Cohen (1995) explicitly claims that 'Marx did think that capitalist exploitation was unjust' (p.195). He finds three issues in Marx's work to imply the unjustness of capitalist exploitation: '(1) workers are at the short end of an unequal distribution of means of production. A second is that (2) they are forced to work as others direct them to. And a third is that (3) they are forced to yield surplus product to others' (p.195-196). As quoted at the beginning of this section, Cohen (1995) argues that the exploited suffer injustice and do not have a fair share of the external world, because they are separated from physical productive resources. Put simply, Marx thought capitalist exploitation was unjust because of the unjust distribution of the means of production on the one side and the unjust extraction of surplus value on the other.

However, Marx's criticism of unjust capitalist exploitation does not go without any critique. Cohen (1995) points out that Marxists wrongfully affirm the thesis of self-ownership when representing exploitation as unjust. Instead, he argues that it is necessary to reject the thesis of self-ownership in order to represent exploitation as unjust.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, Roemer (1982) points out that Marxian exploitation mainly refers to capitalist exploitation; instead, he argues that it is essential to apply various materialist definitions of exploitation to different societies (see Roemer 1982, Chapter Seven). Thus, in the following section, I will introduce Roemer's argument that exploitation is unjust, based on various materialist definitions of exploitation in different societies, as well as introducing other sociologists' work.

## **2.4 Debates about exploitation**

Following Marx's work, many theorists have realised the importance of discussing injustice when considering exploitation, and regard injustice as central to understanding Marxist ideas of exploitation (Callinicos 2000, Roemer 1982, Cohen 1985, Wright 1996). Roemer (1982) creates a new theoretical device, the game-theoretic characterisation of capitalist exploitation, to clarify his criteria for understanding economic inequality as exploitation.

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<sup>20</sup> See Cohen 1995, Chapters Five and Six

According to Roemer (1982: 235-236), the game-theoretic characterisation of capitalist exploitation is superior to the Marxian traditional surplus value definition of exploitation. First, it specifies a new set of property relations in the 'alternative' – an alternative space he assumed in the game theory, that helps clarify exploitation. Second, it has an adequate generalisation of cases of heterogeneous labour and some non-produced factors. Third, it distinguishes between different kinds of exploitation, which is not possible in the Marxian surplus value definition. Based on this theoretical device, Roemer categorises different forms of exploitation in different systems of societies: in a feudal society, exploitation is based on inequalities generated by the unequal distribution of labour power assets; in a capitalist society, it is based on inequalities generated by the unequal distribution of alienable assets, such as the means of production; in a socialist society, exploitation is based on inequalities generated by the unequal distribution of inalienable assets, such as skills.<sup>21</sup>

Roemer (1982) pays particular attention to exploitation in existing socialism.<sup>22</sup> He claims that exploitation still exists in socialism, and that socialist exploitation, based on the inequality in ownership of skills, is socially necessary at a certain stage. The historical task of socialism is to eliminate capitalist exploitation, rather than socialist exploitation. However, Roemer, as a follower of Marx who devotes considerable efforts to explain Marx's work, still shows his ethical concern about socialist exploitation, by asking 'if a form of exploitation is socially necessary, what should one's attitude toward it be? Should its existence be endorsed?' (p.240). This piece of work directs my attention to concerns about exploitation in the Chinese internet industries: to what extent do we consider inequalities in the Chinese internet industries as exploitation? If exploitation is industrially and socially necessary, what should our attitudes towards it be? To what extent should we criticise it? Or should we dispute the notion of socially necessary exploitation? Could we argue that it is possible for exploitation not to be socially necessary?

Roemer answers these questions with reference to the level of 'social consciousness – how the people involved think' (p.248). He puts it thus: if the exploited fight against injustice, even though the revolution or rebellion is doomed to fail, the social necessity of the exploitation then should be questioned. Because of this, it would be morally wrong to accept a form of exploitation which seems to be socially necessary, without criticising it. I will answer these questions with some empirical data in Chapter Seven, where I will illuminate the internet workers' agency as a response to the exploitation. It might be argued that the exploitation of internet workers' labour efforts and skills are acceptable, because it is necessary for the rapid growth of the

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<sup>21</sup> See Roemer 1982, Chapter Seven

<sup>22</sup> See Roemer 1982, Chapter Eight

Chinese internet industries. This, to a certain extent, leads to the growth of the Chinese economy. But as Roemer points out, if the exploited – internet workers in this study – fight against such injustice, because the injustice results in the difficult working conditions, it thus would be arguable to state the notion of socially necessary exploitation. Put simply, the response from the internet workers towards the injustice in their working-life experiences, which is caused by exploitation, shows that the social necessity of the exploitation needs to be questioned.

Cohen (1995) argues that Roemer correctly states that exploitation is not based on natural injustice, but that he is incorrect to indicate that an unequal product flow is unjust 'only if it reflects an unjust initial asset distribution' (p.204). The work of exploitation needs to focus on the unjust exploitative allocation. This is because Roemer's work directs our interests to unjust asset distribution, which in Cohen's understanding is caused by the unjust product flow. As an alternative, Cohen states that it is necessary to focus on the 'injustice of an exploitative allocation' (p.207) rather than the 'injustice of the initial distribution' (ibid.), as the former generates the primary injustice that drives the latter to be unjust.

Wright (1985) criticises Roemer's work on exploitation because of the elimination of class relations in his analysis of injustice. For example, Wright states that Roemer fails to point out that unjust inequalities are created by 'real transfers from one actor to another' (p.74). According to Wright, Roemer fails to introduce the notion of dominance in his game-theory approach to exploitation. As an alternative, Wright defines exploitation as a process that contains both 'economic oppression' (ibid.) and the 'appropriation of the fruit of the labour of one class by another' (ibid.). As a criterion of exploitation, the benefits of the exploiter must depend on the work of the exploited. As quoted in the beginning of section 2.3, Wright restates the Marxian concept of exploitation with three conditions, which indicates a relationship in which the exploiting class depends upon the efforts of the exploited class for the reproduction of values.

Roemer's work represents a more sociological approach, and, by contrast, Wright builds his work upon the sociological approach and 'classical' Marxian approach, namely using a 'neo-Marxist approach'. It is Wright who points out the importance of discussing the problem of class in analysing exploitation and understanding modern social modes of production. He distinguishes his work from both the Weberian approach, which regards economic inequality as the result of relations of exclusion, and traditional Marxist approach, which centres on structural exploitation and domination. He emphasises the necessity of using an integrated analytical approach, which consists the micro level model of stratification approach and the macro level models of the Weberian approach and the traditional Marxist approach (see section 2.1), to understand

the class problem. This then leads his discussion to the exploitation problem in different social modes of production.

### **2.4.1 Social modes of production**

Wright (1976: 28-29) claims that exploitation needs to be discussed within varied modes of production, as different forms of exploitation correspond to different modes of production. For example, workers in industrial capitalism are exploited in a way that is distinguished from workers in the earliest capitalism: on the one hand, they cannot control the labour process as producers in cottage industries did, because they are gathered in factories; on the other hand, the labour force is deskilled and the production process is fragmented, because of the introduction of new technologies in factories. Meanwhile, capital is not a commodity in existing socialism as it is traded in capitalism. Burawoy and Wright (2002: 478-480) distinguish existing socialism from Marxist socialism by using the example of Soviet communism, which is entitled 'state socialism'. They claim that state socialism refers to a central planned system: a class of 'planners' take charge of the 'redistribution of surplus', which is extracted from a class of 'direct producers'. This extraction is legitimised in the name of 'the superior knowledge of the planner about the needs of the people' (p.479).

Roemer (1982) divides modes of production into four categories, based on the different forms of exploitation: feudal exploitation, which is based on injustice generated by unequal distribution of labour power assets, in which lords and serfs are the main classes; capitalist exploitation, which is based on injustice generated by unequal distribution of alienable assets, in which relations between bourgeoisie and proletariat are the main class relations; status exploitation, which exists in the existing socialism, a historical stage between capitalism and socialism; and socialist exploitation, which is based on injustice generated by unequal distribution of inalienable assets, in which experts and workers are the main classes. In status exploitation, exploiters control labour power and property because of their high status in the social structure. This is different from the injustice generated by either means of production or skills, and this is the Weberian approach which Wright is against.

Wright (1985) agrees with Roemer that skill-based exploitation would exist in a Marxist socialist society, and it could only be eliminated in Marxist communism. But Wright indicates that Roemer's concept of status exploitation is problematic in two ways: first, it is not necessarily related to production at all; and second, it is hard to distinguish it from feudal exploitation. As an alternative, Wright (1985) points out a post-capitalist mode of production that exists between the stages of capitalism and socialism, statism, which is based

on organization asset. In this mode of production, bureaucrats and managers occupy the class location of the exploiter.

This is agreed by Callinicos (1983), who interprets that existing socialism is 'bureaucratic state capitalism' (p.183), as the working class is exploited by 'a state bureaucracy which competes with its Western counterparts' (ibid.). In the context of the Soviet Union, socialism, or 'bureaucratic state capitalism', did not *self-emancipate* the working class, as it claimed. The followers of the Soviet Union, such as China, reproduce this mode of bureaucratic state capitalism in their societies. Callinicos (2004) further explains his arguments in his later work. He states that the existing socialist societies are 'state bureaucratic socialist, combin[ing] the statist and socialist modes of production' (p.223). This includes multiple occurrences of exploitation based on the unequal ownership of varied resources: 'skills, organisational assets, means of production, labour-power' (p.225).

This exploiter class, which allies bureaucrats and capitalists, has been acknowledged by some theorists who work on modern Chinese society. I have demonstrated such research in the last chapter, in order to build up the class structure in contemporary Chinese society and clarify the social class of internet workers. Here, I continue my argument from the last chapter, based on Wright's and Callinicos' work, recognising the social mode of production in modern China as bureaucratic state capitalism or bureaucratic state socialism. The bureaucratic capitalist class, which I defined in section 1.2.1, where I talked about the Chinese class structure, occupies the location of exploiter class, with ownership of the means of production, organisational assets, and political authority. This class accumulates huge wealth by controlling labour power and the skills of the middle class and the working class. This activity of appropriation then generates inequality and injustice between the bureaucratic capitalist class, the middle class, and the working class. I will now explain this special social mode of production and analyse how the exploiter class appropriates the labour power and skills of the exploited classes, in order to clarify how and why internet workers, as the lower middle class facing the problem of proletarianisation, suffer from injustice and inequalities.

## **2.5 Exploitation in the Chinese context**

I have outlined the class structure in section 2.2.2, where I recognise the emergence of the bureaucratic capitalist class and the polarisation of the middle class: the lower middle class (such as workers in private enterprises), and the upper middle class (such as workers in SOEs and civil servants). In a sense, the upper middle class in China dominate the lower middle class and the working class, because of their family background. As Figure 2.3 indicates,

good jobs in China not only depend on education levels and skills, but also on people's family backgrounds. Thus, family background excludes the lower middle class from good jobs. As this research adopts a neo-Marxist approach, which balances the Weberian approach and traditional Marxist approach, such exclusion arising from the social status results in inequalities between classes. However, as Wright (2009) stresses, not all domination involves exploitation. In the context of contemporary China, it is hard to claim that the upper middle class accumulates wealth by appropriating the labour efforts of the lower middle class or the working class. Thus, I argue that the Chinese middle class is polarising, as the upper middle class dominates the lower middle class, which faces the problem of proletarianisation. Here, I will analyse the relationship between these different classes, in order to explore the issue of exploitation in the Chinese context.

Some researchers have analysed unjust relations between different social classes in China. For example, Zhao (2003) discusses the inequality between urban middle class and rural peasants. She says the following about their very different access to the media: 'While the rising business and urban middle classes are increasingly using the media to articulate their interests and shape state policies toward their preferred ends, the rally cries of tens of thousands of Chinese workers and farmers in their struggles for economic and social justice, for example, have simply fallen on deaf ears in the Chinese media system' (p.63). Zhao states that the rising business and urban middle classes increasingly enjoy better quality of life, such as gaining more prestige, better education, better health care; but workers and farmers, by contrast, are still struggling at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Moreover, Zhao (2007) explains the uneven regional development by quoting Hu, Zhou and Li's work (2001), which depicts China as 'one country, four worlds' (p.102) because of the fragmentation and polarization of 'class, region, gender, ethnicity and other cleavages' (p.101). Here, Zhao highlights inequalities between classes due to their different opportunities of accessing certain life chances.

Zhang (2008: 9-10) points out the inequality between the higher classes and lower classes in post-reform China: the privatisation of SOEs enabled the cadres and capitalists to become rich, whilst causing cuts in public social welfare to balance the deficit resulting from fiscal decentralisation, and also caused millions of ordinary workers to be laid off; the privatisation of village enterprises enabled the expansion of the petty bourgeoisie, resulting in millions of peasants losing their lands and having to move to big cities as peasant workers. Zhang then states that the high cost of social development in China fell on ordinary people.

Sun (2002) argues that contemporary Chinese society is polarised into the privileged class, which powerfully imposes state policies in order to benefit itself, and the vulnerable class, whose benefits are sacrificed to favour the

privileged class. Zhang (2000: 35-38) points out that the social problems of modern China are centred on the emergence of the new advantaged class (the bureaucratic capitalist class in my definition) and the new disadvantaged class (such as retired workers, laid-off workers and peasant workers), as well as the large gap between these classes.

Andreas (2008) points out that China's Gini coefficient – a system measures that the inequality amongst values of a frequency distribution, such as the international income inequality, and the range is from 0, which indicates absolute equality, to 1, which indicates absolute inequality – was amongst the lowest rates in the world in 1978 (the figure was 0.22), which indicated China as an equal country. But this figure increased to 0.496 in 2006; higher than that of the USA and nearly amongst the highest rates in the world. He blames this high inequality on the unequal distribution of resources between regions and between rural and urban areas.

Some social tensions are generated by such inequalities between various social classes, such as the crisis of social trust depicted in Yan's work (2009: 286). He argues that these inequalities have led to a crisis of social trust in contemporary Chinese society. This crisis involves several elements: people do not trust the market because of unsafe goods and poor services; they do not trust strangers; they do not trust friends and even relatives; they distrust law enforcement officers, the law, and legal institutions. At the time of writing this thesis, the recent Hong Kong milk powder restriction accurately reflected the crisis of social trust in mainland China: in 2008, six babies died after drinking milk laced with the industrial chemical melamine in mainland China. Some big local milk brands were reported to have added the industrial chemical melamine to their milk products, which caused a crisis of social trust in Chinese society – people did not trust the law and the market. Since then, large numbers of parents in mainland China chose to buy milk powder in Hong Kong or from Western countries, which caused a shortage of milk powder in the Hong Kong market. As a result, the Hong Kong government issued a new restriction on milk powder on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2013, in order to limit unlicensed exports of powdered infant formula. Even though the central government in mainland China has assured people that most Chinese brands of milk powder are now safe, large numbers of Chinese parents still distrust the local market and rush to the Hong Kong market and other global milk powder markets.

Researchers generally relate the class inequality in China to the unequal distribution of economic and social resources amongst classes. For example, Bian (2002) claims that the state workers (workers in party-controlled enterprises after the privatisation of SOEs) have a privileged position in society because the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) controls the economic resources, such as oil, banking and telecommunication. Sun (2002) blames the inequality between the privileged class and the vulnerable class on the

unequal distribution of state properties, economic resources, and skills during the economic reform in the beginning of 1990s. Duckett (2001) points out that state departments started to set up profit-seeking businesses by investing state resources in the capitalist market in the 1990s. This investment accumulated capital for the bureaucratic capitalist class, rather than benefiting the entire society, such as people in the lower classes. This then generated the inequality between the upper and lower classes.

Wright (2006) points out that socialism is an economic structure whereby the entire society owns the means of production and social power allocates resources. By contrast, statism, which he argues is contemporary 'socialism', is an economic structure where the means of production are owned by the state, and resources are allocated by the exercise of state power. The Chinese economic structure, as I stated in the last section, is neither complete socialism nor absolute statism. Instead, it is bureaucratic state capitalism (similar to Dickson's term 'crony communism' or 'crony capitalism', which I stressed in Chapter One, because all concepts emphasise the close relationships between government officials and capitalists), where the means of production are owned by the bureaucratic capitalist class, and resources are allocated through the exercise of both state power and economic power. The bureaucratic capitalist class is dominant, because it owns means of production and it has the power (both the state power and economic power in Wright's terms) to allocate resources.

The discussion above guides the concept of exploitation in the Chinese context to the question of ownership of varied resources, such as labour power, skills, and means of production, and towards the question of political authority in the allocation of these resources. The working class in contemporary Chinese society sells labour power in order to survive, as their livelihoods are not guaranteed by society. The bureaucratic capitalist class owns the means of production, such as factories/firms, raw materials and telecommunication, and has the political authority to allocate these means of production (see section 2.2.2 about the class structure in China). For example, executives in the party-controlled enterprises (the SOEs in contemporary Chinese society) and government departments own the main raw materials and economic resources, such as oil and telecommunication. Officials in the bureaucratic capitalist class with certain political power (similar to Wright's state power) and capitalists with certain economic power allocate these raw materials and economic resources. But what does the middle class own, and what are the relationships between the middle class and these other two classes?

According to a number of commentators, most people in the middle class have high skill levels, such as the internet workers with professional skills and technical skills, but, as I argued in section 2.2.2, these skills are only effective when placed in the capitalist's service. Some people in the middle class own

certain resources. For example, some internet workers own company stocks, but this does not give them any managerial power; and the amount of the stock is so small that it is hard to help workers to survive. Although some people in the middle class own certain means of production, generally, most of them, especially people in the lower middle class, lack the power to allocate these resources, and they still need to sell their skills to survive.

As I have discussed in the last section, the Weberian approach of exploitation understands the inequality between classes as the result of the unequal distribution of resources. By contrast, the neo-Marxist approach relates the inequality to the production process, where the exploiting class appropriates the effort of the exploited class because of the ownership of the means of production. Here, the bureaucratic capitalist class dominates the working class and the middle class, because of the ownership of the means of production, and the power to allocate these resources. It is the bureaucratic capitalist class, where officials and capitalists gain benefits from corruption and bribery, which appropriate the fruits of other classes. Due to this, the wealth of the bureaucratic capitalist class is based on the labour efforts of the working class, who contribute labour power, and the middle class, who contribute skills.

The picture then becomes clear: the bureaucratic capitalist class own the means of production, and appropriate labour power of the working class and skills of the middle class, by having both political power and economic power to allocate the resources; the middle class owns skills, some of them own certain means of production, but lack the power to allocate the resource; instead, people in the location need to exchange their skills in the capitalist market in order to survive; the working class owns labour power and sells it to survive. The significant issue here is that the bureaucratic capitalist class builds upon the appropriation of the efforts of the middle class and the working class. This then becomes the special model of exploitation in a Chinese context.

However, exploitation is a macro level concept that emphasises dynamics between classes, rather than describing personal experiences. As Wright points out, at the centre of exploitation is the causal relationship between the welfare of one group of people and the material deprivations of another. It is the dominating class, which controls relevant productive resources, that appropriates the fruits of the dominated class. Due to this, it is difficult to use the concept of exploitation to analyse the micro level experiences, such as internet workers' working experiences. In this research, exploitation is the mechanism for understanding why the working conditions in the internet industries are deteriorating and why the internet workers suffer. It is also the concept to structurally understand 'the problem of the middle class', proletarianisation. Therefore, 'the Chinese model of exploitation' as I have described it here is useful for understanding the quality of working life in the

internet industries. Based on such an understanding, in the following section, I build a model that contains issues relevant to the working life in order to evaluate the quality.

## **2.6 A model for evaluating working life beyond exploitation**

As I indicated above, the framework of exploitation is a mechanism to evaluate workers' experiences in the Chinese internet industries. As it is a structural concept, which focuses on the structural activities between different classes, it cannot be directly applied to subjective experiences. Therefore, in this section, I develop a model with concepts that exemplify injustice surrounding working life, in order to evaluate workers' subjective experiences in a theoretical way.

Some theorists emphasise the importance of evaluating workers' self-understanding of their subjective experiences. Ezzy (1997) for example, argues that workers' self-understandings link 'pre-existing cultural discourses, the structuring effect of a person's social location, and the individual's creative use of these resources' (p.440). Workers' self-understandings become an important perspective to approach the quality of work. Banks and Hesmondhalgh (2009) also explain the necessity of conceptualising creative labourers' subjective experiences to understand creative industries. They point out that creative work is highly appreciated because it provides good rewards, fame, autonomy, and chances for self-expression. As Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010) claim, self-expression, autonomy and individualization in creative work mean that the 'taste of freedom can be most deliciously savoured' (p.417). These experiences are mostly subjective, and can only be collected via workers' self-understanding. Thus, the vivid working-life experiences in this study can also be analysed via addressing certain issues that relate to workers' self-understanding of their subjective experiences. Therefore, it is important to build up a model with issues relating to workers' self-understanding of subjective working-life experiences to assess the quality of working life in Chinese internet industries.

Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010) develop a model of good and bad work, as illustrated in Figure 2.9, based on Blauner's model of alienated and unalienated work, to evaluate creative labourers' subjective experiences. In this model, they particularly focus on concepts of 'autonomy, interest and involvement, sociality, self-esteem, self-realisation, work-life balance and security' (p.36) to evaluate whether it is possible for creative work to be considered 'good work'. Moreover, they regard the 'social and cultural value of

products' as another important dimension of good work. Green (2006) regards 'skill, effort, autonomy, pay, and security' (p.150) as the main ingredients of work quality. Building on these discussions, which assert that subjective experiences in creative work are important, I develop a theoretical model for my research, which brings together the concepts of work effort, security, and autonomy, to analyse internet workers' subjective experiences.

<b>Good work</b>	<b>Bad work</b>
<b>Good pay and working hours, high levels of safety</b>	<b>Poor pay and working hours, low levels of safety</b>
<b>Autonomy</b>	<b>Powerlessness</b>
<b>Interest, involvement</b>	<b>Boredom</b>
<b>Sociality</b>	<b>Isolation</b>
<b>Self-esteem</b>	<b>low- self-esteem &amp; shame</b>
<b>Self-realisation</b>	<b>Frustrated development</b>
<b>Work-life balance</b>	<b>Overwork</b>
<b>Security</b>	<b>Risk</b>
<b>Excellent products</b>	<b>Low-quality products</b>
<b>Products that contribute to the common good</b>	<b>Products that fail to contribute to the well-being of others</b>

**Figure 2.9: Hesmondhalgh and Baker's model of good and bad work**

**Source: summary by Hesmondhalgh and Baker of their model (2010)**

Green (2006: 44-47) points out that little attention has been paid to the impact of work effort on the quality of work life and there is only some psychological research focusing on it (Warr 1987, Berg and Schalk 1997). He argues that work effort needs to be understood as a key element for evaluating the quality of work life. Green (2006) regards work hours as an important component of work effort, which is equal to work intensity – the intensity of labour effort at work. Work intensity is conflated with concepts of efficiency, individual performance, and skills, whereas work effort could only be measured by relative effort and effort changes. Individual performance refers

to 'the extent to which an individual performs contractual tasks' (p.47), which are equal to the productivity of an individual. An individual's productivity could be evaluated by relating to workers' skills and efficiency. As Green (2006: 47-48) interprets, an individual's performance is efficient if it can be improved by 'raising either skill or work intensity or both' (p.47). Both relative effort and effort changes are closely related to individuals' self-report or their perception of their own effort. Relative effort refers to some norm related to judgements of work effort, which are set up by researchers and have 'fixed effect' – change little over time. Effort change based on people's self-report of their own changes in terms of effort levels at different times. In the case of Chinese internet workers, I argue that work effort could be partly measured by work intensity and work hours. Work hours are measured to explore work overload in the industries, and work intensity refers to how much labour effort workers make during their time at work. Because of the characteristic of internet work, it is possible that some workers do not work overtime, whilst making a large labour effort during their working hours. This then demonstrates the high work intensity in the internet industries. Put simply, work intensity in the daily work of the internet industries needs to be examined as an important feature of work effort in the industries.

Meanwhile, Green (2006: 63-64) discusses pay as another component of work effort, because high pay usually is the reward for high work effort. However, this might be wrong in the case of the Chinese internet industries: workers with high work effort do not always receive reasonable rewards, which I talk about with empirical data in Chapter Four. It is possible to have a job in the Chinese internet industries, with unequal pay levels for hard work. Thus, pay should be taken as a factor by which to evaluate work effort in the internet industries.

## **2.6.1 Security in work**

Green (2006) claims that workplace uncertainty is harmful to the quality of working life, in which continuity and progress of employment is the centre. He understands job insecurity as 'the loss of welfare that comes from uncertainty at work' (p.130). Green points out that the loss of welfare to a certain extent refers to workers' income stream, which includes current income and uncertain future wages for the work. Work is insecure when something causes a decrease in current income, such as cutting wages, or makes future income uncertain, such as losing an expected promotion or even a job. Therefore, Green connects work security with workers' income. Here, Green's work is useful to understand internet workers' unequal pay and promotions. This research then develops some questions to analyse the empirical data based

on the discussion of uncertainty in Green's work which I have outlined here: how often do workers change their jobs? To what extent do they have the chance to get promotion? How much opportunity do they have in terms of wage increase?

Some research on freelance workers draws attention to the precarious working conditions of freelancers by focusing on forces that lead to insecurity (Fraser and Gold 2001, Ekinsmyth 2002). For example, Ekinsmyth (2002) shows factors that generate insecure working conditions for freelancers: 'uncertain work and pay, lack of employment benefits, difficulties of taking on commitments, and the difficulties of working at home' (p.178-179). Ross (2008) relates these issues to the accumulation of capitalism: he blames post-industrial capitalism accumulating capitals by generating benefits from 'vulnerability, instability and desperation' (p.44). He understands insecurity in work as a precarious working condition in modern society. He argues that research on the quality of working life needs to focus on precarious working conditions. It is a problem that is shared by workers in both low-end services and high-end knowledge industries. Precarious working conditions contain 'the temporary or intermittent nature of their [workers'] contracts, the uncertainty of their future, and their isolation from any protective framework of social insurance' (p.41). Ross (2008) blames precarity and insecurity on post-industrial capitalism, because such capitalism builds upon the former – the precarious and insecure working conditions of workers. Unstable working conditions then become a basis to generate benefits in contemporary capitalism. Put simply, insecure working conditions indicate injustice surrounding certain working conditions. Thus, security needs to be understood as an important issue to evaluate the quality of working life.

Building upon these theorists' work, some questions corresponding to tensions between the state, businesses and workers are addressed to examine the empirical experiences in the next few chapters: how stable is work in the internet industries? Can a stable future, which is secured by social insurance, be expected?

## **2.6.2 Autonomy as self-exploitation?**

According to Kim (2009), Theodor Adorno is the pioneer of research in the field of autonomy. He defines autonomy as the relationship of art to capitalist production and accumulation. Adorno argues that this concept is not only useful for describing the growing culture industry, but also important to be a critical reflection of the society. Kim (2009) agrees with Adorno's views about the significance of valuing autonomous art, which is 'a form of resistance to the political and economic effects of capitalism on cultural production' (p.136) on

the one side; and helps critical theorists observe ‘the objective conditions that led to the rise of non-autonomous forms of culture’ (ibid.) on the other. According to Kim (2009), research on the definition and explanation of autonomy has varied in different contexts: from ‘a synonym for independence or self-determination (Koivisto & Valiverrone 1996), to the structural relationship between ideology (and, by extension, culture) and the economy in capitalist society (Johnson 2006, Sparks 1989), to the practice of journalism in relationship to the state and/or corporate pressures (Craig 2004)’ (p.128) [and probably much more]. This diverse discussion of autonomy highlights the importance of ‘independence’ and ‘freedom’ in terms of both culture and people’s practices. Thus, autonomy today is not only about art, as it was in Adorno’s original research, but also relates to people’s independent professional practices and their freedom in society and organisations.

Critical theorists in cultural production (Banks 2007, Hesmondhalgh 2006, Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010) explore the question of cultural workers’ autonomy in their recent research. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010) provide a sophisticated framework for understanding creative workers’ autonomy in cultural industries. This framework is borrowed here and applied in later chapters to internet workers’ subjective experiences of autonomy.

Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010: 40) admit that it is impossible to have total autonomy, to be entirely free from any constraint or determinant, in one’s life. They explicitly state their fundamental claim about autonomy as follows: ‘we use it to refer to ‘self-determination’, but we recognise that autonomy cannot simply be understood as freedom from others’ (p.40). Autonomy in their research then is divided into two parts: workplace autonomy and creative autonomy. By workplace autonomy, they refer to ‘the degree of self-determination that individual workers or groups of workers have within a certain work situation’ (ibid.). And creative autonomy in their definition refers to ‘the degree to which “art”, knowledge, symbol-making and so on can and/or should operate independently of the influence of other determinants’ (ibid.).

Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010: 39-41) state that only some work in cultural industries provide high levels of autonomy, which is shown in Mike Sosteric’s empirical research (1996) about workplace autonomy in a Canadian nightclub. Sosteric finds out that employees in the nightclub enjoyed high level of autonomy. They were, for example, allowed to develop their own personalised service styles. This high level of autonomy resulted in low turnover rate, job security and good relationships between customers and employees, although this autonomy was later decreased by a new manager, which resulted in employee resistance. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010: 40-41) point out a problem that relates to this workplace autonomy: ‘Is workplace autonomy really better understood as a mechanism to distract workers’ attention from the “real” exploitation and alienation lying beneath the

surface of their working life?' (p.43). This question corresponds to the recent research on self-exploitation in cultural industries (du Gay 1998, McRobbie 2000, Ursell 2000).

Wright (1996: 697) points out that in the production process exploiters try to moderate their domination in order to elicit consent from the exploited. Some governmentality theorists tend to discuss this indirect way of management with the concept of self-exploitation (McRobbie 2000, Ursell 2000). It is a concept that criticises the autonomy offered in cultural production at the price of suffering experiences of overtime, low pay, and high risks and uncertainty. For example, McRobbie (2000) believes that firms/managers authorise some degree of creative freedom and space to cultural workers and train workers in 'self-exploitation' or 'self-management' in order to control them. In other words, she argues that state and firms manage cultural workers through discourses of self-exploitation, instead of simple domination. Banks and Hesmondhalgh (2009: 421) appreciate McRobbie's work because it usefully questions the quality of creative work by acknowledging the difficult working conditions in cultural production, such as self-blaming. They also quote other theorists' work on self-exploitation in culture-related industries, such as the IT industries (Ross 2005), in order to show a tendency that reflects 'disappointment and disillusion' (p.421) behind 'aspirations to and expectations of autonomy' (ibid.).

Banks (2007) agrees that such creative management combined with the authorising of certain autonomy to workers aims to 'override any misgivings, constraints or disadvantages that might emerge in the everyday reproduction of this highly competitive and uncertain domain' (p.55). But he also argues that governmentality work is problematic in terms of self-exploitation: by understanding autonomy and creativity as a seduction from the state and firms, it ignores the agency and subjectivity of cultural workers. Wright (1996) explicitly states that the constraining force of exploitation also offers a certain power to the exploited. The subjectivity and power of the exploited shown in Banks's and Wright's work could be related to workers' agency, which will be introduced in the next section, although Banks does not define cultural work as exploitation. Meanwhile, Hesmondhalgh (2010: 274) also claims that research on exploitation in cultural industries needs more careful work, as the vital issue in explaining exploitation is to distinguish whether the work is carried out under the illegitimate form of compulsion or not.

Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010: 61-67) divide creative autonomy into aesthetic autonomy and professional autonomy. The former defines works of art that are produced without applying to human product or natural object. Hesmondhalgh and Baker argue that it is necessary to aspire, which is linked to the social value of culture and communication, to human freedom which is included in aesthetic autonomy. But they also state that most work in cultural

industries does not involve aesthetic autonomy, as most creative workers do not conduct aesthetic or artistic production. For example, journalists are a large group that is not involved in such aesthetic production, whilst their work is still largely autonomous. Indeed, the autonomy sought by journalists is close to that sought by professional groups. Therefore, Hesmondhalgh and Baker argue that autonomy in creative work needs to be understood in two ways: aesthetic autonomy and professional autonomy, the latter in which journalistic autonomy belongs.

Some internet workers conduct work related to aesthetics or arts, such as visual art designers who deal with works of aesthetics online. However, most workers in the internet industries are not involved in such aesthetic work; instead, they occupy jobs that centre on knowledge, information and technologies. These workers search for autonomy that is closer to journalistic autonomy, professional autonomy in Hesmondhalgh and Baker's term, rather than aesthetic autonomy. This professional autonomy involves workers' self-determination in their work practices and creativity, under the pressures that are exerted by the state and firms. Meanwhile, internet workers also search for workplace autonomy in their daily work. As Hesmondhalgh and Baker clarified in their framework, this is sought by people desiring freedom from constraints or determinants in their work, which is different from personal autonomy, which is the freedom sought by individuals in their lives. By comparison, internet workers search for freedom in their daily work, such as the balance between work and life. Internet work blurs the labourers' work and leisure time, as some work in modern societies does. This blurring sometimes results in internet workers' desire to seek free space in terms of working hours. Thus, workplace autonomy constitutes the other account of the autonomy I discuss in the empirical part.

Given these various forms of autonomy, it is likely that workers' experiences of autonomy are subjective and ambivalent. This would seem to suggest that in an analysis of workplace autonomy, it is crucial to include the degree of autonomy workers experienced in their daily work, and 'the pressures that they feel are being exerted on their professional autonomy' (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010: 67). Moreover, it is also vital to explore forces, such as political and economic issues, that shape workers' experiences of autonomy. These forces help to show workers' subjective experiences of autonomy, which would consequently contribute to an evaluation of the quality of working life in the internet industries.

In this section, I have outlined a theoretical model that contains concepts of work effort, security, and autonomy, in order to exemplify my framework for assessing working life in the Chinese internet industries. I argue that work effort needs to be examined with reference to issues of working hours, work intensity, and pay. In terms of work security, I raise some questions that

concern the need for stable conditions and knowledge regarding the future of the work, in order to shape a framework that would be applied to an examination of tensions between the state and internet workers. I then follow Hesmondhalgh and Baker's framework in relation to autonomy to clarify my approach to internet workers' autonomy. As I outline in detail later in the thesis, I propose that it is imprecise to discuss workers' experiences of autonomy using the concept of self-exploitation. Instead, I argue that the internet workers' experiences of autonomy are quite ambivalent. They need to be discussed via two variants: workplace autonomy and professional autonomy. These experiences could be examined via workers' subjective understandings of the degree of autonomy in their daily practices as well as the pressures upon their autonomy. It is also necessary to discuss the political and economic forces that shape these experiences of autonomy in workers' practices.

## **2.7 Acts of agency**

As discussed earlier, in section 2.5, Wright (1996: 697) points out that exploiters moderate their domination by eliciting a certain degree of consent from the exploited, in order to reduce costs. This moderation then authorises a certain power to the exploited. Wright (2002: 850) explicitly claims that this power authorised to the exploited enables them to resist appropriation. It is essential to class relations, as the exploiter depends upon the exploited. Because the exploiter needs the exploited classes, the latter's resistance to the exploitation is hard to counter. Burawoy and Wright (2002: 474-475) further claim that inequalities, especially the unequal distribution of interests in workers' lives within social relations will lead to conflicts by those who are exploited. These exploited classes 'have inherent sources of power to resist their exploitation' (p.475). Here, the collective activities of conflict are understood as a response from the exploited class to their exploitation.

But such conflicts are impossible to be realised in contemporary Chinese society, where political power is still highly centralised in the hand of CCP (part of the bureaucratic capitalist class). Large-scale social movements, a key component of class struggle, are hard to find in a Chinese context. However, this does not mean that the lower middle class and the working class are exploited without any resistance. Small scales of resistance are initiated against appropriation within the classes. But, again, class conflict is a macro level concept for understanding the dynamics between classes, such as resistance from the working class to the bureaucratic capitalist class, rather than one that might be used to analyse individual acts of resistance. Like the concept of exploitation, it provides a context to explain why internet workers have certain experiences, practices and values. Moreover, it would not be a

real choice, if all acts of agency or autonomy were understood as a product of systemic exploitation. How can people resist if everyone is hopeless, trapped and exploited? Thus, it generates the necessity to clarify what is meant by acts of agency, especially worker agency.

Callinicos (2004) clarifies his understanding of the concept of human agents by restating Elster's work. According to Elster, human action is distinguished from the rest of nature by intentional behaviour, which is an action that relates to the future. It is 'guided by a goal that is absent, not-yet-realised, merely imagined or represented' (p.5). Callinicos (2004) quotes Perry Anderson's work to divide this intentional behaviour into three forms. The first is acts towards 'the pursuit of 'private' goals' (p.1), such as choosing marriage and exercising skills; the second is behaviour that 'operate(s) within the framework of existing social relations, pertaining to the kind of ventures involving 'public' goals' (p.2), such as political struggles and commercial explorations; the third refers to acts involved in 'the collective pursuit of global social transformation' (ibid.), such as the French Revolution. Callinicos (2004) endorses Anderson's analysis as it 'overcome(s) the abstract polarity between structure and agency represented by Althusser and Thompson respectively' (ibid.). For Althusser, history is a process, which results in certain accumulation of structural contradictions and changes. Human beings only participate in historical change. In other words, Althusser focuses on structural change, with ignoring agency of human beings. In comparison, Thompson highlights human beings' struggles in the historical process, which ultimately consciously control and change the world. Anderson's work is valuable to distinguish 'public agency' and 'collective agency' from 'personal agency'. But Callinicos also points out that Anderson fails to consider the common ground between the different forms of agency. Thus, Callinicos's research sheds light upon empirical studies of worker agency by offering a philosophical understanding of human agency.

In the field of sociology, theorists work on the question of subjectivity or agency via various approaches. For example, O'Doherty and Willmott (2001) introduce three tendencies of exploring agency in labour process theory: the orthodox school, which, according to O'Doherty and Willmott, overemphasises the economic and structuralist issues of Marx's labour process theory by neglecting labour's subjectivity; the anti-realist approach, which abandons analysis of subjective/objective or structure/agency; and the post-structuralist approach, which offers a critical way to understand the social formation of subjectivity. Critically, this approach explores complex 'political, economic, psychological and existential processes that inter-articulate and combine in the practices of the labour process' (p.465), which, in O'Doherty and Willmott's discussion, focuses on both structure and agency. O'Doherty and Willmott prefer the post-structuralist approach as it helps them to understand 'how subjectivity is co-implicated in the accomplishment and reproduction of

capitalist employment relations' (p.457). The post-structuralist approach is valuable in terms of realising workers' subjectivity and agency, but it overemphasises individual subjectivity by neglecting structural production relations, which, in my view, is an important contextual factor that helps us to understand workers' experiences. Moreover, it does not specifically focus on agency in the workplace; thus, it could not be thoroughly applied in this research to understand internet workers' agency.

Instead, the definition of worker agency in Randy Hodson's work (2001) is more useful. He defines agency as 'the active and creative performance of assigned roles in ways that give meaning and content to those roles beyond what is institutionally scripted' (p.16). He further divides worker agency into four categories of behaviour, 'resistance, citizenship, the pursuit of meaning, and social relations at work' (p.17). Hodson's definition and categorization of worker agency are valuable in terms of relating workers' subjectivity to social relations at work. Hodson explains workplace resistance as the subtle and subdued practices that are actively and passively enacted by workers against unequal 'abuse, overtime and exploitation' (ibid.). It usually relies on 'small-scale actions involving a subtle withdrawal of cooperation or a banking of enthusiasm' (ibid.). Here, it shows the interactive relations between the issue of agency and class exploitation by understanding acts of resistance as a reaction to exploitation. Hodson's other three issues with reference to worker agency are also important, such as citizenship, which explains workers' purposive practices aiming to create productions above the organisations' requirements. But, in this study, I am particularly interested in Hodson's work of resistance.

In the field of the cultural industries, Banks (2007) criticises two approaches towards cultural production for neglecting worker agency: critical theorists who recognise the erosion of labour's creativity and autonomy in cultural industries because of the pervasiveness of globalisation, whilst neglecting the agency of labour; and governmentalsists who use the concept of self-exploitation to understand creative management in cultural production, whilst understanding workers' subjectivity in a negative way. As an alternative, Banks acknowledges a certain degree of worker agency in the concept of individualisation. To him, individualisation is double-edged: although it is the means for state and firms to manage workers, it still runs the risk that one day people will be genuinely independent 'in ways unanticipated and unwelcomed by government' (p.100). Put simply, Banks indicates a sense of worker agency in the cultural industries, and the importance of recognising acts of agency. Building on this, I argue that acts of worker agency indeed need to be understood as a part of working life: workers engage in acts of resistance and negotiation in order to support their own existence – improving working conditions, and contributing to moral practices – such as looking for certain freedom for the lower classes (I will explain this issue in Chapter Seven). The

responses from the internet workers then form part of the uniqueness of working experiences in the Chinese internet industries.

Wittel (2004) argues that worker agency is commonly neglected in the political economy of communication approach, which claims that agency only matters in some studies of audiences' consumption practices. This top-down approach argues that agency only matters in the production process if we look at 'a very few powerful people in the media and communications industries, such as Rupert Murdoch or Bill Gates' (p.84). In other words, political economy of communication, in Wittel's argument, neglects ordinary workers' agency. Such neglecting of worker agency is criticised in some theorists' work (such as Callinicos), who regard work agency, especially worker resistance, as a significant issue in various ways. Callinicos (1983) points out that workers' resistance contributes to 'the consciousness and organisation of the working class' (p.147).

Ross (2008) also highlights spaces of resistance in the cultural industries. He points out that the concept of immaterial labour – labourers that produce service, social relationships, affects, knowledge, and communication (Negri 1989, Hardt and Negri 2000, Dyer-Witheford 2005) – is helpful to generate a political cross-class coalition of interests between low-end workers, such as service workers, and high-end workers, such as the creative class in knowledge industries, even though the concept is problematic in several ways. Because all these workers share a similar experience of precarity in contemporary capitalism, there is enough space to prompt an anti-precarity movement, which might 'forge a political coalition of interest against the class polarization associated with economic liberalization' (p.41). Put simply, Ross indicates a possible resistance that unites different social classes against the precarious conditions in their work experiences. This could be understood as power originating from the bottom to the top in contemporary capitalism. For example, Ross gives the case of the recent anti-precarity social movement in France. In 2006, the French government planned to issue new labour policies to make it easier to fire youth under 26. This generated massive resistance amongst students, and later linked student movements to immigrant rights struggle and service workers' struggle. According to Ross, this large-scale social movement was regarded as a 'cross-class alliance' 'drawn from sectors of the service class, the creative class and the knowledge class' (p.41). It is arguable that 'immaterial labour' unites people in such anti-precarity movements; rather, I argue that the 'precarious' working and living conditions organise people to initiate such anti-precarity movement.

Likewise, Qiu (2009) points out a similar tendency in the Chinese social context: low-end workers and users, the 'information have-less', in Chinese society generate a transformative power potential from the bottom to the top – a possible transformation initiated by this low class to against the state, aiming

to create a better China. This have-less class experiences difficult working and living conditions, such as low pay with manual work, which results in their difficult lives in cities, and discrimination against workers from rural areas, which makes them unable to settle down in cities. As a result, this have-less class tries to gain control over the power distribution in the information society, by using their simple skills, physical labour force and social networks, to express their discontents about the injustice and difficulties they experience and to even improve their working and living conditions. These ordinary Chinese people discuss their experiences of inequalities in contemporary China and then take effective and significant actions in varied new media events, which I will discuss in Chapter Eight. This have-less class then becomes 'an important harbinger of change' (p.226) in contemporary Chinese society. Qiu then argues that this have-less class shape and empower a new working class in Chinese society and might take Chinese society into a new era via large-scale social transformation. The agency of low-end workers and users in Qiu's research is regarded as a potential power from the bottom to the top that would bring possible transformation in Chinese society.

Ross's and Qiu's work points to the possibility of cross-class coalitions between low-end workers and high-end workers: is it possible that the working class in Qiu's research, ordinary Chinese new media producers and users, and the lower middle class in my study, internet workers, shape a cross-class coalition, because of their similar experiences and interests in contemporary Chinese society? And, if they do, will this cross-class coalition embark on collective resistance that would lead to a potential transformation in Chinese society? I will address these questions in Chapter Seven and Chapter Eight, when I discuss internet workers' agency.

In this section, I have argued that internet workers' agency consists of negotiation with and resistance to the state and firms. This agency, I argue, is a part of working life in the internet industries; it represents workers' response to the difficult working conditions they face. These individual acts of negotiation and resistance arise from macro level class conflicts, which are shaped by macro level class exploitation, and a certain theory of personhood – to support one's own existence and contribute to moral practices. Moreover, based on Ross's and Qiu's work, I further point out a possible cross-class coalition between the lower middle class, internet workers in this research, and the working class, the low-end workers and users in Qiu's work. I argue that through such cross-class coalition, it is possible to initiate a transformation in the Chinese society that might lead to a better China.

## 2.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I began with a discussion of social class and Marx's concept of exploitation, which fundamentally contributes to my understanding of working life in the Chinese internet industries. Based on his conceptualisation of exploitation and other theorists' restatement and modification of his work, I argued that exploitation is a structural context and that this notion is an important conceptual tool with which analyse workers' subjective experiences in the industries. Then, I built up a theoretical framework based on this context, which contained concepts of work effort, security, and autonomy. In subsequent chapters, I use this framework in order to evaluate my empirical data relating to workers' subjective experiences in the next few chapters.

Moreover, I argued that the agency of internet workers and their acts of negotiation and resistance also need to be understood as a part of their working life. This agency is believed to initiate a possible social transformation which might lead to better Chinese internet industries and a better Chinese society in the future. It indicates that the power is not only in the hands of the powerful, but also in the hands of the lower classes in contemporary Chinese society.

In this chapter, I argued that both exploitation and agency are macro level notions, which focus on structural relationships and dynamics between classes. Exploitation refers to the dominating class, which owns the relevant productive resources, appropriating the labour efforts of the dominated class. This indicates the causal relationships between the classes' activities. Agency refers to the response, in forms of class conflict, of the dominated class to exploitation from the dominating class. This emphasises dynamics between the classes. Both notions provide a macro model of class analysis, which is difficult to use to directly analyse individuals' subjective experiences. Thus, I argued that both notions need to be used as contexts for understanding subjective experiences: the notion of exploitation explains why workers suffer from bad working conditions; whilst the notion of agency explains how workers strive to improve working conditions and why they still work in the industries, despite the bad conditions.

As Wright (2009) argues, a fully elaborated class analysis needs to combine both a macro model and micro model of class analysis. Here, I combined the macro model of class analysis, notions of exploitation and agency, and the micro model of class analysis, subjective experiences of workers in the lower middle class, such as their work effort, autonomy and security in work.

Therefore, as I pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, I intend to adopt a neo-Marxist approach to class analysis as the fundamental mechanism for understanding workers' subjective experiences in the Chinese internet industries. This fundamental mechanism will be applied to analysing my empirical data, which was collected during my fieldwork, in the empirical section (from Chapters Four to Seven) of this thesis. But before I move to the empirical discussion, I will first explain my five months' fieldwork and discuss the methodology for this research in the next chapter.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

According to Llobera (1998), historical research, whereby researchers investigate the past in order to understand the present, is the key method to archive both large-scale social change and small-scale individual experiences. In his view, the approach mainly depends on primary sources and secondary sources. Primary sources include 'interviewing people directly, observing them, or analysing the documents they produce in going about their lives' (p.74), whilst secondary sources involve 'reviewing and synthesising a range of research reports each describing a single but different society, whose authors had themselves built their descriptions on primary sources' (ibid.). However, such methods are not only valuable in historical research. These methods are also valuable for conducting other qualitative research relating to humanity, such as understanding individuals' experiences of working life in contemporary societies. This research then prioritises the primary sources of interviewing workers directly and observing them to archive and assess the quality of their working life experiences.

In this chapter I discuss why and how I collected the primary sources via these qualitative research methods. In section 3.2, I introduce the two companies in which I carried out fieldwork and clarify what kind of internet workers I am talking about in this research. In section 3.3, I discuss the two methods I used to conduct this research: in-depth interviews and participant observation. I explain why I chose these methods and how I applied them to collect data. I argue that it is necessary to conduct covert observation in the Chinese internet industries, where much academic research of this nature is viewed with suspicion. In section 3.4, I introduce how I analysed the data, where I highlight the problem of translating the Chinese language data into English. In section 3.5, I explain the ethical issues related to this research: the problems I found difficult to solve and my reflections on these problems. In section 3.6, I discuss my reflections during the fieldwork and in some academic occasions after the fieldwork.

### **3.2 Research companies and workers**

As I have already established in the preceding chapters, this research project focuses on the quality of working life in the Chinese internet industries. I am particularly interested in how workers themselves understand the quality

of their working life. This includes how they evaluate their experiences and practices, and how they understand their values towards products. Also, if the workers evaluate the quality of their working lives to be low, then how (and whether) they improve that quality. I do not intend to compare the quality of Chinese internet workers' working lives with the quality of internet workers' working lives in other geographical and political contexts via a quantitative study. Instead, I pay particular attention to how Chinese internet workers are experiencing and practicing their work in contemporary Chinese society: whether they enjoy a quality middle-class life as their social class indicates, or whether they are exploited by certain upper classes? What results in this quality of working life? And to what extent does their working life matter?

As I pointed out in Chapter One, little research has paid attention to the quality of working life of internet workers, especially Chinese internet workers. Due to this, I take a close look at internet workers' practices and experiences via participating in their work and life; I also talk about internet workers' values towards their products via directly discussing the issue with them. As I wanted to find out how these workers work in the internet industries and live in contemporary Chinese society, I spent three months (September – December 2011) participating in the work at one internet company (Grand) to observe what kind of working life the workers experience and practice, and I conducted in-depth interviews with workers in another internet company (Campus) to find out what the workers think about their work.

### **3.2.1 Research questions**

As noted in Chapter One, the main research question is: What is the quality of working life in the Chinese internet industries? In order to explore this question, some subsidiary questions to be considered are as follows:

- (1) What are the main features of working life in Chinese internet industries?
- (2) What is internet workers' class location in Chinese society?
- (3) Why do internet workers suffer injustice and inequality in their working lives?
- (4) How do the workers themselves understand these experiences?
- (5) How do the state and companies seek to control workers?
- (6) To what extent we can criticise the workers' experiences as exploitation?
- (7) What are the responses of workers to the state and companies' control?
- (8) Why do workers work in the industries, despite the difficult working conditions?

In order to answer these research questions, a qualitative methodology is needed to gain a deep understanding of the quality of working life. Before I introduce the qualitative methods I adopted to collect empirical data, I first turn to introduce the two companies in which I chose to conduct my fieldwork.

### 3.2.2 Research companies

There are thousands of internet companies in China, some of which produce significant economic, cultural and political benefits. For example, microblogs play an important role in the construction of online spaces, which are perceived by many to be mechanisms for free speech. Because of microblogs, it is claimed that ordinary Chinese people have the chance to discuss public issues and push the state to improve public services, such as in the case of the 7/23 Wenzhou train crash, discussed in the introduction, where criticism in microblogging platforms led to a change in government strategy. As a response to the government's restriction on media coverage of this accident, internet users successfully forced some officials in the Ministry of Railways to resign, via their strong online criticism and other online activities of resistance. At the same time, local governments have been pushed to be transparent about certain issues, with over 10,000 local government departments setting up microblog accounts to make their services transparent.<sup>23</sup>

However, when this research was initiated, microblogging was not as popular as it is now, so it was not my first choice as a site through which to conduct this research. As an alternative, I chose the company where I had conducted interviews for my MA fieldwork as one of my fieldwork sites. My MA project considered some internet workers in Campus as a part of immaterial labour – labourers that produce services, social relationships, affects, knowledge, and communication – via discussing the blurring of their work and life. There were three reasons for choosing Campus as one of my fieldwork sites. First, the access problem would be easily solved, as I had already built up my social networks in that company; second, it would benefit this research to revisit some participants in my MA project to discuss certain sensitive issues, such as practices against the state; third, it was easy to build up a rapport with the participants, because of our prior contact, which facilitated my aim of discussing issues in great depth.

At the beginning of this research, I planned to choose the top online commerce company to conduct another part of this ethnographic study – Taobao, the major player in Chinese online commerce market, launched by Alibaba Group in 2003. It has had deep cooperation with Sina microblog since

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<sup>23</sup> China National Information Infrastructure, 11<sup>th</sup> January 2011

April 2013, when Alibaba invested Sina microblog. For example, users with Sina microblog accounts were able to log in to Taobao directly. However, this plan failed because the company rejected my request to carry out participant observation when it recognised me as an academic researcher, who might publish information that it did not want in the public domain. This highlights the access problem when conducting ethnographic research in China: most companies reject academic research that does not bring economic benefits (unless researchers have *guanxi* with government officials or company leaders). Moreover, some companies worry that such academic research will expose certain issues that harm them, such as bad working conditions in the companies. Therefore, I decided to conduct covert observation in another company, which a friend introduced me to. I will discuss this covert observation in section 3.3.2, and talk about the related ethical concerns in section 3.5.

As a result, I chose two companies from amongst the top 20 Chinese internet companies to carry out my fieldwork. I anonymise the two companies in this research, in order to protect all participants. The first I call Grand here. This company focuses on online entertainment, such as online games and online novels. It was listed on the US-based NASDAQ stock exchange in 2005, and has dominated the online games market since then. The second company I call Campus. This provides social networking services, like Facebook. It dominates the Chinese online social networking market and was listed on the US-based NASDAQ stock exchange in 2011. I carried out covert observation for three months (September – December 2011) in Grand. Whilst in Campus, I conducted fourteen interviews (five people – William, Lara, Galeno, Carl, and Louis – were interviewed twice, and four people – Wynn, Davis, Lee, and Walter – were interviewed once). I also invited one of the interviewees from Campus, named Galeno here, to keep his working journal for me as a form of self-observation. Meanwhile, I chose some interview contents of my MA project as a part of the data (such as interviews conducted with Alex and George). All of this important interviewee information is shown in section 3.3.1, whereby I explain how I conducted these interviews. There are also some key participants in my observation I introduce in section 3.3.2, where I explain the process of covert observation.

It has been difficult to decide to what extent I should introduce these companies in this section. Some parts of this research deal with sensitive issues in the Chinese context, such as how workers improve their working conditions via practices against the companies and the state. Thus, it would be risky to give too much information about the companies, as it would probably identify the participants. On the one hand, certain information about the companies is necessary to explain why they were chosen for this research, and on the other hand, anonymising all participants' information, such as their names and positions in the company, will reduce the risk of them being

identified. I will discuss these concerns in section 3.5. First I clarify who these workers are below.

### 3.2.3 Who are these workers?

Some research in the 'turn to labour', has a tendency to centre on notions of creative labour and knowledge labour (Florida 2002, McKercher and Mosco 2008). For example, Florida (2002) argues that a new creative class, which includes core creative workers and creative professionals, is forming in the creative economy. The term core creative workers refers to workers 'creating new ideas, new technology and/or new creative content' (p.8), and creative professionals are workers 'engaging in complex problem solving that involves a great deal of independent judgment and requires high levels of education or human capital' (ibid).

But McKercher and Mosco (2008) make the criticism that the notion of the creative class is too narrow, as it only focuses on highly educated people 'whose major value lies in their ability to translate human capital into creative work' (p.24). As an alternative, they argue that the notion of the creative class should be broadened to the concept of knowledge labour, and should focus on the subjective experiences of workers, such as the ways they choose to organise their unions, rather than on external criteria. In other words, McKercher and Mosco (2008) suggest a broader concept than creative class – knowledge labour – to include most forms of mental labour.

However, both concepts (creative class and knowledge labour) are criticised in Hesmondhalgh and Baker's research (2010: 56-60), because of their neglect of the specificity of cultural labour. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010: 5-6) argue that McKercher and Mosco's definition of knowledge labour is too broad to acknowledge 'the specific importance of *culture*, of *mediated communication*, and of the *content* of communication products' (p.59).

As an alternative, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010) distinguish the term creative labour from terms for other mental workers, because it highlights the importance of the 'tensions and contradictions between economics and culture, creativity and commerce' (p.9). Creative labour focuses on the activities of symbol-making, by primarily being involved in the 'creation and dissemination of very particular kinds of products, ones that are mainly symbolic, aesthetic, expressive and/or informational' (p.60). Consequently, Hesmondhalgh and Baker clarify their definition of creative workers as 'primary creative personnel such as writers, actors, directors, musicians; craft and technical workers such as camera operators, film editors and sound engineers; creative managers

such as television producers, magazine editors and A&R personnel; administrators; executives; and unskilled labour' (p.9).

According to this definition, it is possible to argue internet workers are a part of these creative workers, as most of them belong to primary creative personnel, such as visual art designers and product designers; craft and technical workers, such as web designers and engineers; administrators and executives, such HR (Human Resources). But due to the framework of assessing working life adopted in this research – working hours and pay, autonomy, security, and worker agency, it is important to categorise these creative workers based on their work status, such as work patterns, rather than their work contents. There are some differences between these creative workers' working-life experiences, because of their different work patterns. For example, those who work as part-time (interns), have different working hours and pay compared with workers who work full-time. Thus, it is necessary to borrow another framework based on work patterns to categorise creative workers in the Chinese internet industries.

Noon and Blyton (2002: 5) point out several criteria by which to classify people's work, such as the way jobs are undertaken, the main purpose of the work, job status, temporal pattern, and work location. In this research, I classify the workers by the criterion of temporal pattern, such as full time/part time, and permanent/temporary. According to this criterion, these workers are full-time workers, interns and agency labour.

'Full-time workers' refers to workers who are paid and hold formal occupations in internet companies. These workers are the main contributors to the creation of cultural products. Some of these workers possess high skills, whilst some have low skills, though none of them only sell manual labour as manual workers did during industrialist capitalism. Thus, some full-time workers here are understood as technical workers, conducting technical-related work, such as programming, web design and APP (Application Software) developing, etc. Other full-time workers are non-technical workers, who are mainly involved in administrative and routine work, such as HR (Human Resources) recruiting and training employees; marketing workers doing promotional work; and PR (Public Relations) personnel maintaining relationships with government officials, etc.

Interns have more flexible contracts than full-time workers, and have different working-life experiences compared with full-time workers. This is discussed in the empirical part of this thesis, in Chapters Four to Six. The internship seems to have become a popular temporary work status for university students in a variety of geographical and political contexts. For example, Perlin (2011) conducted a survey on internships, which implied that they are increasingly becoming an important part of university students' lives in the USA and beyond. It is the same situation in China, where most university

BBSs (Bulletin Board Systems) provide information about internship vacancies in various companies for university students. Figure 3.1 is part of the internships information from the BBS in Zhejiang University – the 3<sup>rd</sup> most successful university in China.

User name	Date	Intern opportunities	
18637	mollon	Mar 22	• 水利部发展研究中心招聘实习生
18638	threebulls	Mar 22	• 新东方招聘!!!!
18639	bjsmtc	Mar 22	Interns wanted in Intel China Research Centre (Software development)
18640	cyjsjk	Mar 22	Interns wanted in IBM CDL OmniFind team
18641	testcloud	Mar 22	Interns wanted in IBM CSDL (Java development)
18642	qrz198505	Mar 22	Interns wanted in Taobao (main online commerce company) Data Platform (php)
18643	lovely321	Mar 22	• 工业和信息化部(原信息产业部)软件与集成电路促进中心(CSIP)
18644	yctig	Mar 22	• 北京顺景园林招聘应届生
18645	hackerphoto	Mar 22	• 水工业行业网站招实习生
18646	g9	Mar 22	Interns wanted in C++ and VB6
18647	suibing	Mar 22	Interns wanted in HP mobile program (Software development)
18648	tomath	Mar 22	Interns wanted in IBM CDL ITaaS SDLC
18649	autopig	Mar 22	• 摩士丹利技术团队2010年暑期实习见面会(24-25日北京)
18650	guolaren	Mar 22	• 【经验分享】教你打破实习中的“潜规则”
18651	ActionLi	Mar 22	Interns wanted in a search engine company
18652	HTRR	Mar 22	• 北京迈思奇科技有限公司 招聘实习生
18653	chonghuan	Mar 22	Interns wanted in Yeepay (online commerce company) Product Development
18654	biomedical	Mar 22	• Internship Recruitment of Corporate Technology Siemens Chin
18655	mefee	Mar 22	Intern wanted in Jiuruifu Software company (Beijing)
18656	JeffreyWong	Mar 22	• 招聘商务实习生
18657	smthoju	Mar 22	Interns wanted in Intel OTC OpenSolaris Team

Figure 3.1: Internship information on Zhejiang University’s BBS

Source: Flickr account of a graduate from Zhejiang University (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/delai/4453587152/>), translated by the writer

In figure 3.1, eleven out of twenty-one intern opportunities are in internet-related companies, such as Intel, IBM, and Taobao (the main online commerce company in China). In other words, the internet industries favour recruiting interns from universities. University students hope to have gained fruitful intern experiences before accessing job markets. For example, Janet, an intern in Grand, whom I spent the most time with during my observation, started her internships at the beginning of her university life. Lily, another intern in Grand, had interned in more than ten companies before joining Grand. This number might be higher than most other new full-time workers. According to both of them, it is common to find university students keen to acquire as

many intern experiences as possible before graduation, as they aim to have a good start for a successful career.

As well as full-time workers and interns, there are large numbers of agency workers in the Chinese internet industries. There are two forms of agency labour here: self-employed workers and 'code farmers'. The former is a team of high-skilled workers, who work on certain projects outsourced by big internet companies, without having temporary or long-term positions there. The latter are workers who are sent to the internet companies by outsourcing companies to conduct outsourced work, both technical and non-technical. They do not sign long-term contracts with the internet companies, nor do they hold any formal position in the companies. Rather, they tend to sign contracts with the outsourcing companies. This form of employment relationship is called labour outsourcing services. The internet companies send projects to the outsourcing companies, which then assign workers to carry out work in the internet companies. These code farmers do not have regular employment relations with the commissioning companies – the internet companies in this example. In both Grand and Campus, I found large numbers of agency workers in various departments. For example, most workers in the culture department in Grand – the department responsible for building up and maintaining the company's culture (such as the 'geek culture') via editing internal magazine and reports relating to working life – were agency workers, as the internal magazine the department was working on, was completely outsourced to an advertising company. Therefore, most of the agency workers here, were dispatched from the advertising company.

Full-time workers, interns and agency workers have experiences in common, such as their unequal pay compared to SOE workers and executives. These common issues imply their difficulties and struggles in contemporary society, which suggests the low quality of their working life. It is important to distinguish between full-time workers, interns, and agency labour here, because their different working-life experiences address significant issues. For example, full-time workers' ambivalent experiences of autonomy, addresses the tensions between companies, the state and internet workers. The experiences of injustice by interns', addresses the problematic Chinese education system, which highlights social problems in contemporary Chinese society. The precarious working conditions of agency workers, highlights that individual workers in contemporary Chinese society are forced to have responsibilities, which formerly belonged to the state, on their shoulders. Put simply, both the common and different working-life experiences between these workers, implies that internet workers, the lower middle class in contemporary Chinese society, struggle with the inequalities and injustices partly caused by structural exploitation – the bureaucratic capitalist and higher middle class appropriate the labour efforts of the lower middle class – and unequal power distributions between different classes. I explain these common and different

working-life experiences and how they relate to internet workers' class status in the following chapters.

Among these full-time workers, interns and agency workers, I chose nine full-time workers in Campus to interview (five full-time workers were interviewed in August and December 2011, four full-time workers were interviewed in August 2011, and one full-time worker was invited to partake in self-observation). There were more than twenty full-time workers and interns I contacted via chatting, having dinner and lunch, hanging out, and having coffee in Grand, among which, I chose six full-time workers and five interns' experiences to present in this research. I did not directly contact agency workers via interviews, but had observed two code farmers in the HR Department of Grand. I introduce these participants' information in detail below.

### **3.3 Data collection**

#### **3.3.1 In-depth interviews**

Seale (1998) claims that interview methods in qualitative research help us to investigate the things that cannot be seen or heard, such as 'the interviewee's inner state – the reasoning behind their actions, and their feelings' (p.202). Fielding (1993) divides the interview into three categories: standardised or structured interviews, semi-standardised interviews, and non-standardised interviews. For standardised interviews, interviewers always ask the same questions to all the interviewees. In comparison, semi-standardised interviews are more flexible; the interviewers ask certain, similar questions to interviewees, but are free to alter some sequencing questions depending on different situations. The most popular interview form in qualitative research is the non-standardised interview, which is also called 'an unstructured or focused interview' (p.136). Interviewers in non-standardised interviews normally have a list of topics that relate to their research, but they are free to phrase the questions during the course of the interview, and even join the conversation by discussing the questions with their interviewees. This list of topics is called an interview guide.

In this research, because the working life experience is individualised and fragmented, it is more reasonable and valuable to adopt the non-standardised interview rather than other interview forms. As I noted in the last section, this research builds upon my MA project from 2010, where I had conducted seven interviews on Campus to discuss the blurring of these internet workers' work and life with the concept of immaterial labour. One of the seven interviewees I

originally interviewed for my MA, was interviewed again for this PhD research; some information from the original seven interviews is also used here in this thesis. Ideally, I would have liked to confirm with the seven interviewees about the use of their interview content in this thesis. But, all of them had left Campus when I revisited there in 2011, and it was only possible to contact one of them. Therefore, I received agreement to use the data collected in 2010 from only one person. I hope that if my participants read this thesis and recognise themselves in it, they understand my motivations for using content from their interviews in this research.

In addition to the seven interviews conducted for my MA project, I conducted fourteen interviews in 2011. During this period (August and December 2011), the interviews were divided into two parts: nine interviews were carried out in August, the time before I conducted participant observation in Grand, in order to have a general understanding of the working life experiences. The other five interviews were carried out in December, when I revisited some of the original nine interviewees in order to discuss some issues I identified in the observation. I give details of these interviews in Table 3.1.

All interviewees were chosen according to the following criteria:

1. In order to avoid the problem of bias, both female and male workers were chosen, although there were fewer female workers than male workers, due to gender discrimination in the industries. Thus, seven male workers and two female workers were chosen for this research.
2. All workers were interested in the research and eager to talk about their own experiences.
3. In order to explore the different experiences of the workers, interviewees were chosen from different departments.
4. In order to explore the sensitive issue of control by the state and the company, I chose some interviewees who planned to leave Campus, or who had already resigned from the company. They would be more likely to discuss issues frankly.
5. In order to explore the issue of workers' responses, some interviewees were the most active workers, who were familiar with most colleagues and participated in most activities in the company.

Details of the interviewees are as follows (names of interviewees are anonymised):

<b>Name</b>	<b>Interview time</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Working background</b>
William	26 <sup>th</sup> August	24	Male	Joined Campus in 2010. He worked in the 3G department to enable social

	2011; 19 <sup>th</sup> December 2011			networking services on mobile platforms.
Lara	26 <sup>th</sup> August 2011; 19 <sup>th</sup> December 2011	26	Female	Joined Campus in April 2011. She worked as an intern at Campus since 2009. After receiving a Master degree, she worked in the Advertisement department to attract advertisers to buy advertising spaces on Campus' social networking services.
Galeno	24 <sup>th</sup> August 2011; 20 <sup>th</sup> December 2011	23	Male	Joined Campus in 2010. He worked in the Product Administration Department, taking charge of designing online products.
Carl	27 <sup>th</sup> August 2011; 20 <sup>th</sup> December 2011	24	Male	Joined Campus in 2009. He worked in the Open Platform department to enable online products produced by individuals or other internet companies to work on the website of Campus.
Louis	28 <sup>th</sup> August 2011; 18 <sup>th</sup> December 2011	25	Male	Joined Campus in 2010. He started his work in the Open Platform department to develop online products in 2010, when I first interviewed him for my MA project. He had already left Campus when I visited him in August 2011.
Wynn	24 <sup>th</sup> August 2011	24	Female	Joined Campus in 2010. She worked in the Open Platform Department to enable online products to work on the website of Campus.
Davis	25 <sup>th</sup> August 2011	24	Male	Joined Campus in 2010. He worked in the Advertisement Department dealing with technical work.
Lee	27 <sup>th</sup> August 2011	25	Male	Joined Campus in 2011. He worked in the Product Administration Department designing new online products.
Walter	25 <sup>th</sup> August 2011	27	Male	Joined Campus in 2011. He worked in the Advertisement Department at Campus, conducting mainly technical work.

**Table 3.1: Information of interviewees**

Additionally, as I stated earlier, I adopted some data from my MA project, among which, Alex, Leo and George were three important interviewees. Alex joined Campus at the same time as Louis in 2010. He worked in the Open Platform Department to promote new online products to internet users. At the time I interviewed him, he planned to leave Campus to start his own business. Five months later (August 2010), when I contacted him again, he had left Campus and joined his friend's company, which created APPs. He had provided me with a lot of information about how workers in Campus negotiate with and resist the state and companies, and introduced me to some technical workers in Campus (including Louis), which ultimately helped me successfully conduct the interviews for my PhD research.

Leo graduated from one of the most successful university in mainland China. He worked in the Open Platform Department at Campus at the time I interviewed him. But, he later changed his job to another internet-related company. He provided me with some information about how the state intervened in internet workers' creativity and daily practices, which helped me recognise the complicated relationships between the state, internet companies and workers.

George was a unique case in Campus. He was one of the few 'top workers', who graduated from a branded university and had experience of studying abroad. He gave me some valuable information about how to balance restrictions from the state and workers' own expectation of creating free online space. This helped me to identify internet workers' struggle and negotiation towards control from the state, which became an important part of this research.

The topics addressed in non-standardised interviews generally ranged from workers' innovatory practices, responses to mechanisms of control, the construction of social networks in the company, and the organisational contexts under which the interviewees worked. In particular, I asked interviewees about their motivations behind these practices, such as responses to mechanisms of control, and their own understanding and evaluation of such experiences. Details of the interview guide are shown in Appendix A.

On average, the fourteen interviews lasted two hours. In terms of the language of communication, all interviews were conducted in Chinese. I will turn to a discussion of the problem of translation and transcription in section 3.4.

Overall, in-depth interviews were a useful tool in terms of understanding participants' values towards production, motivations towards innovation, and their beliefs behind the practices which they used to respond to the state and

companies' control. But, according to Fielding (1993), it is possible that interviewees sometimes 'lie or elaborate on the true situation to enhance their esteem, cover up discreditable actions or for any of a whole gamut of motives' (p.148). During the interviews, I noted that some participants avoided certain issues, due to a range of concerns. For example, some interviewees refused to talk about their salaries, as the company forbade them to talk about this issue. Some interviewees avoided issues relating to social networks, because they did not want to expose their bad relationships with colleagues. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010) also recognise this problem in their empirical research by claiming that interview methods have some well-known potential limitations, for example, interviewees will be influenced by the interviewers' leading questions, interviewees' attitudes will change over time, etc. Hence, it was necessary to adopt another important qualitative research method, participant observation, to help supplement the data gathered from interviews. While interviews were able to obtain what interviewees were thinking, with participant observation it was easier to investigate what was happening. I now turn to discuss this method in more detail.

### **3.3.2 Participant observation**

Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) define ethnography as a method that 'involves the ethnographer participating overtly or covertly in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of research' (p.1). By some definitions, participant observation is regarded as a part of ethnography, and this is adopted in my research, though arguably not for an extended period of time. Brannan and Oultram (2012: 310) claim that participant observation enables the exploration of certain human experiences, such as cultural and emotional life experiences, which cannot be explored via other research methods.

According to Walsh (1998), ethnography is classified into four categories, depending on the potential observer roles: complete participant, complete observer, participant as observer, and observer as participant. Complete participant is also sometimes known as 'covert participant observation' (Brannan and Oultram 2012: 297). This form of participant observation does not inform participants about the research. Thus, this role involves a certain degree of duplicity, which can result in some ethical problems. It also has the risk of 'going native, where the observer abandons the position of analyst for identification with the people under study' (Walsh 1998: 222). These issues will be discussed in section 3.5, as they represent some of the ethical issues I

encountered during this research. In the complete observer role, the researcher observes people from an alien framework, avoiding any social interaction with them. This method may prevent the observer from getting at people's meanings and understanding the situation well. Both participant as observer and observer as participant refer to overt ethnography. The former emphasises 'participation and social interaction over observing in order to produce a relationship of rapport and trust' (ibid.), whereas the latter prioritises observation over participation to prevent the researcher from 'going native'.

As I noted in section 3.2.2, most Chinese internet companies reject academic research that does not result in significant economic benefits. As a result, I was rejected by the online commerce company where I planned to observe internet workers' practices and experiences. Therefore, I changed my plan and decided to carry out covert participant observation in Grand, where a friend had secured me an internship for three months. Moreover, another reason I chose covert research was to witness more 'genuine' acts of worker agency.

There are many debates regarding the advantages and disadvantages of covert participant observation. Fielding (1993) claims that covert research is helpful for some research where access would otherwise be impossible, which matches my research – the company refused academic access for research purposes. Jorgensen (1989: 49) also argues that covert approach enables researchers to access certain 'closed' field sites and ensures 'genuine' results. Calvey (2000) highlights the necessity of conducting covert research in his covert observation research about door supervisors in Manchester pubs, where he regards covert research as a useful method to solve access problems and protect researchers in dangerous fieldwork, such as work relating to criminals. He also stresses that 'covert participant observation was the richest way to engage with the participants in any meaningful sense' (p.47).

But Walsh (1998) argues that covert research produces 'major problems of an ethical and practical kind and a massive problem if the cover is blown' (p.222) after accessing the research field. Brannan and Oultram (2002) point out that covert participant observation has been criticised because of 'being unethical, dishonest, failing to respect human rights and potentially putting the participants' interests at risk' (p.299). Berg (2009) points out the risk of harming research participants when conducting covert research. It is possible that covert research may damage research reputation because of deceptive activities, which will close off further avenues for research. Spicker (2011: 119-120) also points out that covert research is always questioned because of deception involved in the process. But he also claims that most deceptive research is not covert. He argues that many objections to covert research are objections to deception rather than covert activity.

Calvey (2000) admits that covert participant observation is done whilst being indifferent to 'all corrective moral judgements of the adequacy, value or success in the way participants perform their work' (p.47). However, he argues that the covert role only matters seriously if one 'holds on to a traditional concept of the objectivity of the fieldworker' (p.55). Instead, he argues that ethics needs to be applied more broadly as 'situational and case contingent' – to put ethics as 'part of the ethnographic setting rather than extracted from it and given honorific status (ibid.)'. He questions the issue of informed consent, which was suggested by researchers who regard covert research as a problematic method, by highlighting the practical concerns of 'understand[ing] the setting without disturbing it' (p.47). Rather, he encourages more investigative social research to be done on controversial areas with covert methods.

Meanwhile, the criticism of the covert role does not mean overt participant observation can solve all problems caused by covert research. Brannan and Oultram (2002: 300) mention that some researchers argue that the benefits of covert approaches can outweigh the risks. For example, Lauder (2003) argues that covert research can be justified when the benefits outweigh the potential risks. Fielding (1993) admits that overt and covert approaches indeed 'shade into each other' (p.160): not all overt research informs its participants, and some covert research does inform its participants with informed consent. Brannan and Oultram (2002: 300) argue that it is impossible for a participant observation researcher to be an ethical researcher, because the overt approach also contains certain covert issues, such as duplicity due to the necessity of collecting certain sensitive information.

Admittedly, the covert approach I adopted in my research resulted in some ethical problems. For example, I felt that I was deceiving 'participants' as I simultaneously built personal friendships and gathered their stories. Participants told me their personal stories because they saw me as a friend; friendship therefore helped me to gather data. This then presents me with a dilemma regarding sharing the stories that participants confided in me.

But as Calvey argues, such ethical concerns need to be put as 'a part of the ethnographic setting' rather than extracted them from the ethnographic setting and gave them honorific status. Spicker (2011) also argues that covert approach is necessary in some research, which has to 'minimize the effort of the process of observation on the way that people behave' (p.120). In this research, workers' acts of agency, such as resisting to the state and negotiating with the company, are the field that I want to minimise the impact of my observation on the way that these workers behave. By using a covert method, I felt that I would be able to witness more 'genuine' acts of worker agency.

Meanwhile, as I argued earlier, the access problem is the other reason that I insist on using this covert method: because Chinese companies tend to reject requests for access to do academic research, unless the research could bring them commercial benefits. Such rejection would certainly have been the case for my research into workers' practices. Therefore, although I realised certain ethical concerns in the process of using this covert approach, I still decided to use this method due to its necessity for this research.

Moreover, Spicker (2011) points out that there are two rights in relation to research subjects need to be considered when using the covert research: particular rights and general rights. The former refers to the relationships between the researchers and the participants – that is researchers' actions should be consistent with the principles they affirm. The general rights include rights of citizenship, 'general legal rights, and human rights, including rights to privacy where appropriate, and the right not to be exploited' (Spicker 2011: 122). The researchers are responsible for avoiding harm, promoting welfare, and respecting persons. These duties apply not only to research participants, but also to 'third parties and potentially to wider social groups' (ibid.).

The way I used covert approach in this research addressing the deception issue may harm the participants, if the particular rights of participants were taken priority over other general rights. But, the 'genuine' research results, based on this covert approach, will benefit 'wider social groups' – I feel that the research results contribute to understanding Chinese society and the role played by internet workers. In other words, the covert research ensures the general rights of wider social groups by contributing to common good – helping us understand how internet workers contribute to the growth of Chinese internet industries and the development of Chinese society. Therefore, I chose covert observation as an important method to explore the working life. I will discuss this issue in more detail in section 3.5.

Walsh (1998) suggests that the typical means of recording the data of observation is making field notes, which is 'concrete descriptions of social processes and their contexts and which set out to capture their various properties and features' (p.228). Brannan and Oultram (2002) also highlight the importance of making field notes during participant observation. In my research, as I adopted the covert approach, it was difficult for me to keep notes when I was working as an intern. Therefore, I wrote-up issues with key words on my notebook during working hours, and developed them into diaries after work as field notes. These field notes not only kept what I saw and thought during work, but also my reflections during the fieldwork. I discussed some parts of these notes with my supervisors via email during my three months' observation. From our discussions, I reflected on certain issues and changed some of my data-collection strategies.

As an intern, I was placed in the HR department and dealt with work relating to translation (from Chinese to English, and from English to Chinese). In this work, I read large amounts of documents relating to working life, such as recruiting, training, and rewarding. These documents were only circulated inside the company, so my covert approach facilitated my access to this information. My internship also enabled me to share experiences with other interns. These experiences gave me a deep understanding of interns' working conditions in this internet company and also facilitated my awareness of some of the general problems in contemporary Chinese university education, as all interns were university students.

As my internship was in the training team in the HR department, which took charge of workers' training programmes, I was able to talk to workers in different departments, including some technical departments. These workers included both new workers and experienced ones; thus, conversations with them showed me both the expectations from new workers and the subjective experiences of experienced ones. Sometimes, I found that workers who had work experience in other internet companies gave more detailed and comparative information about working life in the internet industries. This certainly helped me towards obtaining a general idea of working life in the Chinese internet industries.

On a number of occasions, I showed my interest in working in the internet industries, and was able to discuss certain topics relating to my research with full-time workers or interns. In these cases, I collected data from 'personal narratives' (Madison 2012: 28) – not only personal perspectives on certain events, but also personal experiences and lives – and 'topical interviews' (ibid.) – individual points of view towards particular topics. This kind of data, especially the personal narrative, gave me detailed and illuminating information about working life. For example, an intern in the HR department, Janet, told me of her difficulties and struggles in finding a job and settling down in Shanghai. Her experiences showed me a new world, with young people struggling for jobs and living in cities. Such stories have been in the media recently, but did not have the same impact as when I heard them directly from a university student my own age.

I was also asked to take part in some internal events at the company. These experiences helped me to understand how ordinary workers built up social networks in the company. In some events, I took pictures as part of my data for this research, and this visual data helped to show working life first-hand. I also took pictures for some issues relating to my research by my mobile phone. This became an important part of my first-hand information in the field.

As previously discussed, there were six full-time workers and five interns I spent the most time with during the three months, though I talked with more

than twenty workers in terms of their feelings and thoughts about their working life. I now introduce the information of these eleven participants below.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Position in the company</b>	<b>Working background</b>
Sam	Male	Full-time worker; Senior manager in HR department	He was a middle-aged man, who had worked at several companies in HR. He worked in Shanghai, away from his family, who were based in Nanjing, another city two hours away from Shanghai by train.
Peter	Male	Full-time worker; Senior manager in HR department	He was a similar age to Sam, and had also worked at several companies in HR. He also worked in Shanghai alone, while his family resided in Shenzhen, another big city two and a half hours away from Shanghai by air.
Tim	Male	Full-time worker; Technical worker in Innovation Department	He was the same age as me, and joined Grand at the same time as me. He had worked at another internet company for two years before he joined Grand.
Sarah	Female	Full-time worker; The manager of Online Novel Department	She was a middle-age woman, who had several years' experience in HR and PR at different companies.
Monica	Female	Full-time worker; An experienced HR	She was the friend who introduced me to Grand. She was in her thirties. She had a Master degree in HR, and had worked at another internet company in HR before joining Grand. Her husband worked in another internet company as the team leader of a technical department.
Katy	Female	Full-time worker; HR	She was in her thirties, and worked in the HR department at a state owned telecommunications company, before joining Grand. She shared many experiences working over-time with me,

			and gave me information about working life in SOEs, which enabled me to evaluate the quality of working life in internet companies.
Janet	Female	Intern; HR Department	She was a postgraduate at a famous university in Shanghai when she did the internship. She joined Grand in 2010 after having had internships in several other companies. She shared a lot of her and her classmates' working and living experiences in Shanghai with me, which helped me create a picture of university students' situations in mainland China.
Salina	Female	Intern; HR Department in Online Game Department	She was a postgraduate at a university in Shanghai. She joined Grand at the same time as Janet. She had also worked in several companies as an intern. She provided me lots of information about technical workers in the game department, which enabled me to explore how these workers practice in the company.
Cathy	Female	Intern; Customer Service Department	She was a postgraduate from a university in Shanghai. She joined Grand in the beginning of 2011. She had worked in two companies as an intern before joining Grand.
Lily	Female	Intern; HR Department	She was a postgraduate. She had worked in more than ten companies as an intern before joining Grand. She told me lots of stories about relationships between supervisors and students, which helped me explore how supervisors 'use' postgraduates for profits.
Shelly	Female	Intern; HR Department	She was a postgraduate in a university in Shanghai. She had worked in three companies as an intern before joining Grand.

**Table 3.2: Information of participants in Grand**

As stated earlier, I did not have direct interviews with any agency workers, but heard lots of stories about self-employed workers and code farmers from interviewees in Campus. I also heard about their situation via talking with Salina, the HR intern in The Game Department. In the department where I worked as an intern, I observed two code farmers while they worked, and watched them communicate with other colleagues in the department. Ideally, I would have collected more information about these two code farmers, but due to their limited networking with colleagues, I had few chances to talk with them, and hear their thoughts on working life.

In addition to in-depth interviews in Campus and covert observation in Grand, I invited one worker at Campus, Galeno, who participated in my interviews twice in 2011, to conduct self-observation. Bauchard (1976) defines self-observation as the 'self-reports of activities (of participants) in the form of diaries, check lists, etc.' (p.398). According to my instruction, Galeno kept a journal of his working life from 31<sup>st</sup> August 2011 to 20<sup>th</sup> December 2011. He also gave me the working journal he kept from September 2009 to July 2011. Therefore, I received his journal of working life during the period of September 2009 – December 2011. I had hoped that more workers would agree to engage with this process but they did not.

Bauchard (1976) points out that the validity of self-observation is low because of 'the unpredictable manner in which human perception and memory select and distort information' (p.398). He suggests systematic sampling techniques as a way to solve these problems. Admittedly, the validity of Galeno's self-observation might have been questionable but, as I conducted in-depth interviews after collecting the data, such risk was reduced. Galeno's journal contained his thoughts and reflections during the production process; how he judged control from the company and the state; and how he evaluated their practices in the production process.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

Madison (2012) claims that 'coding and logging data is the process of grouping together themes and categories that you have accumulated in the field' (p.43). I started the process of data analysis by transcribing the fourteen interviews. This took some time, as they were each two-hours long. But the most difficult thing for me was to translate the Chinese language interviews and field notes into English: some Chinese terms with special cultural connotations were difficult to translate, and it would have been a tough and painful job to completely translate all interviews and field notes, which came to

over 40,000 words. Therefore, I chose to categorise the Chinese interview content and field notes first, and then translate the necessary content according to different themes.

Madison (2012) notes that grouping themes creates points of views. At this stage, I read through the interview materials and field notes in order to familiarise myself with the data. Then, I created certain themes according to both my literature review and findings. Themes drawn from the literature review included: pay, work hours, autonomy, staff turnover, pressure, security, control from the company and the state, and acts of resistance and negotiation. Some of the themes that emerged in the interviews and observation included: relationships between full-time workers and interns, contribution of agency labour, monopolisation, and workers' ambition to set up individual businesses.

Then, I translated most Chinese materials under these themes into English. At this stage, I discussed most of the translated materials with my supervisors. From these discussions, I was able to filter and reorganise the data. Coding and translating the raw findings not only helped me identify and manage the data, but also helped me formulate my arguments. It is with this understanding that I approached the write-up of this thesis.

### **3.5 Ethical issues**

Madison (2012) claims that ethics is part of being human, as it includes the 'beliefs and principles upon which we judge human action' (p.96). Critical ethnographers have a responsibility to act morally, in order to 'contribute to the quality of life and to the enlivening possibilities of those we study' (p.97-98). My covert approach has raised the necessity to discuss ethical issues. As a researcher concerned with people's well-being, I felt responsible to protect my participants and minimise the harm that might be brought to them as a result of this research. Calvey (2000) claims that one of the ethical struggles in his covert research centred on 'the threat to my sense of self in the research process and the ongoing management of personal relationships, loyalties, obligations and confidences that developed' (p.54). This shows the difficulty of managing personal relationships and avoiding the problem of 'going native' during covert research.

Likewise, as noted in section 3.3.2 – my discussion of how I carried out covert observation in Grand, the first ethical issue is deception, which has been debated for a long period in relation to covert research. Although some researchers (Douglas 1976, Ferdinand et al. 2007) argue that the benefits of covert research can outweigh the risks, I still emotionally felt I was deceiving the participants. All participants in my research told me about their personal

narratives and activities because they regarded me as their personal friend, and believed that I would not reveal their experiences. The way I collected material via building up personal friendships with the participants helped me quite a lot in terms of accumulating research data, whilst it also presented me with a dilemma regarding using the information.

Before I wrote up this thesis, I presented this concern at various academic events in order to find help. For example, I presented this concern during the ECREA (European Communication Research and Education Association) summer school in August 2012 (it focused on the topic 'Media in/and society – present trends and developments', through a variety of working forms, such as feedback seminars, workshops, and lectures), where one response was that it originated from my problem of 'going native', and it was suggested that I ignore this issue. It is possible that my feeling of deception was partly because of my 'going native'. But, I would argue that I definitely have the responsibility to act morally and reflect on this feeling of deception as a researcher, when concerned with the quality of working life and well-being. I also discussed this issue with other researchers in a roundtable, named 'other ethics' (it focused on internet research ethics beyond some key concerns that have already been addressed. It discussed how the umbrella of ethics can be broadened in internet research), at the 13<sup>th</sup> AoIR (Association of Internet Research) conference, where it was suggested that I emphasise my identity as a researcher when using the information, instead of deceiving the participants by identifying myself as a friend of them.

This feeling of deception remains, yet I choose to write about the research in the public domain (the publicity of this PhD thesis is somewhat limited, but some journal articles and probably a book, which would be produced based on the data after this thesis, would be more public), because I feel that it contributes to understanding Chinese society and the role played by internet workers. Indeed, this is why I chose to pursue the research through what might be seen as an ethically problematic means. I hope that if my participants read this thesis and recognise themselves in it, they understand my motivations for carrying out covert research and the benefits it may bring, and that they do not feel deceived by me.

The second issue in terms of ethical concerns is how to protect the participants. Madison (2012) notes that researchers must make efforts to ensure that 'their work does not harm the safety, dignity, or privacy of those with whom they work' (p.129). And she regards anonymity as an important tactic. Thus, I anonymised both the companies and participants. I blurred most information about the companies, aiming to make them unidentifiable. It is arguable whether anonymity can completely protect the participants, because their colleagues and leaders might figure out their identity, as I describe their acts in detail. For example, when I describe that some interns in Grand help each other clock on and off, this might get them in trouble as their leaders

might recognise them if they read this thesis. But I believe it would not be a big problem, due to the high turnover rate in the internet industries. Indeed, most interns and full-time workers mentioned in my research had left Grand by the time of my writing. It then becomes safe for them to appear in this thesis with their acts of resistance.

The third issue is the safety of the researcher. As I was reminded during the 13<sup>th</sup> AoIR conference, certain parts of my research may harm me, as a Chinese student in the UK who might return to China to work after graduation. Admittedly, some parts of this research, such as my focus on workplace agency, might not be welcomed in China, which might have a negative impact upon my academic career. However, the main focus of this research is on quality of working life and I do not believe this subject would have a serious affect upon my future career in China.

I was reminded about my own safety in China after publishing some parts of this research, when I attended the ECREA summer school. China might be well known as an authoritarian state, but it is not a totalitarian state that seriously inhibits all academics speaking out within their publications. This is a piece of research concerning people's well-being, rather than dealing with some more dangerous issues, such as Calvey (2000) did in his door supervisors' research that might hurt him, due to the drug and gang issues that appeared in the fieldwork process. In other words, I believe that my future career in China might be slightly negatively influenced by the publication of some parts of this research, but I do not think that I would be put in jail when I return to China because of this research.

The last issue is the storage of data. I stored all the data, especially my field notes, on my own laptop when I conducted fieldwork, in order to make sure that the data was only used for this research. I plan to delete all the data ten years after I finish this research, in order to ensure the security of the data.

### **3.6 Reflection**

Haynes (2012) defines reflexivity as 'an awareness of the researcher's role in the practice of research and the way this is influenced by the object of the research, enabling the researcher to acknowledge the way in which he or she affects both the research processes and outcomes' (p.72). Reflexivity helps researchers to identify problems relating to social, ethical and political issues emerging in the research process, which includes 'defining research, data gathering, analysis and interpretation' (p.86) and 'writing up and publication' (ibid.).

Following Haynes (2012) suggestion, I kept reflection notes during my fieldwork, especially during my three months' observation. I usually went back to read my previous month's diaries, in order to find out some significant issues. I sometimes went back to the discussions between my supervisors and I, which focused on my findings in the two companies. This reminded me what I needed to discover. Also, I continued reading other researchers' work during my observation, to remind myself of my identity as a researcher.

Looking back, I would say that conducting the fieldwork was both challenging and rewarding. Some of the challenges were emotional, as I noted in section 3.5 (ethical issues): sometimes I felt that I was deceiving my participants. Some challenges emerged when I was preparing for the participant observation, especially when the online commerce company rejected my request for observation. Undoubtedly, carrying out interviews and observation was also challenging, due to certain difficulties I faced. Some participants for example, refused to talk about how they resisted the company to improve certain working conditions. But it was also rewarding; when I conducted the five non-standardised interviews after my observation, I felt confident to construct the non-standardised interviews, as I had learnt a lot from the nine interviews I carried out before the observation. I also felt a responsibility after engaging in the internet industries, as I was impressed by how the workers were working, living, and struggling. I had a much deeper understanding about the aim of my project, which mattered because it related to people's well-being. Moreover, it was the fieldwork that linked theories and practices, and gave me an insight into the Chinese internet industries.

## **Chapter Four: Excessive working hours and little pay**

### **4.1 Structure of this chapter**

I have stated the issues relating to internet workers by addressing the class problem in Chapter Two, and also developed a theoretical and conceptual framework in the chapter. In this chapter, I start to examine the empirical data using the theoretical background I provided in Chapter Two. In section 4.2, I introduce the high work intensity of these workers, and discuss their working hours. I not only illustrate these workers' excessive working hours, but also explain why these workers need to work excessive hours, and what problems are caused by this. I demonstrate variation within internet workers: different internet workers suffer different experiences in terms of working hours. I also explore dynamics of disunity within these workers. I argue that there are tensions within the lower middle class, due to these workers' different life chances. In section 4.3, I explore the issue of pay. I argue that different castes of workers experience different levels of inequality and injustice in terms of pay. The high work intensity and unreasonable pay clearly indicate a necessity to explore how the lower middle class – the social class of internet workers – is exploited (though there is variation across the class in the degree of exploitation they experience), and suffers inequality in terms of working hours and rewards, notwithstanding tensions within this class. In section 4.4, I argue that the Chinese internet industries constitute a new form of sweatshop in the digital era, where internet workers struggle with different experiences of inequality and injustice, which indicates the different levels of proletarianisation of this lower middle class. The status struggles between the three types of worker indicate tensions and disunity within this class of workers.

### **4.2 Work intensity**

As I mentioned in section 2.6, work intensity refers to working hours and how much labour effort workers expend during their time at work. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010) regard working hours as an important issue when assessing working conditions in cultural industries. There are three key points they remind us to pay particular attention to when looking at cultural workers' working time: 'Workers needing to be flexible with their time; workers not getting paid commensurate to the hours actually worked; and workers having to take on second jobs to make ends meet' (p.116).

Here, I am particularly interested in the extent to which these internet workers are working excessive hours, and why these workers need to work excessive hours.

Most of my interviewees, technical workers, stated that excessive working hours is a common phenomenon in the internet industries. For example, Tim, a new technical worker who joined Grand at the same time as me, stated that he had worked overnight for several days since he joined the department half a month ago. The following are some quotations from other workers who also experienced this issue.

*I always work until 10pm, which is nearly twice the standard working time... (Davis, technical worker in the Advertisement Department at Campus, 25<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

*There is no end to overtime... Look at the record of my clocking on and off: one day I worked 16 hours without any break... (William, technical worker in the 3G Department at Campus, 19<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

*We [the four team members] worked overnight for a whole week in last month... Normally, we work for nine hours per day, does it mean overtime? If it does, to be honest, we do overtime every day... (Walter, technical worker in the Advertisement Department at Campus, 25<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

*In Campus, the standard working time is 10am-9pm... This [long working hours] is quite common in the industries nowadays, where 10 hours are the average working hours... I have a friend working in another internet company, where he usually finishes his work at 11pm or 12am. We have the same experience during peak time, which refers to every two months in a season, when some departments even need to work during weekends. As far as I know, workers in the 3G department now are still staying in a hotel to work day and night for a new program... (Louis, former technical worker in the Open Platform Department at Campus, 28<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

This overtime experience is also shared by non-technical workers in both companies. For example, Cathy, a new employee in the customer service department in Grand, said that she needed to work from 9am to 9pm with only a half-hour lunch time. Katy, a new HR worker, who joined Grand at the same time as me, worked overtime for nine days, which usually meant she finished work at 11pm or midnight, during the first ten days she joined the company. She said that sometimes she even considered sleeping over in the office, because her home was far away from the company. If she was 'lucky' enough to finish work 11:30pm, she could claim reimbursement for the taxi fee and would arrive home after midnight, and go to sleep by 1am. But she would need to get up at 5am, as she needed to change three times on the underground to arrive at the office. Thus, the overtime seriously reduced her sleeping time and made her very tired.

Another story was collected from two experienced HR workers in Grand. They stated that, in 1998, when the company was experiencing rapid growth, they were required to work overtime until 2am and return to work at 9am.

Figure 4.1 is a picture I took in the beginning of my fieldwork in Grand. It encourages all full-time workers to write good comments for the company's new product on the Apple App Store and the Android Store in order to promote the product. Here, workers are encouraged to do extra work - writing comments as ordinary users - with reward of EXP, a system that links to workers' promotion and pay. It might not be as heavy work as full-time workers usually do in the excessive working hours, but it still shows a creative way, via which the company encourages workers to work excessive hours without realising the fact.



**Figure 4.1: Advertising for new product within Grand**

**Source: Observation journal 9<sup>th</sup> October 2011**

All these stories show the serious excessive working hours worked by full-time internet workers. And the most significant issue here is whether the excessive working hours is reasonably rewarded. This will be the first question answered in section 4.3. The key point of the issue in this section is to answer why these workers need to work excessive hours.

## 4.2.1 Why do full-time workers work excessive hours?

Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010) and some governmentality theorists (for example, McRobbie 2000, Nixon and Crewe 2004) point out that 'pleasure in creative work', helps to explain the degree to which workers in the cultural industries push themselves hard in the form of long hours. Some governmentality theorists relate such pleasure to the concept of self-exploitation: the concept highlights that autonomy often results in experiences of excessive working hours, low pay, and high risks. I addressed this issue in section 2.6.2 (a theoretical discussion of autonomy). According to my participants' experiences, there are certain rewards, such as pleasure, which encourage them work excessive hours. For example, some technical workers indicate their preference for working during weekends or after working hours, because the company provides good working conditions.

*Internet speed in the company is faster than my home, and all my working documents are in the office, so I prefer to work at weekends when I can spend half of time playing and half time on writing some reports and preparing for my next week's work... I don't think it is overtime work, instead, I think it's my own choice to spend time in the office... It's not uncommon among my colleagues... (Wynn, technical worker in the Open Platform Department at Campus, 24<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

This quote shows the rewards some workers in Campus gain from working during weekends. As Wynn highlighted, the fast internet speed and the relaxing environment in the office encouraged her to work excessive hours. These may not be pleasure in work as commonly discussed, in terms of the mental pleasure workers receive from their work. But these good conditions give some workers in Campus feelings of enjoyment and relaxation while working during the weekend, and need to be considered as one kind of pleasure given by internet work.

*Internet industries are creative industries, which are productive because of our creative ideas. Sometimes, the creative ideas could only come out after you've been thinking for ten hours, then, working overtime is quite usual... In my case, I usually work until 10pm, as I need time to rethink some of my ideas... Some of my colleagues mention that they could only [do] programming after working hours, as it's the only quiet time when they can concentrate on the creative stuff... (Galeno, technical worker in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 20<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

Therefore, these rewards, fast internet speed, flexibility of workload, and space for self-reflection, encourage workers to spend extra time on their work, and they enjoy the blurring of this work and leisure time.

Ross (2005, 2007) specifies that work in the high-tech industries has some characteristics in common with knowledge work. He claims that the endless and never-solved problems in all knowledge work keeps workers going on after their working hours. In the internet industries, it is necessary to keep up to date with new information and technology, even after working hours.

*Even after I go back home, I am still doing the same things as I did in the office: reading, using the internet, designing, and programming... (Galeno, technical worker in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 20<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

Galeno's statement shows that internet work, similar to other knowledge work, requires workers to update their skills and knowledge via reading, designing and programming after work. It also leaves 'endless and never-solved problems' to workers, which sort of forces them to carry on the same work they did in their companies when at home.

Moreover, internet work has other extraordinary characteristics that drive workers to sacrifice their leisure time.

*[Overtime] sometimes is because of the industries themselves. I mean you can only leave after your programs are updated and [you] have made sure there is no problem. So, it requires you to stay longer than the office hours... (Lara, non-technical worker in the Advertisement Department at Campus, 26<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

*Some technical workers need to get up at midnight if there are emergency cases, such as some emergency problems relating to users' online activities... (Lara, non-technical worker in the Advertisement Department at Campus, 19<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

Here is the difference that distinguishes internet work from other knowledge work: technical workers need to update and secure the running of programs, which forces them to spend extra time on their work. It is not my intention to relate such characteristics of internet work to self-exploitation, which has already been widely done. Instead, I intend to relate overtime to certain aspects of Chinese culture and to questions of exploitation.

Ross (2005, 2007) points out that workers in the Chinese outsourcing high-tech industries work overtime because of high competition in the industries: they need to work harder to help avoid the risk of other workers taking their places. Some of my participants show the anxiety caused by high levels of competition.

*Of course, there are some workers working overtime because of the high pressure from their work: they need to work more after the office hours, in*

order to meet a lot of deadlines... (Louis, former technical worker in the Open Platform Department at Campus, 18<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)

*I work overtime because I always have very tight deadlines [so] I need to work harder to meet them... (Lara, non-technical worker in the Advertisement Department at Campus, 26<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

*Every month we have KPIs [Key Performance Indicators] to push us to work overtime... (Walter, technical worker in the Advertisement Department at Campus, 25<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

Both deadlines and KPIs are set by managers to push workers to compete with each other. For example, workers who cannot keep deadlines will be marked low in KPIs, and workers with high KPIs have higher bonuses and a greater chance of promotion than workers with low KPIs. Such competition forces workers to be anxious about their career in relation to promotional and economic benefits, and to work overtime, in order to secure these benefits.

*My leader always reminds me to keep myself in a high competitive status. For example, to think about who will be fired if the company needs to lay off staff and if I might be the person laid off: all this means I need to work harder. (Galeno, technical worker in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 24<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

Managers and companies play a key role in pushing these workers to work overtime, because they seek high profits with low labour costs. For example, Galeno shows how his manager keeps him in a sense of crisis: he may be laid off if he does not work hard. Louis, Lara and Walter all indicate that companies push them to work overtime by endless deadlines and KPIs, which are directly related to their bonus and pay.

According to my participants, it is common to promote 'geek culture' in all internet companies, which encourages workers, especially technical workers, to show their love of the internet work via working day and night.

*I hate geek culture in the company. It just encourages these nerds [she points to her technical colleagues] to work day and night without any pay! The company promotes this culture in every event, such as training and gathering, so I always try to avoid these events... This [geek culture] is exploitation... (Lara, non-technical worker in the Advertisement Department at Campus, 26<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

This reference to 'geek culture' suggests the need to discuss Chinese culture in relation to work. Qiu (2009) points out the importance of considering the one-child policy in terms of assessing work in contemporary Chinese society. He claims that young workers nowadays work hard and are keen to succeed in a short space of time, because they are the only child in the family, and everyone has high expectations of them. Ross (2005) claims that the

one-child policy drives every family to have high expectations of showing-off the attainments of the only child. This forces young workers to frequently job hop, in order to succeed quickly. Here, most of my participants, who are the only child in their families, indicate their parents' high expectations. Moreover, some of them are from developing areas, where they are the only university student in their villages. In this case, not only their parents, but also the whole village has high expectations of them obtaining a highly respected job with good pay in one of the big cities. This expectation certainly gives some workers a sense of competition – they need to compete with their classmates to get a good job, and compete with their colleagues via hard work to keep this job.

The one-child policy also impacts overtime in another way: non-local workers are more likely to spend extra time in the office, because they do not need to have dinner with their parents, whereas local workers, who are the only child in the family, do. Therefore, both internet companies in my study prefer to recruit non-local workers, who are more likely to devote themselves to working overtime.

*I am alone here [in Beijing] without my parents, so I don't need to enjoy dinnertime with them. And it makes me able to work in the company until midnight... Basically, parents prefer children to come back from work around 7pm-8pm, in order to have dinner together... There are fewer local employees in my company, because it is impossible for local Beijingers to work overtime like us [non-locals]... (Wynn, technical workers in the Open Platform Department at Campus, 24<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

Here, Wynn points out an important part of Chinese culture: spending time with one's parents. It is an important part of Chinese people's lives, which may be because of the one-child policy. Qiu (2009) states that the one-child policy helps to tighten the relationship between parents and the only child in the family. Parents focus on their only child with unprecedented protection and control, for example, they often require the child to come back from work before dinnertime, even very regularly after getting married. Therefore, non-local workers in big cities, such as Beijing and Shanghai, where these internet companies are based, are more able to frequently work overtime than local workers. It is the same situation in Grand: most non-local workers tend to spend more extra time in the office than local workers. These non-local workers work late and hard because they are far away from their family and friends.

The last reason that internet workers over-work is related to the Chinese work ethic. Max Weber (2002) regards the Protestant work ethic as an important force behind Protestantism's involvement in the development of capitalism. He believes that the Protestant work ethic drives Protestants to work hard and engage in commercial investment to accumulate wealth, which

ultimately contributes to the development of capitalism. His later work on the impacts of the Chinese religions of Confucianism and Taoism towards Chinese social development, such as answering why capitalism did not develop in China, is not helpful to this research. However, his Protestant ethic thesis helps relate Chinese internet workers' hard work to a certain Chinese work ethic: Chinese people believe that working harder makes their lives, especially their family well-being, better. Lim and Lay (2003: 321) highlight Confucianism as an important factor relating to Chinese work ethic. They claim that Confucian values, which still play a vital role in contemporary Chinese society, encourage individuals to contribute back to family and society via hard work, because of the close relationships between them.

Harrell (1985) discusses the Chinese work ethic in a sophisticated way. He points out that Western scholars, from Arthur Smith's observation of diligent Chinese people in 1894 to Chester Holcombe's observation of Chinese poor, to whom 'life is a never-ending struggle against starvation' (p.205), in the nineteenth century, have stereotyped the Chinese as tireless workers for centuries. Chinese people are characterised as 'industrious and diligent' (ibid.) workers. However, Harrell also points out that there are certain circumstances, especially after the economic reform in 1978, in which some Chinese people choose to not work hard. Thus, this enlightens him to consider Chinese work ethic in a historical and cultural perspective.

On the basis of his observations in a village in Taiwan, he sums up the values that motivate Chinese people to work hard as 'the ethic of entrepreneurship': 'the investment of one's resources (land, labour, and/or capital) in a long-term quest to improve the material well-being and security of some group to which one belongs and with which one identifies' (p.216). Here, he particularly highlights three elements in these values: a long-term quest, the idea of security – not only maximising economic benefits, but also establishing 'hedged and defenses against loss' (ibid.), and the group – the family or 'the collectivity of one's jia (family) mates and all their potential descendants' (p.217). With such elements, he claims that Chinese people will work hard when 'they see possible long-term benefits, in terms of improved material conditions and/or security, for a group with which they identify' (ibid.).

This could be related to certain social values promoted by CCP in recent years: the Chinese Dream – a slogan promoted by the new Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, that refers to building a moderately prosperous society and realise national rejuvenation via hard work. He encourages the youth to 'dare to dream, work assiduously to fulfill the dreams and contribute to the revitalisation of the nation'.<sup>24</sup> This is what Harrell sums up as a political context of Chinese ethic: Chinese leaders tend to direct Chinese traditional values of hard work to

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<sup>24</sup> Xinhua News 2013

'a different set of goals and into service of the interests of different kinds of groups' (p.212). Here, the new Chinese leader tends to direct Chinese people's traditional work ethic – improving the material well-being and security of their families via hard work – into service of the interests of the bureaucratic capitalist group, which are to build a moderately prosperous society.

These young people, who 'dare[s] to dream, work[s] assiduously to fulfill the dreams', certainly includes most young Chinese internet workers, who value hard work over enjoyment. They are expected to devote themselves to hard work, as it shows their morality. Some of my participants mentioned that they spend extra time on work because they are single.

*... [Working extensive hours] is because most of us are single, and the condition in [the] office is better than in our accommodation... We don't have any friend to spend time with when we just come here, so work becomes the best choice for us... (Galeno, technical worker in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 24<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

*There are several reasons for us to work overtime... Some of us stay in the office until late night just because the condition in [the] office is better than in our rented houses, and we don't have extra money to spend on leisure. For example, social life in Beijing is quite expensive compared to our low salary, so some of us cannot afford to go outside with friends. Using [the] internet in [the] office becomes the best way to have a social life for these people. (Louis, former technical worker in the Open Platform Department at Campus, 18<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

These single workers are usually non-locals, which results in their limited social networks. It might be hard for Western scholars to understand the logic here: even though these workers are far away from their families and friends, they could still have other choices rather than spending time on work after normal working hours. This again relates to the Chinese work ethic, as discussed above: Chinese people work hard when 'they see possible long-term benefits, in terms of improved material conditions and/or security, for a group with which they identify' (p.217). Young people in modern China keep to this 'religion' in their working habits, which now echoes Xi's slogan of the Chinese Dream: work hard to improve material conditions of their families and build a prosperous society.

This work ethic sometimes even influences experienced workers who have families. Some of my interviewees said that some executives in Campus chose to play online games with them after office hours in order to build up close relationships with them. Such social networking helps executives manage their workers, which is an important part of their work. Again, these executives devoting themselves to their work, by giving up spending time with their families, shows the important role the Chinese work ethic plays in the overtime work in Chinese internet industries.

Therefore, full-time workers' excessive working hours depend on four issues: the rewards of internet work; characteristics of knowledge work; high competition in the industries; and the Chinese work ethic. The high competition is driven by the managers (of companies), who seek high profits via workers' overtime, and the parents, who expect their child to succeed in a short space of time.

Interns also work overtime in the internet industries, as they do in other Chinese industries. But their overtime in the internet industries brings about some significant issues. One is their complicated relationship with full-time workers, which indicates status struggles within the class, and another is their reasons for working overtime, which indicates some problems in the contemporary Chinese education system. Below, I talk about interns' inferior positions in the two companies, compared to their overtime work – interns are treated as an inferior group in companies, although they do overtime work as full-time workers.

#### **4.2.2 Interns' inferior positions**

Interns in the internet industries are mostly treated as full-time workers in terms of their working hours. In Grand, interns are required to clock on and off as full-time workers do, and spend the same time on work as full-time workers do. Janet told me that her team needed to recruit some Spanish and Arabic translators for the technical departments. But, after negotiating with some interviewees, the head decided to recruit interns who majored in Spanish and Arabic to carry out the work, because the salaries of full-time translators were out of their budget. Interns in this case, were regarded as an alternative to full-time workers, because they could do the same work.

Lily, an intern in the HR department, said the company continuously recruited interns to fill full-time vacancies, because interns were cheaper and easier to manage. For example, Janet was struggling to write up her MA dissertation, find a formal job and conduct her intern work near the end of her internship in Grand; therefore, she decided to quit the internship. But this was rejected, as her work could not be suspended because of her departure. It was suggested that she find a new intern to take over her work, if she really wanted to leave. Here, the pressing issue is that interns are forced to take over the company's responsibility of finding new interns to fill vacancies. This then becomes a way for the company to control the interns.

*We [full-time workers] think they [interns] are the same as us, in terms of working time and the tasks being arranged... (Wynn, technical worker in the Open Platform Department at Campus, 24<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

*... I did more work when I was an intern than now. During my internship, we three interns were required to carry out seven full-time workers' work... (William, technical worker in the 3G Department at Campus, 26<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

But such overtime does not guarantee interns the same position in companies as full-time workers. Instead, interns are regarded as an inferior group in companies:

*Most interns are following our [full-time workers'] steps. They are doing the jobs we assigned to them... They are a separated group from us... They are still students rather than professionals... They are the second-class workers... (Galeno, technical worker in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 20<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

According to these full-time workers, they are the people who control the production process, whereas interns are in an inferior position regarding work. This indicates the tension between these two groups. Some cases below show the struggles of interns because of their perceived inferior positions.

At the time that I did my internship in Grand, there was a story about the tension between full-time workers and interns, which was widely being circulated amongst interns. An intern who had worked in Grand for more than three months was guaranteed a position after her graduation. But this did not materialise, because her team leader disliked her. She received this news at a time when Campus recruitment was nearly over, which meant she was unable to find a good job during that year, and needed to wait for one more year. In this case, one full-time worker had a large influence on one interns' future career.

Sometimes, interns are required to take over the responsibilities of full-time workers, both because of and despite their inferior positions. For example, Janet was blamed by her team leader because a new employee could not find anyone in her team to begin his commencement procedures when she was on leave. Janet argued with her leader that it was her holiday and that she was not supposed to be responsible for the work. But she was still blamed because she was the only intern involved in the work. As Janet said, every time there was a mistake, it was the interns' fault.

This story may seem to suggest a problem with my argument concerning the class schema in Chapter Two: interns struggle in the relationships with full-time workers, rather than suffer similarly bad working conditions. This may seem to suggest that they occupy different class locations, However, as Wright (2009) emphasises, a fully elaborated class analysis needs to combine the 'macro-model of conflict and transformation with the macro-micro, multi-level model of class processes and individual lives' (p.111). The class structure of his model includes not only the mechanisms of exploitation and domination

associated with the traditional Marxist approach, but also analysis of mechanisms that sustain the privileges of advantaged classes by status, associated with Weberian approaches to inequality.

Breen (2002) has discussed Weberian understandings of the mechanisms sustaining the privileges of advantaged classes in terms of the concept of 'life chances'. Life chances are chances that 'individuals have of gaining access to scarce and valued outcomes' (p.43). He then claims three aspects of the distribution of power in society, which is widely adopted by Weberian approach, as factors that influence the distribution of life chances: classes, status groups, and parties. All these dimensions overlap, whilst none of them can be reduced to others. The status groups imply 'some level of identity in the sense of some recognised "positive or negative social estimation of honour" (Weber [1922]1978: 932)' (Wright 2002: 834). In other words, members of a status group are conscious of being members of the group.

Wright (2002) points out that Weber distinguishes status from class by highlighting the different mechanisms through which they shape inequalities of the material conditions of people's lives: status affects people's well-being with 'the monopolisation of ideal and material goods or opportunities' (p.835); by contrast, class influences people's well-being via economic assets that people bring to market exchanges. Weber distinguishes status groups from classes by highlighting members' consciousness, and regards classes as objective places.

Here, as some of my interviewees state, both full-time workers and interns are conscious of being members of certain status groups in society. For example, Galeno points out that interns are still understood as 'students', a group considered inferior to professionals. Nevertheless, some of them do the same work as professionals. Some of my observations in Grand also suggest that there are various status groups within the lower middle class. For example, interns, ordinary full-time workers and team leaders all have their own dining areas. Team leaders usually drive together to good restaurants in the downtown area of Shanghai, full-time workers usually go to the canteen in the centre of the Software Park, and interns usually go to cheaper snack bars near underground stations. Most members are conscious of belonging to these different groups – it is rare to find ordinary full-time workers go with team leaders for lunch, for example. This shows disunity within the lower middle class: different forms of workers have their own 'principles of their consumption of goods as represented by special styles of life' (Cox 1950: 226) – the way 'status groups' distinguishes from 'classes'.

These different kinds of workers have different life chances, and this results in status struggles, such as the bullying of interns by some full-time workers. Such tensions raise a question: why do large numbers of university students still pour into the intern market, when they have inferior positions, and

have to work as hard as full-time workers? This might relate to the pay they receive for their hard work, which I will discuss in section 4.3. However, the more significant issue here is the high competition amongst fresh graduates. Below, I introduce the issues that cause this high competition amongst fresh graduates, which ultimately pushes them towards the intern market.

### **4.2.3 The large number of interns and the problematic education system**

As I mentioned earlier, all interns I met during my fieldwork had fruitful intern experiences. The intern market has grown rapidly in recent years and one of the forces behind this rapid growth has been high competition in the job market. The large number of low-quality university graduates, caused by the problematic education system, has resulted in difficult employment conditions: the job market cannot afford the large numbers of fresh graduates, and a large number of vacancies require graduates with higher education quality than they have now. Thus, this results in large numbers of graduates cannot find jobs, whilst large numbers of vacancies are waiting for candidates with high education quality.

Qiu (2009) paints a historical picture of the Chinese education system since the Han dynasty, the time when Confucian learning was broadened to include members of the lower class. He focuses on the recent reform of the education system in the 1980s, when the CCP further extended national compulsory education to 'peasants and the proletariat working class' (p.135). In particular, in 1999, the CCP issued two policies 'The Action Plan for Education Development in the Forthcoming New Century' (*Mianxiang 21<sup>st</sup> shiji jiaoyu zhenxing jihua*) and the 'Decision of Deepening Educational Reform and Promoting Quality-oriented Education' (*Guanyu shenhua jiaoyu gaige quanmian tuijin suzhi jiaoyu de jueding*),<sup>25</sup> aimed at expanding college education. This education reform caused some problems: university degrees were denigrated because of the large number of students graduating; employment difficulties followed on from the large number of graduates and denigration of university degrees; free interns were pervasive because of the high competition in the job market; and rural students struggled because of the increasing tuition fees.

Figures 4.2 and 4.3 show increases in the higher education population increased from 1999 to 2010. For example, the proportion of acceptances rose

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<sup>25</sup> Higher Education Research Institute, 31<sup>st</sup> August 2009

from 55.6% in 1999 to 69.4% in 2010 (see Figure 4.2), meaning that nearly 70% of students who took the college entrance exam were guaranteed to be educated in colleges in 2010. Furthermore, the proportion of students going into higher education had risen from 12.5% in 2000 to 26.5% in 2010. This meant the number of students accessing higher education in 2010 was double that of 2000. This would not be problematic if quality remained high. But the problem here is that the high quantity of university students has not guaranteed a higher quality of the higher education. In fact, in contemporary Chinese society, higher education is largely derogated, because of its low quality.

Time (Year)	Students attended college entrance exam (million)	Students accepted (million)	Acceptance rate (%)
1990	2.83	0.61	21.6%
1991	2.96	0.62	20.9%
1992	3.03	0.75	24.8%
1993	2.86	0.98	34.3%
1994	2.51	0.90	35.9%
1995	2.53	0.93	36.8%
1996	2.41	0.97	40.2%
1997	2.78	1.00	36.0%
1998	3.20	1.08	33.8%
1999	2.88	1.60	55.6%
2000	3.75	2.21	58.9%
2001	4.54	2.68	59.0%
2002	5.10	3.20	62.7%
2003	6.13	3.82	62.3%
2004	7.29	4.47	61.3%
2005	8.77	5.04	57.5%
2006	9.50	5.46	57.5%
2007	10.10	5.66	56.0%
2008	10.50	5.99	57.0%
2009	10.20	6.29	61.7%
2010	94.7	65.7	69.4%

Figure 4.2: Numbers of college students' population from 1990 to 2010

Source: *China Education Online*, 25<sup>th</sup> January 2010

Year	Proportion of people going into higher education
2000	12.5%
2001	13.3%
2002	15%
2003	17%
2004	19%
2005	21%
2006	22%
2007	23%
2008	23.3%
2009	24.2%
2010	26.5%

**Figure 4.3: 2000-2010 proportion of Chinese people going into higher education**

**Source: Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 21<sup>st</sup> March 2012**

At the time of writing, there is a widely popularised understanding of higher education in Chinese society: if education is a train to working life, then there is standing room for junior college graduates, seats for undergraduates, hard berths for masters, and soft berths for PhD students. However, when the train arrives at the labour market, all students are cheap labour. According to this understanding, there is no difference between various education degrees, because all graduates only qualify as cheap labour in companies.

In particular, the postgraduate programme is a good case by which to understand the denigration of higher education degrees. In 2004, the top three universities in China, Peking University, Tsinghua University, and Zhejiang University, claimed that the number of postgraduates (including masters and PhD students) was larger than the number of undergraduates.<sup>26</sup> The expansion of postgraduate programmes, then, required more supervisors to be recruited, because of the one-to-one teaching model. But few supervisors

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<sup>26</sup> *Education in China*, 11<sup>th</sup> January 2012

were newly recruited to these three universities to reflect their largely increased postgraduate numbers. Instead, supervisors were encouraged to supervise more postgraduates than they were able to.<sup>27</sup> The result of the education reform is that students have had more chances to access higher education, but the most important part of the education, the quality, has been reduced.

For example, from what I heard amongst all interns, nowadays, postgraduates (students with master degrees) in China can pay publishers to publish their research. According to Lily and Cathy, the two interns in Grand I mentioned earlier, the price of publishing a paper varies from £80 to £200, depending on the level of the journal. CSSCI (Chinese Social Science Citation Index) journals charge more than other lower-level journals. It is not most students' personal choice to pay for publication; rather, they are forced to pay this money by universities, because publication has become the criterion for judging postgraduates' degrees in almost all universities. Thus, postgraduates are forced to spend money on these non-qualified publications. It is depressing to come across these cases, but it does highlight the serious problem: the denigration of higher education degrees caused by the education reform.

As I mentioned earlier in this section, the large number of graduates and the denigration of university degrees has resulted in employment difficulties. For example, Janet told me that many graduates cannot find a job. In one of her hundreds of job interviews, seven out of nine interviewees had master degrees. Janet's university has been highly regarded by many employers in Shanghai over the few past years, however it became quite hard for graduates to find jobs in 2011, because the university expanded its undergraduate program and postgraduate program in 2008 and 2009, which created large numbers of graduates in 2011. According to her friend who majored in German, only one student out of all the graduates in the class, received an offer from Amway – a company selling health and beauty products – as a salesperson. Such difficulties in employment were also shared by graduates of other majors. According to a member of staff in the Employment Guiding Centre in Janet's university, who had a close relationship with Janet, few students in the university were able to find jobs in 2011, and the average monthly salary had been reduced to £300 after taxes; even lower than a migrant peasant's salary.

The employment difficulty then makes finding jobs quite competitive: graduates are not only required to have good academic records, but also need to have accumulated many working experiences before graduation, such as intern experiences. Therefore, more and more students pour into the intern market, as I mentioned earlier in this section.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

There are still some significant issues I want to address in terms of interns' experiences, related to their pay. Thus, I will return to these interns' experiences later, in section 4.3. Now I turn to assess agency labour's work intensity.

#### **4.2.4 Code farmers' inferior positions and self-employed workers' high work intensity**

Similar to interns, code farmers are regarded by full-time workers as an inferior group in companies, though they suffer from working excessive hours like full-time workers. They are completely differentiated from full-time workers via their online user names, ID cards and daily lives in the companies. For example, in Grand's internal online instant message system, OC (Office Communication), these code farmers have a special signal 'v.' on their online user names, which easily distinguishes them from full-time workers and interns. Meanwhile, these code farmers wear special work ID cards displaying a white line, which also differentiates them from full-time workers and interns.

*Code farmers are the inferior citizens of the company, with lower skills, lower pay, and no social benefits. So they definitely would group [into] their own social networks, which obviously are far away from ours [full-time workers]... (Galeno, technical worker in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 20<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

*Personally, I rarely talk to them [code farmers]... They are another group that is far away from us... (Louis, former technical worker in the Open Platform Department at Campus, 18<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

All these material goods enable code farmers to be conscious of their identities: a group of people, whose pay and education levels are lower than others, without the guaranteed social benefits available to other kinds of workers. This again highlights the Weberian concept of status groups: though internet workers are generally in the lower middle-class class position, several status groups interact with each other within this class. These tensions and dynamics thus influence certain groups of people's well-being, along with the special class location of these workers.

For example, in Grand, the two code farmers in my group rarely talked to others in the department, and never spent lunchtime with us. Salina, a HR in the game department in Grand, said that code farmers in the game department never joined full-time workers for lunch, as the latter usually excluded the former from their social networks. Monica, my friend working in Grand, told me that in her previous internet company, most code farmers felt inferior and

never tried to talk to full-time workers, because their low wages and uncertain working conditions obviously excluded them from full-time workers' social networks.

The inferior positions of code farmers, result in excessive working hours in certain ways. Salina gave me an example: a code farmer in the game department was required by a full-time worker to work overnight in order to finish a project, which was taken charge of by the full-time worker. In other words, the code farmer was required to take over the full-time worker's work without any pay or even appreciation. Salina said it was common to find code farmers in the department being bullied by full-time workers in this way, because full-time workers believed that some low-skilled work needed to be carried out by the inferior groups, such as code farmers.

*They [code farmers] usually carry out the hardest work. We rarely have the chance to talk to them... (Lara, non-technical worker in the Advertisement Department at Campus, 19<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

*There is a big board with the word 'outsourcing' outside the software park, which clearly reminds us that the city has been occupied by outsourcing services. To IT workers, such as me, outsourcing means thousands of typists who do low-skilled jobs as cheap labourers... The only advantage of these agency labourers is that they do not pollute the environment... (Galeno, technical worker in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 12<sup>th</sup> October 2009, Self-observation journal)*

In his working journal, Galeno indicated his contempt for code farmers, referring to them as 'typists who do low-skilled jobs'. In his mind, the only advantage of recruiting code farmers in internet companies is that they 'do not pollute the environment'. This part of the journal shows how full-time workers undervalue code farmers and are highly aware of the different status groups to which full-time workers and code farmers belong. I show tensions between different status groups within the lower middle class and status struggles experienced by code farmers, which influences the quality of their working lives in the industries.

Self-employed workers, the other form of agency labour I discuss in this research, have the highest work intensity amongst all workers, because their pay directly relates to how many projects they finish in a certain time.

*... Their working time is insanely long: usually from 8am to 2am the next day. Do you think you could work over 14 hours per day? Even though their wage is high, no one could do the work for years... (William, technical worker in the 3G Department at Campus, 19<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

It is easy to understand self-employed workers' long working hours, because their wages are based on the number of projects they finish in a month. As my interviewee, William, a technical worker in the 3G department

said, these workers need to work day and night to meet every deadline, in order to conduct as many projects as possible.

This point needs to be related to the New Labour Law (*xin laodongfa*), which seems to benefit agency labour, but indeed makes self-employed workers' working conditions worse. Before 2008, there was a form of outsourcing services, known in the industries by a Chinese phrase I am translating as 'labour dispatch service' (*laowu paiqian*). Internet companies paid outsourcing companies according to the number of workers dispatched to carry out the project, as opposed to the now dominant form of outsourcing whereby internet companies pay outsourcing companies by project rather than by worker. Payment by worker was more popular than payment by project, as the price for the former was cheaper for internet companies.

However, the situation changed in 2008, when China's new labour law took effect: the new labour law has restricted the use of the labour dispatch service. For example, it requires that 'dispatched workers shall enjoy the right to obtain the same pay as that received by workers of the commissioning entity for the same work'.<sup>28</sup> This raised labour costs for internet companies. The new labour law also requires that 'the dispatched workers shall assume the temporary, assistant or substitute positions generally',<sup>29</sup> which limits the positions that dispatched workers can take in the industries. Consequently, the law has decreased the use of labour dispatch services, although it was criticised as the term 'equal pay for equal work' was not clearly defined. It was not clear whether equal pay included equal social benefits and bonuses from the commissioning companies. In other words, according to the new labour law, commissioning companies need to pay more for and have fewer chances to use the labour dispatch service, because the law standardised the way of using the service. Since then, the labour dispatch service has been replaced by a labour outsourcing service (*laowu waibao*), a form that allows commissioning companies to outsource projects to individuals or small teams, and requires commissioning companies to pay outsourcing companies by project rather than by worker.

The new labour law seems to standardise the outsourcing market, and guarantee good working conditions for agency labour. However, from what I observed and from my interviews, it is obvious that self-employed workers are pushed very hard and suffer from high work intensity – finishing as many projects as possible, because their wage is based on project completion. These poor working conditions are similar to the situation in the 'pre-industrial family-based household economy' (Prak 2000: 150), when workers were forced to be responsible for the production process and benefits of products.

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<sup>28</sup> Article 63, in *Labour contract law of the People's Republic of China*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

One of the differences here is that the self-employed workers do not have kinships as workers in the family workshops did. And the other difference is that workers here are pushed to have high work intensity, which is where the new labour law plays an important role. I further discuss these self-employed workers' difficult working conditions in Chapter Six, where I highlight the high risks involved in such outsourcing work.

With recognising that most internet workers I observed and interviewed had experiences of excessive working hours or high work intensity, it is important to discuss how much they were paid for their work, and whether the pay really reflected their work efforts. Therefore, in the next section, I discuss the inequalities and injustices surrounding the issue of workers' pay.

## 4.3 Pay

As I pointed out in section 2.6, Green (2002) regards pay as an important component of work effort. How much are internet workers paid for their high work intensity? Workers' pay here includes two parts: salary and pay for excessive working hours, as discussed below.

### 4.3.1 Unequal salaries

According to a report from International Labour Organisation, which investigates per capita monthly income in 72 countries, Chinese workers' average income is £399 (\$656).<sup>30</sup> Although there is no official figure of Chinese internet workers' average income, a relevant figure given by Sina Economy indicates that internet workers' monthly salary is above the per capita monthly income. The average annual salary of fresh graduates in the top 5 internet companies is between £10,000 and £15,000 (the average monthly income is between £833 and £1,250).<sup>31</sup>

Figure 4.4 shows how new employees in Grand gain promotion and pay rises: the employee can rise one professional level (S level, which I will explain in Chapter Five) and 250 RMB (£25) pay rise after earning 1013 EXP, which can be earned via daily work, projects, and extra tasks (such as writing good comments for the company's new product). This game style management, a style of creative management created by Grand, may not directly show how much different levels of workers earn, but at least, we can get a sense about

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<sup>30</sup> Ifeng news 2012

<sup>31</sup> Sina Economy 2013

the average salary of most workers there: as figure 4.4 shows, the starting monthly salary is 5,000RMB (£500). This is still above the average monthly salary of Chinese workers (£399).

<b>Growing Map of Employees in Game Style Management System</b>					
<b>New employee</b>		<b>Q1</b>	<b>Q2</b>	<b>Q3</b>	<b>Q4</b>
<b>S level</b>	<b>S30</b>	<b>S30</b>	<b>S30</b>	<b>S31</b>	<b>S31</b>
<b>Salary</b>	<b>5,000 RMB</b>	<b>5,000 RMB</b>	<b>5,000 RMB</b>	<b>5,250 RMB</b>	<b>5,250 RMB</b>
<b>EXP</b>	<b>20,000</b>	<b>20,298</b>	<b>20,770</b>	<b>21,013</b>	<b>21,282</b>
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**Figure 4.4: Game style management system**

**Source: An internal-circulated document from Grand**

However, this does not indicate that internet workers enjoy a high-level salary among all Chinese workers. Instead, their annual income is still lower than SOE workers and civil servants. According to the State Statistics Bureau Population Division, the average annual income of workers in Chinese private enterprises in 2012 was £2,875; in contrast, the average annual income of SOE workers was £4,677.<sup>32</sup> This indicates a large gap between private enterprise workers' and SOE workers' income. In particular, another report from the Website for Agriculture, Rural areas and Farmers states that even in the same industry, the average annual income of SOE workers is much higher than private enterprise workers'. For example in the telecommunication industry, SOE workers earn on average 1.8 times more than private enterprise

<sup>32</sup> Netease Economy 2013

workers'.<sup>33</sup> In 2013, Netease Economy, one of the most popular portals in China, conducted a survey about SOE workers' income in 287 SOEs, which stated that the average annual income of these SOE workers in 2012 was £11,136, which was 3.8 times higher than private enterprise workers'. The highest average income in one SOE was even over £42,000.<sup>34</sup> All these figures indicate that internet workers, representative of private enterprise workers, earn a lower income than most SOE workers. This addresses a necessity to compare internet workers' income with SOE workers' income, and further discuss this gap.

Based on the unofficial figures about internet workers' income, which were provided earlier, and some figures from my participants, technical workers seem to be paid about £13,000 per year, and non-technical workers receive £4,500 per year, compared to SOE workers' annual salary of over £10,000.

*... The Monthly salary for new employees in the products department is £450. My beginning salary was £600 per month, which was the same as new employees with postgraduate degrees. The average beginning salary is £500-£550 per month... Now my monthly salary is £900 after increasing twice. But actually, I only get £700 per month after tax... (Galeno, technical worker in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 24<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

*After two years, my monthly salary is now £850 before tax, which is low in the industries... (Carl, technical worker in the Open Platform Department at Campus, 27<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

Besides the basic salary, SOE workers also receive various bonuses from the state and some of their living costs are covered by the state. At the moment, there is no official report about details of SOE workers' bonus and benefits. But in recent years, some media reports have focused on the good benefits and high bonus SOE workers receive from the state, which are usually much higher than their salaries. For example, Sina Economy points out that SOE workers receive higher pension and housing fund than other workers: according to the state, workers' pension funding and housing fund, which are partly paid by the company, cannot be over 12% of their last year's salary; whilst such fund of SOE workers, which are fully paid by their work units, is over 20% in most SOEs (this means SOE workers pay zero to the funding, but receive higher pay after retirement than other workers).<sup>35</sup> In 2013, another news report from Netease News points out that the monthly travel allowance for workers in a SOE in Shanxi, a northwest province in China, was £530,

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Guangzhou Daily 2013

which was 5 times higher than the minimum wage in the province.<sup>36</sup> During my fieldwork, I was told by my friend, who works in a SOE in Shanghai, that every employee there only needs to pay £0.10 per day for their meals, and they are good quality (most food is organic, which I discuss later). In comparison, some internet workers, as workers in private enterprises, live only with this fixed salary, without extra bonuses and cheap meals.

Some internet companies advertise that they also provide bonuses to their employees in order to recruit high-skilled workers. For example, both Grand and Campus state this in their handbooks for new employees (see Figure 4.5 and Figure 4.6). Figures 4.5-4.6 were collected from the handbook for new employees in Grand which I collected after being recruited as a new intern in the company. These figures show that workers enjoy large amounts of bonuses and benefits, which include insurance required by the state and other extra bonuses provided by the company. However, the company never provides details of these bonuses and benefits, such as how much allowance they pay to employees. According to my own experiences and on the basis of talking with some full-time workers in the company, few of these bonuses are paid in cash; instead, the company gives cheap gifts or gift cards as bonuses. For example, the bonus for the national holiday in 2011 in Grand was a £5 gift card. My interviewees in Campus also told me that most of the 'extra bonuses' advertised by the company usually were gifts or gift cards provided by the company's customers or cooperative partners. In Grand, one of the well-known benefits in summer – free and unlimited ice cream – indeed was provided by its customers, ice cream companies which pay their advertisement fees with ice cream.

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<sup>36</sup> Netease News 2013

## Bonuses and welfare in Grand

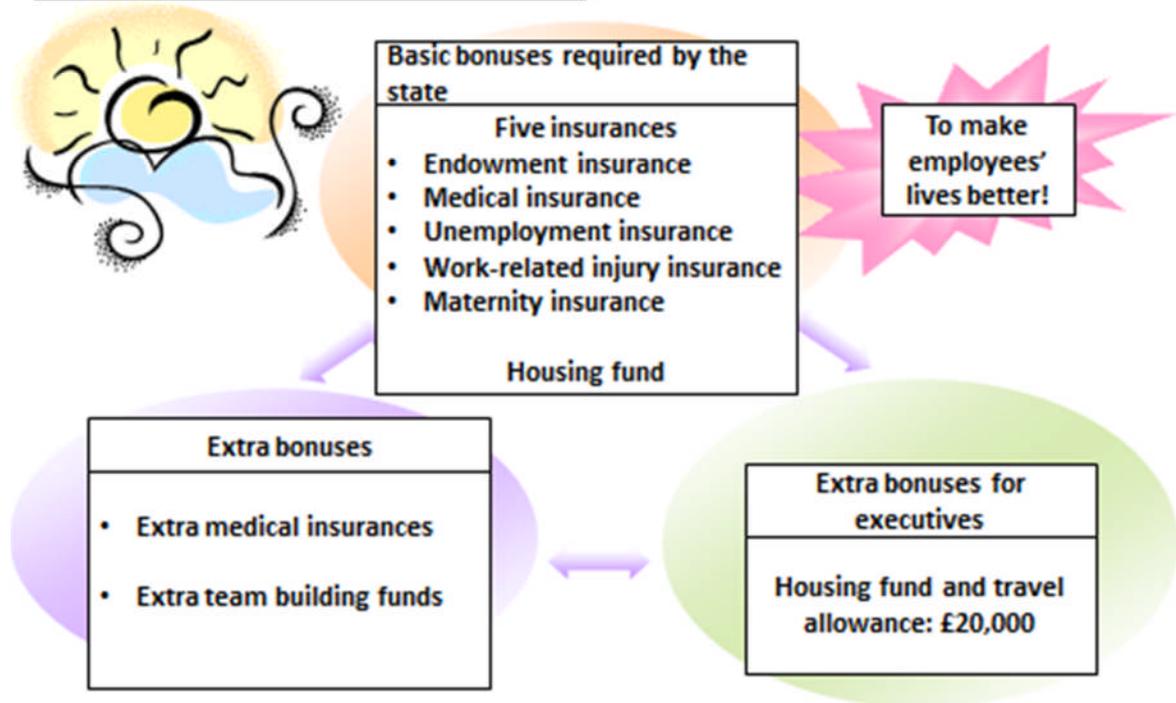
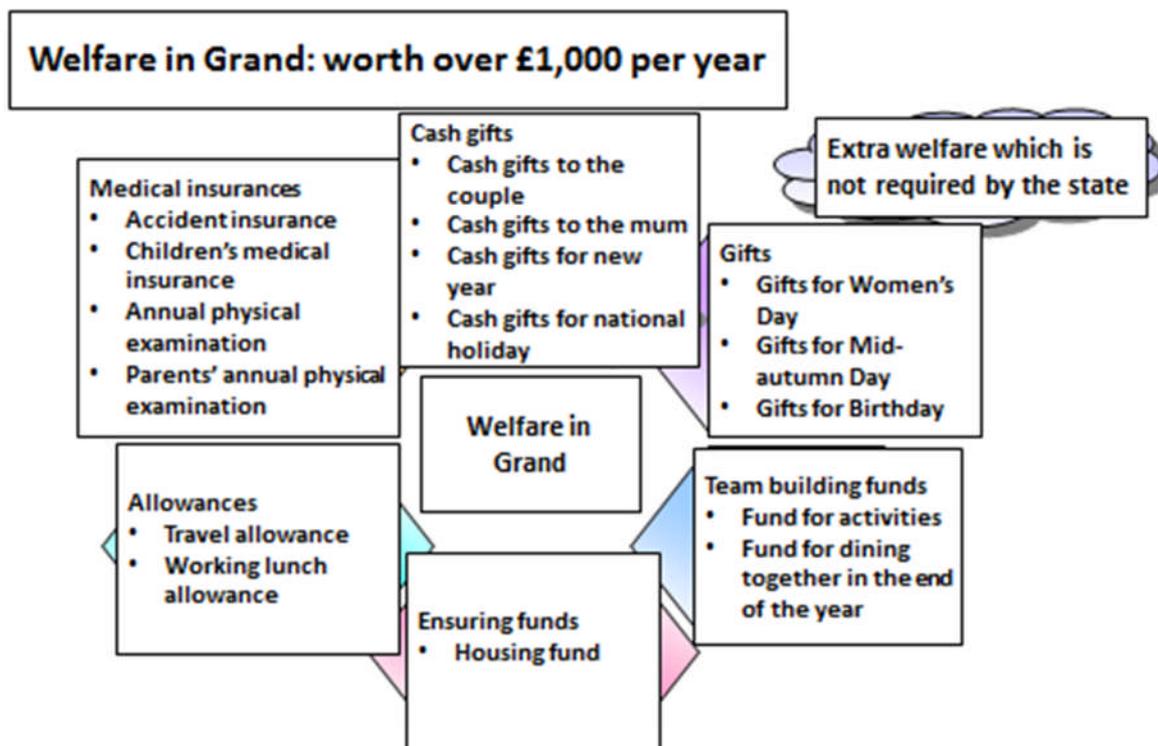


Figure 4.5: Bonuses and benefits in Grand

Source: Translated from an internal-circulated document in Grand



**Figure 4.6: Benefits in Grand**

**Source: Translated from an internal-circulated document in Grand**

Obviously, such 'extra bonuses and benefits' for internet workers cannot be equal to SOE workers, who may be provided over £500 cash for monthly travel allowance and high housing fund. The difference might be assumed to relate to their different work intensity, but the reality is that internet workers are paid less, and have a much higher work intensity. In contrast, SOE workers receive higher pay without working any overtime; neither do they have to devote themselves to their work during working hours, as internet workers do. In other words, internet workers are paid unequally, compared to SOE workers.

*My salary is £13,000 per year before tax [£1,000 per month \* 13 months] with the endless overtime, whilst my friend who works in a SOE, earns around £20,000 per year after tax [£800 per month \* 16 months, and bonus £200 per quarter \* 4 quarters] without any overtime. (William, technical worker in the 3G Department at Campus, 19<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

This is what Wright (2010) points out in his research in Chinese society: SOE workers receive benefits from the party-state that 'have been unavailable to other poor individuals' (p.3). Such inequality between SOE workers and

internet workers can also be found in their different benefits: SOE workers and executives in internet companies enjoy specially delivered organic food as a benefit, whereas most internet workers do not. This will be discussed later.

There is another part of the internet workers' wages that distinguishes them from workers in other industries: sharing companies' stocks. Internet work has been fetishized in recent years because workers are likely to receive companies' stocks as their bonus, which I pointed out at the beginning of this thesis. It sounds as if every internet worker can become a millionaire once he/she receives stocks. However, large numbers of internet workers are struggling in difficult working conditions with the dream of being the next hero, but, only a small number of individuals achieve the dream (I discuss this issue in Chapter Six). Likewise, large numbers of ordinary internet workers are still struggling in the area of low-rewarded overtime; nevertheless, some of them receive certain stocks from the companies.

*I had some stocks before I left [Campus]. It was just 3,000 shares. It was £0.40 per share when I received them, which was evaluated as £1 per share when I left [Campus]. It seemed that I could receive £3,000 when I left. But, in fact, the company had a rule which meant we could only sell ¼ of our shares every year. So this year I can only sell ¼ of my shares, which is £750. But because income from stock sharing is 'windfall' in the income tax law, I need to pay 47% of this amount of money as tax, which means I only receive £397.50 after tax. This is even less than my monthly salary... (Louis, former technical worker in the Open Platform Department at Campus, 28<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

According to Louis, a former technical worker at Campus who had recently started his own business, only some experienced workers who had joined Campus when it was founded could receive certain stocks. These stocks are not worth as much as workers in other industries imagine them to be. And few of the more recently employed workers can receive stocks.

*Most of us were so disappointed when the company went public. All the managers celebrated it, but it's none of our business. We do not get any benefit from it... Even for the workers who received stocks, such sharing does not guarantee them anything. It only becomes a way for the company to stop [workers] job-hopping: once you want to leave the company, HR would suggest you stay for one more year, in order to sell another ¼ of your shares. This does not only happen in our company, but also happens in other internet companies. It [stock sharing] becomes a way for companies to bargain with us [workers]... (Galeno, technical worker in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 20<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

In Chapter Two, I discussed such stock sharing when considering the issue of ownership of resources. It is clear that stock sharing does not authorise these workers any managerial power; instead, it becomes a way for

the company to control workers. This again goes back to the question: what does the lower middle class own? And does the bureaucratic capitalist class exploit this class? As I argued in Chapter Two, it seems that internet workers, people in the lower middle class, only own skills which are effective when placed in the capitalist's service. Some of them own certain resources, such as stocks here, but lack the power to manage such resources. Therefore, these workers still need to sell their skills in the capitalist market to survive.

Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010: 114-116) highlight the issue of unequal pay between executives, such as CEOs, and junior workers, who form the majority in the cultural industries. It is understandable that executives receive more pay than ordinary workers in the internet industries. However, in China, where 'the wealthiest 20 percent of Chinese citizens earned more than 58 percent of China's income, while the poorest 20 percent took in only 3 percent' (Wright 2010: 6), the inequality between executives and workers is more significant in terms of their benefits, with organic food being one example. Both executives in internet companies and SOE workers, the higher middle class, enjoy organic food as part of their benefits, which is unavailable to ordinary internet workers, the lower middle class in contemporary Chinese society. I argue that such unequal benefits between the higher and lower classes, need to be considered as a part of the inequalities surrounding internet workers' pay.

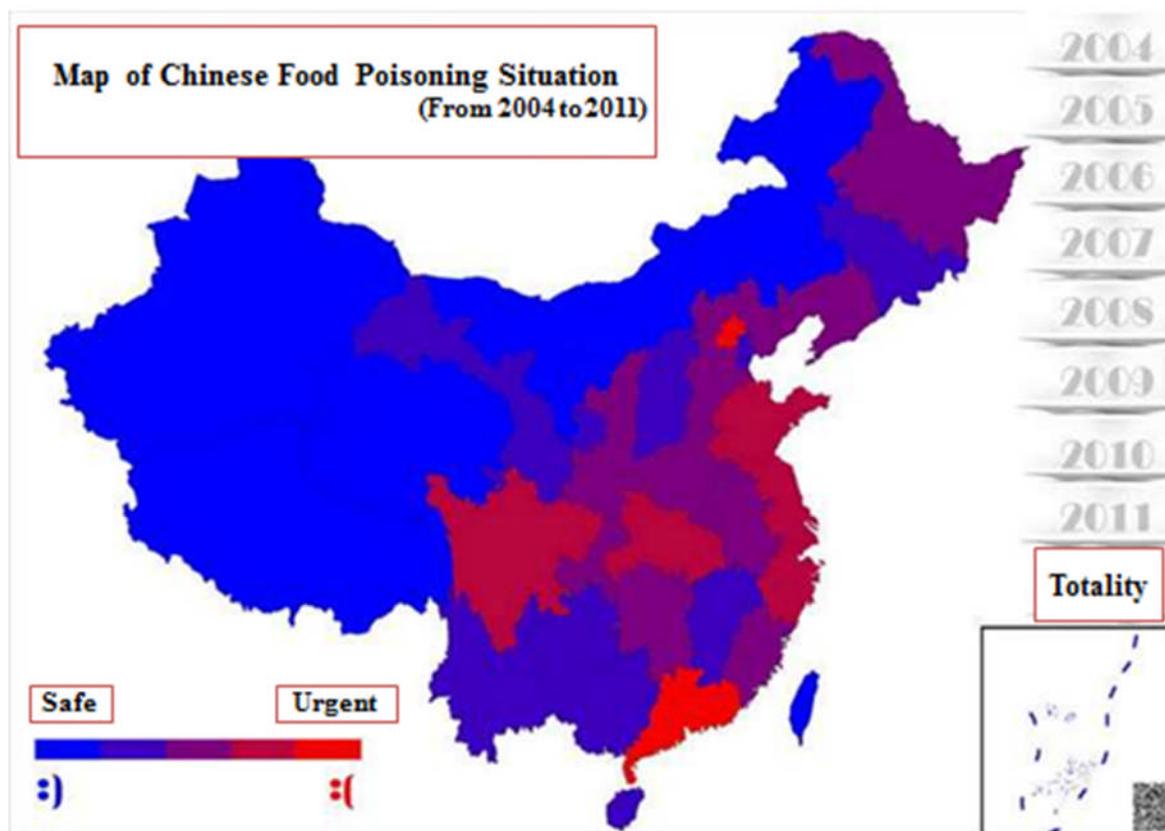
Ross (2005) observes differences between executives and workers in the Chinese high-tech industries in terms of their catering conditions, such as the quality of food and eating areas, which I also discussed earlier. Indeed, the inequalities become more obvious in current Chinese society because of the food safety problem.

At the time of writing, more than 40 kinds of food in mainland China have been exposed as poisonous, contaminated by toxic chemicals. Scandals regarding food poisoning seem to be exposed every second week. For example, in 2008, some newspapers reported a widespread contamination of milk products with melamine, an industrial chemical used to make concrete, fertiliser and plastic. But this news was suppressed by the Chinese government, who were making efforts to create an image of a safe and hygienic China, in the run up to the Olympic Games in Beijing in August, 2008. By the time the central government admitted the problem in September that year, tens of thousands of babies had been affected and several had died from kidney stones.<sup>37</sup> In 2010, thousands of restaurants in some big cities, such as Shanghai, were reported to have used gutter oil (*digouyou*), recycled cooking oil often retrieved from drains where it had been dumped by restaurants after use. Such oil can contain carcinogens and toxic mould. Chinese Xinhua News

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<sup>37</sup> *The Economist*, 29<sup>th</sup> October 2011

Agency, the government's news agency, called gutter oil 'the most nerve-jittery problem of late' concerning food safety, and the one that showed the 'really nasty reality of Chinese food today'.<sup>38</sup> In April 2012, CCTV reported that manufacturers in East China's Zhejiang Province and North China's Hebei Province had used dirty scrap leather to make industrial gelatine, which eventually ended up as medical capsules. At the time of writing, 33 capsule medicine products, 23 out of the 42 samples tested, were found to have contained excessive chromium, a toxic heavy metal.<sup>39</sup> According to the reports of contaminated food from the mass media, individual examples of almost all the food in China – from vegetables to rice, snacks to ingredients of main meals, infants' formula to daily family food – is unsafe. The following figure is a map showing the food poisoning situation in China at the moment (based on statistics collected from news reports and internet users' comments, the blue part means food in these provinces is generally fine, by contrast, the red part means the food problem in these provinces is extremely serious). It is easy to find that the problem is quite serious in some areas coloured red, such as Sichuan, Guangzhou, Zhejiang and Shanghai.



<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Xinhua Net, 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2012

## Figure 4.7: Map of Chinese food poisoning situation

Source: *Zhi chu chuang wai*, 17<sup>th</sup> June 2011

Causes of the urgent food problem are varied. According to Qiu (2009), one cause is 'the pollution created by industrialisation and urbanisation' (p.141). Here, I would also suggest the problematic developing model of the Chinese market, which is economically oriented and centred, and the complex relationships between local governments and local entrepreneurs, as another important reason. On the one hand, some manufactures are pursuing the largest benefits by reducing original costs, which can even be based on using illegal toxic chemicals. On the other hand, in certain areas, the local governments economically depend on these companies producing the contaminated food. For example, in the case of poisonous milk, because of the close relationships between the local government and the big brand milk companies, the scandal was only exposed when the central government intervened.

Because of the urgent food safety problem, Chinese people nowadays favour and desire organic food. However, it is hard for ordinary Chinese people to consume organic food, because of expensive prices and the limited number of organic food shops. Then, only certain privileged classes – the higher middle class and the bureaucratic capitalist class such as government officials, SOE workers and executives in private entrepreneurs – have channels to consume organic food. For example, it was reported that almost all government departments in China had special organic food suppliers for their canteens. Therefore, directly delivered organic food becomes an attractive benefit for executives in the internet industries.

As I have argued, inequality concerning organic food becomes one part of the inequalities in relation to internet workers' pay. The difficulty of housing in cities where these workers work, becomes another inequality in relation to pay. For example, most internet workers are struggling to buy a house in the big cities with their low salary.

*I never think about settling down here, in Beijing, because it's too expensive to be here, especially buying a house... Now I rent a house with my colleague, each of us pays £200 per month for a small and old room. It is still not cheap for us... (Wynn, technical worker in the Open Platform Department at Campus, 24<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

*A house in Beijing is f\*\*\*ing expensive. I can't even dream of buying a house, as I even can't afford to rent a good house here... It's too hard to find a room with a monthly fee of £150, even a low quality one... (Galeno, technical worker in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2010, Self-observation journal)*

In these big cities, it seems that only SOE workers, civil servants, government officials and the rich can afford to buy a house. As Shelly, an intern in Grand, told me, civil servants in Shanghai are usually offered discounted houses by their work units (*danwei*), for which they only need to pay less than half of the market price, because these houses are built by their work units with free land provided by the local government. Here, the work unit again plays an important role in workers' benefits, as it did in Mao's era. But the difference is that the work unit in contemporary Chinese society only protects and guarantees certain classes' benefits, such as the higher middle class – civil servants and SOE workers.

The Weberian approach usually relates such inequalities to different life chances: workers are given different chances to access to scarce and valued outcomes, such as organic food here. Both Weberian and Marxist approaches agree that occupants of different classes enjoy different life chances, though they provide different schemata for understanding class. The Weberian approach might understand these inequalities and injustices in terms of salary and benefits, as a form of exploitation, because they show inequalities in people's daily experiences. But the Marxist approach, especially the neo-Marxist approach adopted by this research, understands exploitation and domination as the mechanism linking different class locations to variations in life chances. In other words, the neo-Marxist approach tends to relate these inequalities in terms of salary and benefits to the production process: to identify how the bureaucratic capitalist class (government officials in this part of the study, and the higher middle class) – some SOE workers, civil servants and executives in private enterprises, appropriate the effort of the lower middle class – the internet workers, because of their ownership of means of production, and their power to allocate these resources.

In terms of the different fixed salaries, it is hard to argue that internet workers face unequal salaries, because their labour efforts are appropriated by people in higher classes. It is also arguable whether these workers experience inequality in terms of organic food, because people in higher classes exploit their efforts. Rather, I argue that such injustice surrounding internet workers' benefits and salaries are caused by a sort of domination between classes: the bureaucratic capitalist class and the higher middle class dominates the lower middle class, because they control members of such lower classes via employment relationship, such as work contracts, via owning means of production. This results in an injustice in relation to internet workers' pay: internet workers are not rewarded equally to their high work intensity, and in contrast, SOE workers and civil servants are well rewarded for their low work intensity. Put simply, some experiences in terms of internet workers' unequal pay, need to be understood as a result of domination between classes, rather than exploitation.

But this does not indicate that the lower middle class, the majority of internet workers here, are not exploited in the industries. Instead, I argue that all of these workers – full-time workers, interns, and agency labour, suffer certain difficult working conditions, such as unrewarded or low-rewarded excessive working hours, because of exploitation from higher classes, though in various levels.

### **4.3.2 Unpaid overtime**

As I stated earlier in section 4.2, most internet workers carry out a great deal of overtime. But little of this overtime is paid. In Campus and Grand, full-time workers' weekday overtime is unpaid. Instead, workers working late during weekdays can benefit from a free dinner or the money to buy a dinner, which is usually offered with certain restrictions. For example, in Campus, workers can only benefit from a free dinner after working for 12 hours, which means the four hours' gap is not rewarded. In Grand, workers only receive £1.80 for a dinner when they work after 8:30pm, and can be reimbursed for taxi fees only after 11:30pm, which indicates the two hours' gap (the official time for finishing work is 6:30pm) is not rewarded. Working during weekends is paid at double time, but in both companies, weekend overtime work needs to be approved by department leaders, who usually encourage workers to finish their work during weekdays. In other words, full-time workers are forced to work overtime without reasonable rewards.

Here, full-time workers' labour efforts and skills are appropriated by internet companies because of their low-rewarded overtime work. Admittedly, some workers work overtime because of certain 'immaterial rewards', such as pleasure in work, as I stated earlier, in section 4.2; some workers overtime because of the characteristics of internet work. However, some full-time workers devote themselves to the work because of the high competition in the industries, which is partly caused by companies, managers and the state. With such overtime work, these workers spend lots of extra time at work, and little of this time is reasonably rewarded. Most of the benefits produced in this extra time are appropriated by the internet companies.

In the Chinese context, such labour efforts and skills involved in overtime work are appropriated not only in the capitalist production process – the way internet companies accumulate economic capital, but also in the way the bureaucratic capitalist class accumulate capital – the state closely involved in the management and production process of internet companies (I discuss this process in detail in the next chapter). Some internet workers cannot avoid such appropriation, because they are forced to contribute extra time to their work, given the high competition caused by companies and managers, as well

as the Chinese work ethic. And such low-rewarded overtime work is prevalent in the industries, in which individual workers cannot escape. In other words, the bureaucratic capitalist class appropriates efforts of the lower middle class, because the former owns the means of production and have political power to allocate resources. This appropriation results in certain unequal experiences of working life – low-rewarded overtime work.

Like full-time workers' poorly-rewarded overtime, neither interns' nor agency labour's overtime is rewarded. Interns in both Grand and Campus are required to work as full-time workers, whilst their pay is quite low compared to the latter. In Grand, interns are paid £12 per day, no matter how many additional hours they work overtime.

*Most interns [in Campus], who are confirmed to be full-time workers after graduation, are paid £200 per month... (Carl, technical workers in the Open Platform Department at Campus, 27<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

Salaries for both interns and agency workers are lower than half that of full-time workers', although interns mainly do the same work as full-time workers. As I highlighted in section 4.2.2, both companies recruited interns as a cheap and easily manageable alternative to full-time workers. For example, when I contacted my friend in Grand one month after I had left, she told me that thirty out of the forty full-time workers in the HR department had been laid off, including her. In contrast, all the interns were kept on, replacing these full-time workers. In other words, the company used these cheap interns as replacements for the full-time workers, in order to save on labour costs. As Perlin points out, interns are a dream solution for employers to 'test drive young workers for little or no cost' (2011: 29).

Like full-time workers, it is evident that interns' labour efforts are appropriated by internet companies, because of their unpaid overtime. In section 4.2.2, I explained why students still chose internships, even though they understood it as a form of exploitation. There is another important issue in these interns' experiences, relating to exploitation: postgraduate supervisors, who become a link to 'for-profit enterprises' (Qiu 2009: 138).

*Normally, every supervisor has certain vacancies for 'special postgraduates', who are good at socialising rather than academic work. These sociable students are necessary for supervisors to negotiate projects with companies or the state. For example, my friend, who is doing an MA at Zhejiang University, told me that one of his classmates was from an unknown university, and had poor academic ability. He was the special student the supervisor chose, because of his ability to socialise. Every time the supervisor needed to negotiate business with companies, he would be the person to help with the socialising. (William, technical worker in the 3G Department at Campus, 19<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

In this case, this student was chosen and used to help the supervisor's business with companies – supervisors earn lots of money from such cooperated projects with companies. In addition, some students majoring in humanities and social sciences are required by their supervisors to write up books for free. For example, Lily, the intern in Grand I mentioned earlier, who was majoring in communications studies, had been required to write up two books for her supervisor to publish (the low quality does not matter in this case, because these books were marked as compulsory reading for her supervisor's modules, and would be purchased by students who chose these modules). As is common amongst postgraduates, she could neither receive any pay nor get her name on the publication. Before that, she was also required to write up a movie script for her supervisor, which was sold to a film company for £2,000, whilst she was paid zero.

Janet, the intern in Grand, worked on a design project with her supervisor, which was evaluated at around £500 by a company, whilst her work was evaluated as a new dress, which was just £80, by her supervisor. Cathy, the intern in Grand, who majored in communications studies, was asked by her supervisor to produce some commercial videos for a cooperative company, without any pay. In these cases, neither student was keen to contribute her creativity and labour for free. Instead, they were forced to carry out the work, because their supervisors could decide whether they would successfully obtain their degree.

Such situations need to be understood as a result of exploitation: the labour efforts and skills of lower classes are appropriated by the higher classes by coercion. For example, interns are forced by supervisors, who decide whether these students can graduate, to be the free/cheap labour. As a result, members of the lower classes, such as university students here, contribute poorly-rewarded or unrewarded labour efforts to capitalist production; by contrast, members of the higher classes, such as the supervisors in this instance, benefit from capitalist production via such appropriation. Here, it needs to be acknowledged that these cases are not specific to the internet industries. Indeed, these are general phenomena happening in all Chinese universities, and again, draw attention to the problematic Chinese education system.

Some cases from my data show the close cooperation between supervisors and internet companies, which shows a for-profit enterprise, in which postgraduates' (interns') labour efforts are appropriated.

*I was recruited by an online game lab which was a joint venture between my university and a Korean online game company. I was not paid as usual... (William, technical worker in the 3G Department at Campus, 26<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

*... I was also forced to conduct projects for my supervisor in my three years' postgraduate study. To be honest, my supervisor is nicer than others, because sometimes he bought dinner for us as pay for our work. Although we all know that our work helps him earn a lot of money, we have no chance to negotiate with him... I know some PhD students are forced to extend their courses, because their supervisors need them to conduct projects for free... (Lara, non-technical worker in the Advertisement Department at Campus, 19<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

*Some months ago, we [Campus] cooperated with the Chinese Academy of Sciences on a search engine project. Some students from the university were sent to the company as interns. But we didn't pay for them, since their supervisors took charge of it, [though we know supervisors do not pay their students]. Personally, I guess, as a common understanding in Chinese universities, these interns are never paid by their supervisors... (Louis, former technical worker in the Open Platform Department at Campus, 18<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

In these cases, supervisors and companies cooperated to set up business relationships to make profits. Both supervisors and companies earn money from this 'for-profit relationship': supervisors receive pay from companies, and also publish papers with data from these projects; and companies obtain economic benefits by profiting from the products of these co-operative projects. Only postgraduates, who work day and night as interns in the cooperating companies, are not fairly rewarded. This shows that interns' labour efforts and skills are exploited by the 'for-profit enterprises', which are built by supervisors and internet companies.

Interns' unpaid work in both internet companies and universities show a different extent or model of exploitation than full-time workers'. Interns' experience seems to indicate that their efforts are appropriated more seriously than full-time workers, because of their lower pay and the 'for-profit relationship' between internet companies and supervisors. This again shows the great variety in internet workers: interns experience a different working life than full-time workers, due to different extents of exploitation behind their experiences.

It is widely known in the internet industries that code farmers are poorly paid, some are paid even worse than interns. William told me that the pay of code farmers was quite low (usually no more than £400 per month), which sometimes was even less than interns. He gave me an example of a code farmer, who had high skills but was rejected by the Campus HR department as a full-time worker, because of his junior college education (*da zhuan*) background. In fact, he had several years' work experiences, but only earned £700 per month in the outsourcing company. This amount of money may seem similar to a full-time worker's pay, but an experienced technical worker like the

code farmer is usually paid double in internet companies. Lara explains why code farmers are paid low below:

*... Most code farmers' pay is taken by the outsourcing companies, which causes their low pay... (Lara, non-technical worker in the Advertisement Department at Campus, 19<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

As I stated in section 4.2.4, code farmers sometimes take over full-time workers' work, and often take charge of the hardest work in the companies, due to tensions between different status groups. But all such work is not rewarded fairly: they are not paid for overtime, because the internet companies pay the outsourcing companies by project rather than by worker, which means they are not responsible for paying for the code farmers' work. Meanwhile, outsourcing companies are well known for exploiting code farmers, meaning that code farmers can rarely claim any pay for their overtime.

This issue again relates to the new labour law, which I explained in section 4.2.4. The new labour law makes the labour outsourcing service (*laowu waibao*) take place of the labour dispatch service (*laowu paiqian*), which intends to standardise the outsourcing market. But, indeed, as I argued in section 4.2.4, it only makes agency workers' working conditions worse: it enables the commissioning companies (internet companies in this research), to ignore code farmers' overtime pay. In other words, code farmers experience unrewarded overtime work, not only because the high class members, internet companies and the outsourcing companies, appropriate their labour efforts; but also because they do not have the right law and union to guarantee their rewards. I will further explain the union issue in Chapter Six, where I state risks relating to code farmers' experiences.

Compared to code farmers, the self-employed workers are better paid: they even earn more than full-time workers.

*In a middle-sized team, a self-employed worker usually earns £50,000 to £60,000 per year. For example, our company outsources a project to a team with the price of £6,000 per person. Although the team leader would take some of the pay, every member in the team could still receive more than £3,000 per project [which usually takes a month]. Compared to us [full-time technical workers, who earn £13,000 per year], their wages are quite high... Like Macroserf [a famous independent outsourcing group in China, which is anonymised in this research], which I mentioned earlier, there are just 20 members and they only take projects over £30,000, so you can imagine how much every self-employed worker there earns... (William, technical worker in the 3G Department at Campus, 19<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

Walter, a technical worker at Campus, whom I interviewed in my first set of interviews in August 2011, moved to his friend's independent outsourcing group. There were several reasons for him to choose to be self-employed,

such as autonomy and freedom, which I discuss in the next chapter, but a good salary was also a force behind his job-hopping.

However, such high wages do not necessarily indicate that self-employed workers experience good working conditions. As stated in section 4.2.4, such good pay is based on high work intensity. In other words, self-employed workers' high pay may imply that they are not exploited as badly as code farmers and interns, but the high work intensity still shows they suffer from poor working conditions.

High levels of risk, which I discuss in Chapter Six, and high work intensity, discussed here, clearly show self-employed workers' poor working conditions. Some of these problems have become worse because of the new labour law. As I argued in section 4.2.4, self-employed workers are pushed towards high work intensity – finishing many projects in a short time, in order to ensure a high working wage. This is caused by a sort of exploitation I criticise in this research: the bureaucratic capitalist class – the state which issued the new labour law, and owners of internet companies which profit from the work of self-employed workers – appropriate the labour efforts and skills of lower classes – self-employed workers, because the former owns the power to control and allocate production resources. This consequently leads to a situation in which self-employed workers' labour efforts and skills are appropriated in the high work intensity, nevertheless, such experience is in a different level than full-time workers', interns' and code farmers'.

## **4.4 Conclusion: Status struggles and variety in exploitation**

In this chapter, I have argued that many experiences in internet workers' working lives need to be understood as a result of exploitation. For example, full-time workers' overtime is poorly rewarded or unrewarded. These workers work overtime for different reasons, such as rewards, characteristics of knowledge work and the Chinese work ethic. But many of them are pushed to work overtime by high competition in the industries. Such high competition comes from parents' expectations, and is pushed by managers and companies. In particular, internet companies promote the geek culture in order to encourage workers to devote themselves to their work without considering rewards. Moreover, this endless overtime work in the industries is generally unrewarded. This shows that internet companies seek to maximise profits via reducing labour costs. Internet workers' labour efforts and skills are appropriated in this capitalist production process via overtime work without equal rewards.

Admittedly, some full-time workers receive stocks as part of their bonus, but such stock sharing does not guarantee the workers good pay, nor does it give the workers any managerial power. In other words, with such limited benefits, internet workers still need to sell their skills to survive. These workers have no other choice, and must accept unequal conditions, because they are controlled by companies via work contracts (internet workers cannot escape these experiences of unrewarded overtime work, because it is so common in the internet industries). In other words, internet workers are forced to experience injustice in their working life. I argue that this is a result of exploitation: exploitation is the economic force behind internet workers' unequal working-life experiences, even though other non-economic factors also help shape such unequal experiences.

Interns also undertake unrewarded overtime work. They do the same work as full-time workers, whilst receiving less than half of their pay. But still more and more students pour into the intern market, because of problems caused by educational reforms. The modern education reform has resulted in four problems: low quality higher education, a large number of graduates, difficulties in employment (caused by the large number of low quality higher education courses) and large numbers of interns, along with the difficulties in employment [looks like 5 problems to me]. All of these problems have caused lots of university students to pour into the intern market to become cheap labour in the internet industries.

Moreover, interns' labour efforts are appropriated in the 'for-profit enterprises', built up between university supervisors and internet companies. In these enterprises, interns are used as cheap labour to work for projects run by supervisors and internet companies, who receive both economic benefits and immaterial rewards, such as publication. But interns are usually unpaid for their hard work. Therefore, I argue that interns' experiences of unrewarded overtime in internet companies and unpaid hard work, are as a result of exploitation. As part of the highly educated lower middle class, interns' labour efforts and skills are appropriated by the bureaucratic capitalist class, which accumulates capital by coercion .

Another point here is the different levels of exploitation experienced by interns' and full-time workers. Interns experience a higher level of inequality in the working life than full-time workers, not only because of their much lower salary with the same workload, but also because their labour efforts are appropriated by both universities and internet companies – the 'for-profit enterprises' created by the bureaucratic capitalist class.

Both code farmers' and self-employed workers' working conditions have been worsened by the new labour law, which enables internet companies to not take care of agency labourers. Code farmers sometimes need to take over full-time workers' work, but this hard work is not rewarded. Self-employed

workers receive the highest pay amongst all internet workers, but it is based on their work intensity being the highest. Both forms of agency workers sell their skills by offering unlimited working time, in order to survive in a society where the minority bureaucratic capitalist class owns the majority of resources, and the majority lower middle class and the working class need to sell skills and labour efforts to survive. I argue that these experiences of agency workers – unpaid overtime and high work intensity – are a result of exploitation. The higher classes accumulate capitals based on appropriating the labour efforts and skills of lower classes, because the former owns the means of production and have the political and economic power to allocate these resources, manifested in their ability to alter labour laws further in the direction of exploitation. This results in the lower classes needing to sell their skills and labour efforts in order to survive, and accept unequal ‘prices’ for such efforts.

The differing working conditions of code farmers’ and self-employed workers’ indicate the variety in experiences brought about by exploitation: self-employed workers may experience a lower level of inequality than code farmers, due to their higher pay, though this comes with a high work intensity. The different working conditions experienced by different kinds of internet workers show the variety of social relations brought about by exploitation.– for example, full-time workers suffer poorly-rewarded overtime, which is caused by the appropriation of the lower middle class’s labour efforts and skills by the bureaucratic capitalist class, whilst they still have a better working life than interns, who experience bad conditions both in companies and universities.

Admittedly, there are some jobs that pay more than others, which cannot be viewed as a result of exploitation. But, in this study, internet workers in the lower middle class receive low pay, which is unequal to their overtime work and high work intensity, because they are controlled by the higher classes. Thus, it is necessary to criticise some experiences as a result of exploitation. But, another significant issue here is to recognise the variety in exploitation: some workers enjoy a better working life because of lower levels of exploitation.

All the experiences shown above are discussed in relation to exploitation, which is based on dynamics between classes. Both a Weberian approach and a Marxist approach regard class as an important concept. For example, the Weberian approach recognises the significance of class, because it ‘links individuals’ positions in capitalist markets to inequality in the distribution of life chances’ (Breen 2002: 47). As the organic food example in this research shows, executives and government officials, members of the bureaucratic capitalist class, gain access to scarce resources in society, such as organic food in this case, partly due to their privileged positions in the capitalist market. Here, inequality of the distribution of life chances is determined by individuals’ class locations.

But this does not indicate that individuals in the same class position always enjoy the same life chances. As Breen (2002: 56) shows, different life chances amongst members in the same class location are related to other factors. So we need also the concept of status groups to theorise some internet workers' experiences. As I argued earlier, full-time workers, interns, code farmers and self-employed workers are conscious of being members of certain status groups. For example, code farmers are conscious of their identity as the 'second-class workers' in both industries and society, due to their lower education level and lower salary. Interns are also conscious of being members of a low status group in society, due to denigration of their university degrees as well as their low skills.

Membership of such status groups influences individuals' working-life experiences. Different kinds of internet workers experience different levels of overtime work and unequal pay; certain members of status groups experience status struggles. For example, some interns and code farmers are forced to take charge of the work for full-time workers, due to their inferior positions in companies and the society, which ultimately increase their workload without extra pay. This shows status struggles experienced by interns and code farmers. Such tensions and dynamics within the lower middle class address the great variety and disunity within the class.

Different working-life experiences and tensions within classes indicate different members of the lower middle class are proletarianised to different levels.. As I discussed in Chapter Two, the other side of the problem of proletarianisation is the close relationships between the lower middle class and the working class, which I describe as forms of agency and discuss in detail in Chapter Seven. So, whilst it is true that internet workers are exploited, as I have highlighted in this chapter, this represents only part of the picture. But before discussing agency (or the other side of the proletarianisation problem) in detail, I highlight other more negative aspects of internet workers' experiences in the next two chapter. In the chapter that follows, I move on to evaluate another issue in internet workers' experiences: autonomy.

## Chapter Five: Autonomy

### 5.1 Structure of this chapter

I discussed internet workers' working hours and pay in the last chapter, and argued that exploitation one mechanism shaping their experiences. In addition, tensions and disunity within the class also influence the quality of working life in these industries. In this chapter, I discuss workers' ambivalent experiences of autonomy. I argue that some workers experience limited or low autonomy in their work, despite the internet industries being fetishized as workplaces providing high autonomy. I begin by specifying the context for discussing autonomy in section 5.2, where I explain the complicated relationships between the state and internet companies. In section 5.3, I address workers' subjective experiences of workplace autonomy. I suggest that some internet workers experience a high level of workplace autonomy, partly because of the way that *guanxi* operates in the company. Other workers experience a high level of autonomy based on their high work intensity. Their high levels of workplace autonomy need to be understood critically, in the context of this high work intensity. In section 5.4, I discuss how the state intervenes in workers' daily practices and creativity, and how workers themselves understand and evaluate these experiences. I recognise a degraded form of agency, which may lead to negative results. In section 5.5, I conclude that Chinese internet workers' subjective experiences of autonomy are distinct from autonomy as experienced in many Western contexts in that their professional autonomy is not only limited by internet companies, as experienced by internet workers in other geographical and political contexts, but it is also limited by the state. In this section, I also recognise that workers' autonomy could be understood as a kind of agency, which shows that people have some capacity to influence their working lives. But I show how this autonomy is sometimes used negatively, as when workers 'choose' to work themselves extremely hard. This provides a link to the more detailed discussion of worker agency, which I address in Chapter Seven.

### 5.2 The Chinese context for autonomy at work

As I clarified in Chapter Two, China has a unique class structure, where cadres – some of whom benefited from the privatisation of SOEs to become the rich in the 1990s – and capitalists cooperate as the bureaucratic capitalist class. This bureaucratic capitalist class has a more privileged class location than the other classes, because of its ownership of economic resources and its

exercise of political authority. Therefore, it is worth discussing the complicated relationships between cadres (including government officials), who represent the state in this research, and capitalists, referring to the internet companies here, as a context for evaluating the workers' experiences of autonomy.

Ross (2005) recognises that Chinese government officials still play a strong role in the Chinese economy, even though the central government has not been planning the economy in detail since the 1980s. There are several ways both the central government and local governments intervene in the internet industries. First, central government intervenes through various policies and regulations; second, state actors exchange both private and public benefits with internet companies; and third, central government directly intervenes in the practices of internet companies.

Some cases show that the central government controls the industries from a macro perspective via its cultural and economic policies. In the Executive Meeting of the State Council in 2011, Premier Wen Jiabao drew up a blueprint for the internet industries. This was the first time that the internet industries were a focus at state level.<sup>40</sup> On 4<sup>th</sup> May 2011, the National Internet Information Office was set up by the state to manage the industries.<sup>41</sup>

O'Conner and Gu (2012: 4) claim that Chinese cultural policies, frames and directs the market via targeting big companies rather than small and medium enterprises. It is similar in the internet industries. For example, at the end of 2011, the Beijing government issued a policy entitled 'Several Provisions of the Beijing Municipality on the Administration and Development of Microblogs in Beijing' (*Beijingshi weiboke fazhan guanli ruogan guiding*),<sup>42</sup> aimed at controlling internet users' online activities by forcing them to register on microblog platforms using their real names and national identity numbers. This policy focused on several of the largest internet companies that provided microblogging services, such as Sina and Tencent. As O'Conner and Gu state, this is the Chinese state's slogan in terms of managing the cultural industries: 'control the big, let go the small' (p.4).

Of course all governments intervene in cultural industries via policy. For example, in the UK, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010) claim that the forces structuring cultural workers' ambivalent experiences include 'the general push on the part of businesses and their allies in government towards neo-liberalism and marketisation (the process whereby market exchange comes to permeate societies)' (p.85). However, a key difference between China and other countries is the extent of state intervention in the industries.

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<sup>40</sup> China National Information Infrastructure, 13<sup>th</sup> January 2012

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Beijing Municipality, 16<sup>th</sup> December 2011

A second characteristic of the state's intervention in the internet industries is the exchange of benefits between officials and internet companies. As O'Conner and Gu claim, the Chinese context is special because 'the management and ownership of these large entities included party and state actors whose personal and professional interests were thus tied up with them, blurring lines between public and private activities' (2012: 4). Put simply, the dynamics of the bureaucratic capitalist class contribute to the construction of a very specific context for evaluating workers' subjective experiences. In the internet industries, it is not the party and state actors who own and manage the large entities; rather, it is the internet leaders, who are subsumed into the bureaucratic capitalist class after their companies dominate the industries.

Figure 5.1 shows the national conference: 'Constructing Healthy Network Cultures' (*gongjian gongxiang wangluo wenhua*) organised by the party, which all CEOs of the dominant internet companies were required to attend. At this conference, the state intended to ask these internet leaders to follow its plan for constructing the internet industries. For example, as the first picture in Figure 5.1 points out, the state required internet companies to work in conjunction with it to build a 'healthy internet space', where information security, such as the filtering of all information against the state, would be guaranteed. In this case, the internet leaders were 're-educated' about the state's plan for constructing online freedom. They were subsumed into the state's plan regarding such construction.



**Figure 5.1: A conference in relation to internet industries organised by CCP**

**Source: From an interviewee's personal website on Campus**

The internet industries are different to the other industries in China, because not all leaders of internet companies are cadres who set up their own businesses by usurping resources from SOEs where they had executive positions, as is universally the case among other industries. Instead, most Chinese internet companies are privately owned by individuals who have succeeded through years of effort. These leaders were mostly not part of the bureaucratic capitalist class before their companies became large entities in the industries. The state quickly made attempts to subsume leaders of the large entities by organising 'educational conferences', in which leaders were required to follow the state's rules and plans concerning the internet industries, in order to realise its slogan 'control the big, let go the small'.

It would seem that the internet leaders are not keen to study the state's plan and rules about the internet industries, as the last picture in Figure 5.1 indicates – some internet leaders, such as the leader of Alibaba, the largest online commerce company that has Taobao as its constituent company, and the leader of Netease, one of the largest portals, fell asleep in the conference. But this does not mean that they reject being subsumed into the bureaucratic

capitalist class. Instead, most of the time, these leaders choose to stand with the state, because their projected benefits are the same – both seek to maximise their economic benefits from the internet industries. These benefits are mostly based on the exploitation of the labour efforts of ordinary internet workers, which I discuss in the next two sections.

Another example of such cooperation happened when I was in Grand. An Election Meeting of Candidates of the National People's Congress, an important part of the Party system, was held in Shanghai. All CEOs of the dominant internet companies, including the CEO of Grand, were chosen as candidates by the Shanghai government. This was an attempt by the local Shanghai government to subsume these internet leaders into its Party system via such political activities. For internet leaders, similar to the previous example, they might have been tired of attending these political activities, but they did not reject being part of the bureaucratic capitalist class, which was capable of bringing them economic benefits and higher social status. As a return for such subsumption or cooperation with the state, the state authorises certain benefits to these internet companies via its policies, such as low taxes and cheap land rental, both of which are used to build up internet companies. In a 'crony communist' country, where the state has great power to allocate resources, such benefits (low taxes and cheap land rental) make it worthwhile for internet leaders to accept being subsumed into the Party system.

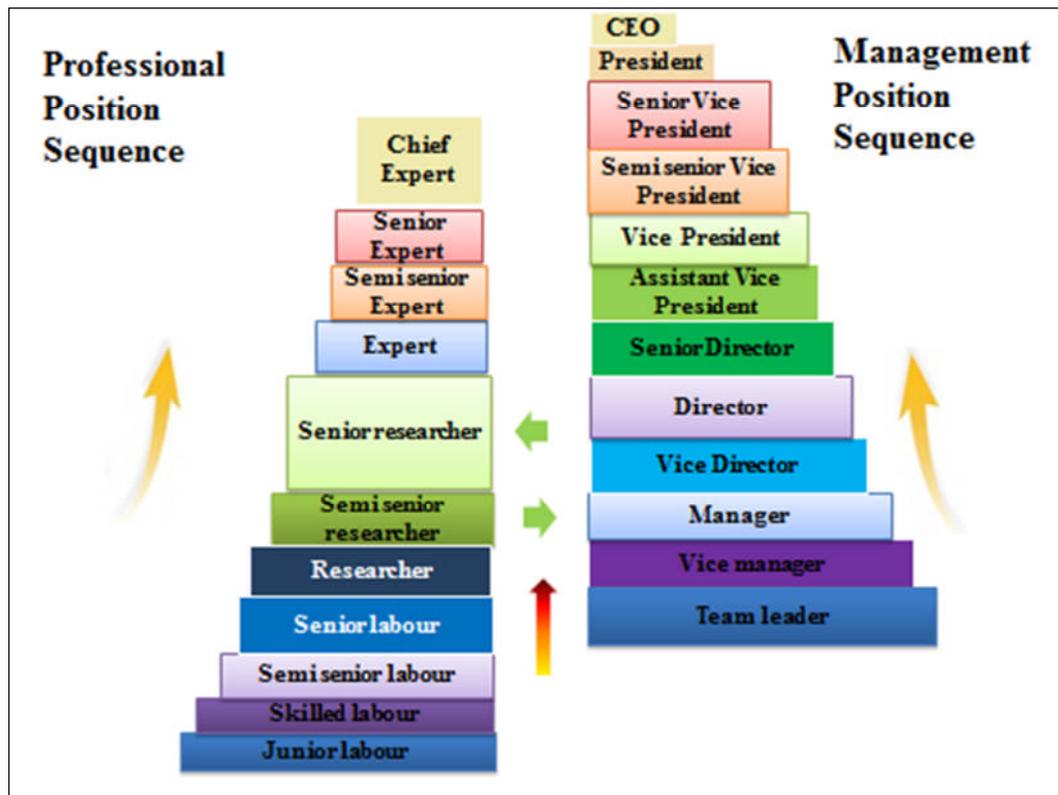
In these two cases, internet leaders are closely tied to the state's plans for constructing the internet industries. The capitalists' benefits are subsumed into the Party's construction plan. It is the manner in which capitalists and the political power are entangled in order to maximise their common benefits in the internet industries, that enables the bureaucratic capitalist class to emerge in these industries.

Sometimes, the two groups in the bureaucratic capitalist class, the internet companies and the state, exchange benefits, in order to guarantee and maximise their economic benefits. This exchange blurs the 'lines between public and private activities', to use O'Conner and Gu's term (2012: 4). For example, the household registration in Shanghai (*shanghai hukou*) is an attractive benefit for all workers in Shanghai, because it opens up access to housing, children's education, and work pensions in Shanghai, amongst other things. But the application criteria are high, and quotas are limited and so a lot of workers struggle to obtain it. In contrast, the Shanghai local government authorises Grand some extra registration quotas. This helps Grand to attract high-skilled workers. For instance, Salina, the new HR worker in Grand's game department, told me that she joined Grand because it promised to help her obtain the household registration in Shanghai.

In return, internet companies have certain benefits they exchange with local governments, such as paying high taxes and helping to develop the

outskirts of cities. In 2008, when the state faced the employment difficulty, as mentioned in the previous chapter, Grand helped the local government by recruiting an extra 1,000 university graduates. It seems that the 1,000 graduates also benefited from such benefit exchange, because they were given jobs. However, according to my participants, these employees were the victims in this situation. They were recruited to work in call centres, where lots of vacancies existed. Many of these employees were qualified for better jobs with higher salaries and better working conditions, but they were employed by Grand as call centre workers with low pay and overtime. In other words, Grand gained the benefit of recruiting highly qualified workers (with a good education and high skills) at a lower price than usual; and the state gained the benefit of solving the employment difficulty. But again, university graduates, some of whom were interns in internet companies, became victims in such benefit exchange, because they were evaluated as being of low quality, and had to suffer bad working conditions, such as long working hours and low pay.

Some of these workers were later put in Grand's talent pool, because they had high skills, which were needed by other departments. Compared to recruiting new employees with the same high skills, using these workers in the talent pool was easier and cheaper for Grand: workers in Grand only get a pay rise when they gain promotion (Figure 5.2 shows the structure of pay rises in Grand): promotions are based on increases in EXP, usually depending on how many projects they have conducted. Technical workers can choose to focus on the work relating to technology, without having to do extra work in relation to administration or management, by receiving a pay rise according to an increase in their professional position. For example, a new technical worker can receive a pay rise after conducting a number of technology-related projects, according to the upgrade of his professional positions. But the highest pay he can achieve is as chief expert, which is equal to the pay for senior vice president. In other words, if technical workers seek a fast promotion with high pay, such as the position of president, they are required to carry out extra projects relating to administration or management, which mostly depends on how many skilled projects they have conducted, whilst the salary of employees recruited after 2008 increases year by year. In other words, even though these workers joined Grand in 2008, earlier than the new employees, and they moved to another department later, this still did not guarantee that they would receive higher pay than the newly recruited employees. In this sense, Grand saved on labour costs by taking advantage of these workers, via its cooperation with the local government in 2008. This case shows how the bureaucratic capitalist class dominates and exploits the labour efforts and skills of the lower middle class, such as interns in this case.



## 5.2: Pay rise model in Grand

Source: an internally circulated document in Grand, translated by the author

Internet companies also benefit local governments by arranging jobs for government officials' relatives. For example, Janet, the intern in Grand, showed me an email from her manager, which asked her to recruit some relatives of Shanghai government officials. These people did not reach Grand's standards, but they were still guaranteed positions in the company because of their strong family background – having family members as government officials – as I pointed out in Chapter Two. Internet companies have become an alternative place to SOEs, for government officials to arrange jobs for their family members. Here, the personal interests of government officials – 'Party and state actors' in O'Conner and Gu's terms – were tied up with the companies. This blurs lines between private matters and public activities.

Meanwhile, this example also shows how family background shapes different life chances, which influence people's well-being: family members of government officials gain more chances of accessing jobs than members of lower classes. This again shows the importance of considering some non-economic factors, such as *guanxi* (personalised networks), embedded social ties, and forms of social relations, as the mechanism to shape the quality of working life.

Moreover, O'Conner and Gu (2012: 4) point out that close relationships with the government have become a valuable way for companies to enter the Chinese market. In every internet company, there is a special 'Government Relationships Department', which is responsible for building and keeping up good relationships with official departments such as the Ministry of Culture and The State Administration of Radio, Film and Television. Workers in these departments are responsible for socialising with government officials, by drinking and eating with them, and sometimes even by bribery, in order to gain political connections. As one of my interviewees said:

*It is in China, where most business needs to keep good relationships with the government... (Carl, technical worker in the Open Platform Department at Campus, 27<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

In these socialising activities, government officials offer benefits to the companies through their privileged political power, which allows them to control varied resources relating to the market. In return, they receive money and other individual benefits provided by the companies. Such Party and state actors then blur the lines between private benefits and public activities. This becomes a form of corruption, whereby the bureaucratic capitalist class accumulates capital by appropriating labour efforts of the lower classes.

As indicated earlier, the third way that the state intervenes in the internet industries is that it directly manages and standardises the practices and products of internet companies. The main contradiction between internet companies and the state concerns users' online freedom and the extent to which online users should be allowed the freedom to speak out. On the one hand, internet companies want to attract internet users by providing them with a free space to speak out; but on the other hand, the companies must follow the state's rules and limit this freedom, in order to avoid internet users engaging in any discussion against the state. Internet companies struggle to find this balance between encouraging internet users, who would bring commercial benefits, and obeying rules from the state, which could easily stop their business. For example, Sarah, the manager of the online novel department in Grand, told me that workers in her department were worried about the widely circulating news stories about teenagers' addiction to network cultures. If the news attracted the attention of relevant government departments, such as the Ministry of Culture, then some of their novels would be deleted and some of their related services would be adapted, or even withdrawn.

*In 2008, our whole product department was stopped for a period by the government because we opened a new forum at that time, in which large amounts of users gathered to talk about sensitive issues. Then, we were required to stop the forum and rearrange our services... (Galeno, technical*

*worker in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 20<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

In these cases, the state shows its powerful nature, and could easily influence or even stop internet companies' services. It highlights the strong political interventions in the Chinese internet industries, which distinguishes the industries from those of other countries. The difficulty of finding a balance between the state and internet users then influences the workers' practices and creativity, which I discuss in section 5.4.

All the three methods of central government and local governments' intervention in the internet industries show how the bureaucratic capitalist class emerges and operates in the Chinese context, especially in the internet industries. Dynamics between the two actors in this class – the state and internet companies – show the complex context in which internet workers have ambivalent experiences of autonomy. Now I turn to evaluate these experiences within this specific context.

### **5.3 Workplace autonomy**

I introduced my framework for discussing workers' experiences of autonomy, which is mainly based on Hesmondhalgh and Baker's model of good and bad work, in section 2.6. Autonomy here is made up of two components: workplace autonomy and professional autonomy. As I defined in the theoretical model of evaluating workers' experiences of autonomy in section 2.6, workplace autonomy refers to the degree of workers' determination within certain work situations, such as how they balance work and life in their daily practices. I explain professional autonomy as workers' determination in their work practices and creativity, under the pressures that are exerted by the state and firms. Below, I discuss the first element of workplace autonomy: to what extent workers determine their own work intensity.

As I showed at beginning of this thesis some media reports, suggest that internet work provides flexible working hours and large spaces for innovation. Here, I discuss to what extent this is true.

In Grand, workers in the innovation department and game department have one hour's flexible working hours; workers in these departments can be late for work by one hour, but they still need to give back the time, by working late for an extra hour at the end of that day. Most of the other workers are required to work between 9am to 6pm, which is usually extended because of overtime. All workers are allowed to be late by half an hour three times in one month; every time on top of this, they are deducted two hours' salary if they are

late by up to half an hour, and deducted half a day's salary if they are late by up to two hours. Put simply, most full-time workers in Grand do not benefit from flexible working hours. Similar to workers in other Chinese industries, internet workers are also required to have fixed working hours, and even more work hours than other workers.

In Campus, there was flexible working hours for technical workers in 2010, which required workers to work for 9 hours per day without fixed timetables. But this was changed to a fixed working hours in 2011, similar to the working hours in Grand.

Therefore, most workers in both companies see their autonomy limited in terms of working hours.

*I hate [to] clock on and off. There's no freedom in terms of our working time... It's real freedom only when I can control my body, by which I mean I can decide when I come to work... (Galeno, technical worker in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 24<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

Such low level of autonomy in terms of working hours then takes the 'shine' off internet work: in the Chinese context at least, internet work does not provide flexible working hours as it is said to, and workers need to work overtime frequently without reasonable rewards, as I argued in the last chapter.

But, there are some exceptions: some internet workers have high level of freedom in terms of working hours, because of their strong *guanxi* with executives. For example, Lily, the intern in Grand, told me that her team leader, Christina, had used a visit to the dentist as an excuse for absence for several times within one week. This was possible because of her good relationship with executives. Sunny is another worker in the HR department who usually only works for half day. Indeed, both Christina and Sunny were 'VIP workers' in Grand, who were not required to clock on and off as other workers do, and could decide their own working hours. This was not because of these workers' 'extremely high skills', but because of their strong *guanxi* with executives or even the boss in the company.

This again distinguishes Chinese internet industries from other cultural industries: as I pointed out in Chapter Two, most Chinese internet companies are private enterprises, which means the individual owners can make most decisions. This allows considerable scope for *guanxi* to operate in the companies, with effects on working life. Christina, the VIP worker mentioned above, was known to have very strong *guanxi* with executives, via practices to create trust in the relationship. For example, she organised groups of workers in the department to look for an executive's lost watch during working hours, in order to please the executive. Another time, she sent her work, which in fact had been completed that morning, to the executive in charge of the project, at

midnight, because she knew the executive like people to work late to show their diligence. All these practices enabled Christina to have strong *guanxi* with executives, which ultimately give her great chances, such as promotion and enjoying certain benefits that are only available to executives.

Here we see a non-economic factor, *guanxi*, as well as the economic factor, class, influencing internet workers' experiences in terms of working hours: internet workers' low class location determines that their working hours are controlled by the bureaucratic capitalist class, the internet company in this case, which is not as flexible as is often claimed; whilst within the class, different levels of *guanxi* enable some workers to have a higher level of freedom to decide their working hours than others.

The above account helps to provide some answers to questions relating to *guanxi* that I asked in Chapter One: are internet industries outside of the influence of *guanxi*? Can internet workers with weak *guanxi* receive the same chances as those with strong *guanxi*? It seems the answer is no at the moment: workers with strong *guanxi* with executives seem to have better chances than others, and the internet industries provide scope for *guanxi* to influence working lives. I will further discuss this issue in the next section. Interns in both companies investigated in this research rarely have the opportunity to decide their working hours. Most interns follow the working pattern of full-time workers, and some need to work overtime, again, like the full-time workers.

*I had interned here [in Campus] for five months before I was formally employed. All new employees, who are recruited before graduation, are required to do internships, before they formally join the company ... My team leader wanted me to do more work, so he asked me to do [an] internship earlier than [the] others... (Galeno, technical worker in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 24<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

Sometimes, interns seem to be able to have more flexible working hours than full-time workers, because they need time to focus on their studies as well as working. But these holidays need to be approved by their team leaders, who usually encourage interns to focus on their work. As shown in section 4.2.2, Janet's experience of failing to quit her internship indicates that interns do not have 'flexible working hours': interns do not even have the right to quit their internships, as the company decides this. Thus, similar to some full-time workers, interns in the internet industries experience a low level of autonomy in terms of working hours.

According to the new labour law, which encourages internet companies to pay outsourcing companies by project rather than by worker, the working hours of code farmers is controlled by the outsourcing companies. For example, the two code farmers in my group in Grand, followed the working hours of the outsourcing company, which was from 8am to 5pm. Colleagues in Grand told me that these two code farmers were rather fortunate as their

outsourcing company set up regular working hours for them. Some code farmers in the game department did not have regular working hours, as they were required to finish projects before the deadlines, so they usually needed to work over 10 hours per day, sometimes even longer than the full-time workers there. This indicates that code farmers do not have any chance to determine their working hours; rather, their working hours is extremely controlled by the outsourcing company, which pushes them to work as much time as possible.

In contrast, self-employed workers seem to have the highest level of autonomy in terms of determining working hours, because these workers self-group to conduct projects, which does not require them to clock on and off as other internet workers do. But, as I pointed out in section 4.2.4, these workers have a high work intensity, because their work is evaluated by the number of projects completed; thus, they still need to work overtime. In other words, self-employed workers are able to determine their working hours, but they are pushed to work overtime because of economic pressures. Flexible working hours do not guarantee them an easy working life; rather, they suffer from high work intensity in order to survive. I will revisit this point in the next chapter.

The second concern of workplace autonomy in this research is to what extent workers determine their work content, such as choosing their own projects. Some workers believe they have a high level of such autonomy, because they have the freedom to determine their projects.

*If I didn't want to do some projects, I could just tell my leader directly. Most of the time, he would agree. (Louis, former technical worker in the Open Platform Department at Campus, 18<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

*Most internet companies are quite free [in terms of deciding projects]. For example, most of the time I can completely take charge of a project, which means I can decide when and how to finish a certain part of a project. The leader would just give me a deadline to submit the final version of the project. (Walter, technical worker in the Advertisement Department at Campus, 25<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

However, some workers indicate that such determination only works in certain cases, and they have limited autonomy most of the time.

*... If the project is small, which just needs two workers to work for two weeks, then I could just discuss this with my leader, and most of the time, it works. But if the project needs five workers to work for one or two months, then it needs to be decided by the managers. It means we could just submit our ideas and wait for the approval from the company... Indeed, there is little chance we could determine some projects for ourselves, as we usually are busy with the projects given to us by our leaders. There is little time for us to*

*think about new ideas... (Louis, former technical worker in the Open Platform Department at Campus, 28<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

In these cases, workers' freedom in terms of deciding projects depends on the size of the projects and the time given to workers for thinking about new ideas. In other words, workers are given limited freedom in deciding which project they want to conduct.

In some cases, internet workers are even forced by companies to conduct some projects that they are not good at. For example, during my observation, all workers in some technical departments in Grand, no matter what areas they were specialised in, were encouraged to learn Android – an open source operating system designed primarily for smartphones and tablet computers, which was the next key project for the company. It seemed that workers were 'encouraged' to select this option, but most workers were actually forced to do the work in relation to the program. The company issued a new rule to process the program: department leaders would have deductions from their salaries, if 30% of the employees in their departments could not pass the Android test. Put simply, the workers were forced to learn new technologies and conduct new programs without any consideration of their capabilities and interests. Two workers in the operations department told me that they needed to conduct the Android project at the same time as learning the skill, which was quite stressful for them. Therefore, the workers involved in the Android project did not have any freedom to decide which projects to carry out.

To sum up, some workers in both internet companies did have certain freedoms to decide which projects they wanted to work on, but some workers had limited or no freedom for determination. As a result, I argue that although the internet industries are characterised by the autonomy of determination, some workers experience limited autonomy in their work.

The limited workplace autonomy in full-time workers' experiences, especially the limited autonomy in terms of deciding projects for oneself, then encourages some workers to set up their own businesses.

*The freedom brought by running my own business is quite important to me. I could develop any program that I think is valuable, rather than waiting for approval from the company I am working [for] now. (Walter, technical worker in the Advertisement Department at Campus, 25<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

*... Another motivation is to control all the resources myself. As an employee in a big company, I am only working for my boss, say, selling my labour to my boss. But if I set up my own business, it means I can control all the things by myself... (William, technical worker in the 3G Department at Campus, 26<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

*I hate to be controlled by the company, who even set my working time. I want to be free, not only physically, say, I could have a rest whenever I want; but also mentally, say, I could develop any programs I want... (Galeno, technical worker in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 24<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

Freedom of working hours and determining projects for oneself, partly explains why workers choose to start their own businesses. Admittedly, there are other important reasons that push workers to set up their own businesses, such as earning more money, which I will discuss later, in Chapter Seven. However, workplace autonomy is also an important issue, and the limited workplace autonomy allowed by the internet industries, means workers sometimes choose to set up their own businesses, in order to enjoy a higher level of workplace autonomy.

Some theorists, such as McGuigan, may understand such setting up of one's own business as practices of entrepreneurial capitalists in the making, and autonomy, as a motivation here, as eroded by capitalism. However, it is vital that such practices still indicate a sort of free choices, which might be subsumed into the capitalist production later. I will turn back to this free choice in Chapter Seven, in which I further evaluate the agency of workers. I argue that some internet workers may experience limited workplace autonomy, whilst such limited autonomy still indicates certain the existence of a certain amount of choice and free thinking, though under structuring circumstances that cannot be fully controlled. This freedom, I will argue, may later be transformed into a potential for improving the existing industrial working conditions and changing existing social orders. I will turn back to this potential in Chapter Eight,

Both interns and code farmers have limited autonomy to determine projects on which to work, because both groups mostly follow full-time workers' instructions. In contrast, self-employed workers have a higher level of autonomy in terms of determining projects: this work group can decide which project to carry out, though sometimes they cannot say no to certain projects, due to economic pressures and considering getting offered future projects. It is the high autonomy and high pay that attract workers to be self-employed. For example, my interviewee, Walter, a technical worker in Campus's Advertisement Department, joined his friend's self-employed team two months after I interviewed him in August 2011. He indicated his interest in being self-employed by saying:

*... I want to indulge myself, which means I could have the space to do the work I am good at, have the freedom to develop the projects I am interested in, and have the chance to take charge of a project completely [rather than finishing a piece of the project]. (Walter, technical worker in the Advertisement Department at Campus, 25<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

At the time of stating this, Walter might not have planned to be self-employed, but, the issues he mentioned above, such as freedom and autonomy, probably later became an important reason for him joining his friend's team as a self-employed worker. But again, as I emphasised earlier, such high levels of autonomy and high rewards are based on high work intensity: unlimited overtime. These self-employed workers may have the freedom to choose which project to conduct, but they do not have the freedom of such determination when they face economic pressures. This high level of autonomy based on a high work intensity should be criticised as a result of exploitation. As I claimed in section 4.2.4, the new labour law issued by the state changes the outsourcing form from labour dispatch service to labour outsourcing service. This enabled self-employed workers to receive more projects, whilst also enabling the commissioning companies, such as internet companies here, to ignore the previous benefits that self-employed workers received, such as their overtime rewards. In other words, these self-employed workers are forced to be responsible for their own benefits and working conditions, which the state and internet companies are supposed to take charge of. The high level of workplace autonomy in self-employed workers' experiences cannot override this sort of exploitation.

In Chapter One, I asked questions in relation to a special issue in the context of the Chinese internet industries: are the internet industries outside of the influence of *guanxi*? Do the Chinese internet industries provide more opportunities for success to ordinary people than other industries? Can internet workers with weak *guanxi* receive equal chances as those with strong *guanxi*? Can workers achieve promotions only through hard work, rather than using *guanxi*? Such possibilities of escaping from the influence of *guanxi*, here, are understood as an issue in relation to workplace autonomy; to what extent do internet workers have the chance of gaining promotion in the workplace without their family background and social networks having an influence?

Admittedly, many internet workers are from ordinary families, and they believe that promotion and success in the internet industries are possible through hard work. Compared to SOEs and civil service posts, more individuals succeed in the internet industries through their hard work. For example, most Chinese internet companies are privately owned by individuals who have succeeded through years of hard work, such as Jack Ma, the owner of Alibaba, one of the most popular Chinese internet companies,<sup>43</sup> who

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<sup>43</sup> Jack Ma failed the college entrance exam twice before he entered a third-grade college. He worked as an English teacher in a third-grade educational institution before he founded the company. In the beginning of his business, he worked very hard and faced a lot of difficulties. Eventually, he has become an idol among youth in the internet industries, as he is the first mainland Chinese entrepreneur to be on the cover of Forbes Magazine and is noted as one of the world's billionaires.

succeeded through early struggles in his life. All these individual idols in the internet industries started from scratch, as most workers in the industries do. These stories encourage lots of workers to believe that the internet industries are there for ordinary Chinese people to achieve individual success, and to be the next Jack Ma. This is exactly what the American notion of 'bootstrap' capitalism refers to – pulling yourself up by your bootstraps.

However, as I asked above, do the Chinese internet industries provide opportunities for success to ordinary workers? And can these workers get promotion only through hard work? The answer is not as positive as Jack Ma's case would indicate.

Compared to the small number of successful individuals, large numbers of ordinary internet workers are struggling with long work hours and poor pay. More workers leave the industries without success, because of the difficult working conditions. Some workers even die from exhaustion on their way to being the heroes (such as the two cases of dying from exhaustion which are discussed in Chapter Six). As Qiu (2009: 237) discovers in the IT industry (the hardware market), many workers there suffer dangerous working conditions with little protection. This becomes the reason for the fast capital accumulation in the Chinese IT industries. The same situation also appears in the internet industries, where workers suffer from difficult working conditions without any help and support from labour unions. As Ross describes (2005: 127-130), the unions in China do not work as well as in Western countries, such as the UK and USA, though union power is deteriorating in these countries. The Chinese unions, either in SOEs or in private enterprises, stand much more with the companies rather than with their workers. The union usually persuades workers to accept difficult working conditions, sometimes even helps the companies to control their workers, rather than helping workers to bargain with the companies. In other words, large numbers of workers in the internet industries are struggling in difficult working conditions, and dreaming of being the next hero, while only a small number of individuals ever achieve the dream.

In my study, internet workers' promotion is still influenced by *guanxi*, although this is less of a serious trend than in other industries. For example, Janet told me that one of the drivers for shuttle buses at Grand was introduced by his relative, who was an executive there. This driver was known for his bad service to workers, whilst he still kept the job, just because his strong *guanxi* in the company. In Campus, workers' KPI (Key Performance Indicator), one indicator that contributes to the mechanism for deciding how much workers will get paid, are evaluated by their relationships with their superiors. Workers who have good relationships with superiors gain a high score in their KPI, which directly leads to more monthly bonuses. Workplace politics (*bangongshi zhengzhi*) – a term referring to the negotiation of power within an organisation for the advancement of personal interests, without considering the effects on

the benefits of the organisation – are also prevalent in the two companies studied in this research; some department leaders reject cooperation with other departments, because it will bring more profits to others rather than to their own departments. These leaders privilege their personal interests, such as personal appreciation from executives and the achievement of their own departments, and initiate internal competition between different departments, which eventually influences the companies' benefits.

The story about how four interns at Grand get their jobs is a good example of how *guanxi* works in the industries. Janet, Lily, Cathy and Shelly, as interns at Grand, all wanted to be recruited as full-time workers after graduation. But only Cathy and Shelly were recruited after four rounds of interviews, even though Janet received the highest score. Cathy was even rejected in the first round, but later was helped by her team leader, who negotiated with executives, for Cathy to get the job. This was not only because of Cathy's good relationship with the team leader, but also because the leader, who had just joined the department, needed someone who would be loyalty to her. Shelly was rejected in the third round, and was also helped by her team leader, because one of the executives was interested in her. The team leader wanted to please the executive by helping Shelly.

This example shows how *guanxi* shapes working life. It shows that workers with strong *guanxi* have better opportunities than workers with weak *guanxi*, no matter what skills and motivation the latter may have. *Guanxi* here refers not only to relationships with executives, but also to workplace politics: the worker gets the job because of her ability to help the manager to ensure his/her personal interests.

Put simply, workers with weak *guanxi* in the internet industries may have a higher possibility of promotion, compared to those in SOEs and civil servants, yet the internet industries still cannot avoid certain features of *guanxi*. Ordinary workers in the internet industries, especially technical workers, believe that promotion and success is a result of their hard work; by contrast, *guanxi* still plays an important role in workers' promotion, as it always does in Chinese society.

To sum up, some internet workers in the two companies do enjoy freedom in terms of deciding their projects, but some of these workers do not really have any flexible working hours, nor they can completely escape the influence of *guanxi* in their opportunities for promotion in workplace. I argue that, even though some work in the internet industries allows workers a degree of workplace autonomy, such as self-employed workers' experience, it is necessary to critically analyse such experience, because there is a sort of exploitation behind this high level of autonomy.

## 5.4 Professional autonomy

As I emphasised in section 2.6, based on Hesmondhalgh and Baker's work (2010), I define professional autonomy as workers' freedom for determination in their work practices, and creativity, under the pressures that are exerted by the state and companies. Thus there are two components that determine workers' professional autonomy: pressure within firms and pressure from the state.

According to my interviewees, some pressure within firms comes from the difficulty of cooperation between different departments.

*It's hard to conduct some work, as it depends on the cooperation between different departments, which doesn't always work well. For example, I want to conduct a project and need to co-work with another worker in another department, but as this project would not benefit him, he would most likely just reject the project... (Galeno, technical worker in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 24<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

Indeed, the difficulty with cooperation is because of the bonus system in Campus. This system states that workers can only receive a bonus if they can finish more projects than in the previous year. This then encourages workers to select the projects benefiting themselves as their first choice, and delay or even reject projects benefiting others, in order to save time. Such rejection or delay of projects, wastes workers' time, as they have to wait, which then restricts their practices. In particular, as most of my interviewees said, they did not prefer teamwork, especially teamwork between different departments.

*Teamwork is tricky: there are always some buck-passers in a team. They are used to looking for someone else to put the blame on. A teamwork meeting always ends up with arguing. I was really unhappy with teamwork... (Louis, former technical worker in the Open Platform Department at Campus, 18<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

Such difficulty of cooperation between different departments then blocks workers' practices: workers need to spend extra time on negotiating with colleagues, in order to finish the projects, which makes it harder for these workers to finish their projects. In other words, workers have limited freedom to decide the progress of their practices, which is influenced by the cooperation of their colleagues. These workers, who face difficulties regarding cooperation with workers in other departments, then evaluate their experiences of professional autonomy by suggesting that they have low degrees of such autonomy.

Additionally, internet workers also struggle in their expectation of intervention contradicting the copycat culture at the present: some internet

workers indicate a desire towards doing innovative and creative work in the industries, compared to the widespread copycat culture in the industries. During my fieldwork, I heard from more than one of my interviewees that he/she had certain senses of innovation, just as workers in American internet industries do. Most workers told me that they are different from workers in other industries, as they are creative and ambitious. They join the internet industries to create something through practices of innovation, rather than by simply producing something. Ross (2005) points out that China joined the world market in the beginning of the 1980s with its cheap labour, and it has become an effective competitor to many Western countries with its highly skilled workers, especially workers in the ICT industries (the hardware industries). It then becomes interesting to ask whether the internet industries are able to remake China with the new label 'created in China', and to what extent workers in the industries are as creative as they state.

The Chinese internet content market, the part of the internet industries which I focus on in this research, is shared by monopoly enterprises. For example, Sina, Sohu and Netease monopolise the portal market; Alibaba dominates the online commerce market; and Tencent is the main player in the instant messaging market. These monopoly companies tend to copy ideas and technologies from American internet companies, rather than creating their own. For example, Alibaba provides the same service as Ebay and Amazon; Tencent copies the majority of its programs from ICQ and MSN; and Renren is branded as the Chinese Facebook. Their monopolistic position in the industries builds a 'copycat culture' rather than a label 'created in China'.

These facts evidently are in conflict with the creativity and innovation workers expect from and express about their work. It then becomes the responsibility of the workers to balance their expectation of innovation and the copycat culture in the industries. Some workers choose to carry out minor innovations based on copying code from American companies. For example, some of them creatively modify the copied code, so the new program fits into the Chinese market. Despite their desire to be innovative, some workers make a compromise because of the copycat culture, and choose not to spend time on innovation: their pay cannot meet the high living costs in big cities, where most internet companies are based, when their ambitions to innovate are not supported by the companies.

Compared to peasant workers – peasants that rush into big cities to be cheap labourers – and peasants, most internet workers are better rewarded, but this does not guarantee that they can enjoy a middle class life in big cities, such as Beijing and Shanghai. For example, during my fieldwork, one of my participants said that she hesitated to have a baby, although she was already 30, a late age to have baby in China. The high cost of buying a house and caring for a baby in Shanghai made her postpone her plan; the cheapest old

flat in Shanghai, with a size of 80 square metres, is around £3,000 per square metre, a total of £240,000. It needs an initial payment of £60,000, compared to her monthly salary of £1,200. In other words, the initial payment would be 50 times her monthly salary, and the total cost would be 200 times her monthly salary, compared with 108 times people's monthly salary in UK.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, the high expenses in Shanghai prevent her being a mother, not to mention having a middle class quality of life.

In fact, it is not only the workers who cannot afford to spend time on innovation, but also the internet companies that need to profit quickly; otherwise, they will be eliminated from the fast developing industries, because of the high costs in big cities. Louis, a former technical worker at Campus, who ran his own internet company in Beijing at the time of my writing, says that the rent of his office is more than £1,800 per month, which is equal to the monthly salary of a senior manager with five years' work experience. Put simply, the costs of running a business in the big cities is so high, that most internet companies could not afford to wait for profits from innovation. Instead, they choose the cheapest and easiest way of profiting: by copying. In other words, the difficult urban life pushes workers to compromise with the fast profit system, which is based on a copycat culture, and halts their dreams of innovation and creativity.

But this compromise does not mean that all workers in the industries give up innovation by working as a silent cog in the fast-developing internet industries. As an alternative, some workers still hold the dream of building up the internet industries with the label 'created in China'. As I showed earlier, with the dream of 'created in China', some workers choose to start their own business. Reasons for starting individual businesses are varied: some intend to achieve individual success by earning money and upgrading social status; some seek a large space for workplace autonomy; some wish to open a space for ordinary Chinese people to speak out; and some aim to promote a culture of innovation. Taylor (2012) claims that 'the association with the arts' shapes 'the expectations workers bring to a creative career and their willingness to endure its difficulties' (p.55). Here, it is the association with an expectation of innovation that motivates workers towards self-entrepreneurship. (I discuss self-entrepreneurship in Chapter Seven). It is unquestionable that a potential for innovation is currently emerging, under the copycat culture of the Chinese internet industries.

However, in both internet companies, there are also workers who consider themselves to have a considerable degree of freedom to determine practices and creativity, such as workers in the online novel department in Grand.

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<sup>44</sup> *Daily Mail*, 20 May 2013

The main job of workers in the online novel department is online editing. Their work includes managing online writers' writing and emotions. For example, when online writers face difficulties writing novels, these online editors are responsible for cheering them up, providing ideas, searching writing materials, and even suggesting structures for their stories. These editors are allowed a high level of freedom in determining these practices, such as deciding when and how to manage the writers and novels. Sarah, the manager, whom I mentioned earlier, never intervenes in the practices and relationships between the workers and the online writers.

Sarah then promotes a high level of autonomy as a successful management strategy amongst all departments in Grand. This is conceptualised as creative management in some theorists' work. For example, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010: 83-86) claim that creative management is a soft and indirect management, which authorises relative autonomy to workers involved in cultural production. Based on Ryan's work, which defines creative management as 'a muted and accommodating style' (1992: 121) of managing creative labour, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010: 85-86) argue that such creative management indicates the specificity of creative labour. They later examine how managers carry out such creative management, and how creative workers understand it, by showing tensions, conflicts and anxieties surrounding such creative management in the three cultural industries: the television industries, music recording industries and magazine publishing industries.

Banks (2010) claims that governmentality approaches usually argue that creative management can train cultural workers to 'accept and reproduce for themselves the precise conditions of their subordination' (p.256). He (2007) argues that such creative management, which offers some relative autonomy to creative workers, aims to 'override any misgivings, constraints or disadvantages that might emerge in the everyday reproduction of this highly competitive and uncertain domain' (p.55). As I discussed in section 2.6, some governmentality theorists discuss creative autonomy using the concept of self-exploitation (McRobbie 2000, Ursell 2000).

McRobbie (2002) points out that the dream of self-realisation seduces cultural workers to devote themselves to cultural work with little return. For example, she states that most cultural workers now self-exploit themselves by long working hours, lacking union and other forms of protection, and with low pay. All these difficult working conditions are 'in the hope of talent paying off' (p.101). She then identifies this kind of activity as the 'Hollywoodization of the UK cultural labour markets' (p.109). The relative creative autonomy here is also understood as an incitement that attracts workers to devote themselves to the work.

Ursell (2000) understands self-exploitation using Nikolas Rose's work. She writes of how television workers seek identity in work, and how their 'subjective desires for self-actualisation are ... harnessed to the firm's aspirations for productivity, efficiency and the like' (Rose 1999: 244 in Ursell 2000: 810). In other words, self-exploitation refers to creative workers who 'give a great deal for little return', because of 'a personalised and individualised identity project' (Taylor 2012: 43).

The work of these theorists is useful in highlighting poor working conditions in cultural production. In this case, the authorisation of high levels of professional autonomy covers some disadvantages within the work: the workers need to work day and night without receiving appropriate rewards. In order to maintain good relationships with the online writers, who usually start their writing at night because they are only part-time writers, these editors need to work until late at night. Surprisingly, although they carry out such day and night overtime, these editors receive just £300 a month without any overtime pay (compared to other full-time workers' £1,000 monthly pay). Meanwhile, some of these theorists' work, such as McRobbie, is also valuable to bridge structural explanations rooted in a theory of exploitation, and the kinds of worker-centred experiential accounts that I am keen to elaborate in this research, as it recognises that people have autonomous capacities to choose for themselves under the structural constraints, albeit sometimes in a negative way.

But Banks (2010) points out that these arguments about self-exploitation overemphasise 'the capacity of capital to determine the conditions of cultural production', and underrate 'the extent to which autonomy is shaped by the somewhat more open dialectic of creativity and constraint that underpins what Bill Ryan (1992) has termed the "art-commerce relation"' (p.259). Taylor (2012) also points out that McRobbie underestimates the drive to be creative, such as 'a passion for developing their skill or craft rather than commercial motives' (p.44). Taylor's work usefully indicates people's ability to exert independent agency or autonomy within difficult workplaces.

Sarah claimed that the online editors focused on the moral contribution rather than the economic rewards. For example, they perceived success of the online novel industry, as an online novel website providing a good reading experience to its online readers. Such idealism motivated them to work overtime, Sarah claims. This recalls Taylor's claim that cultural workers are strongly motivated by 'the association with the art' (p.55). Both Taylor and Banks agree that it is the desire to choose one's life/career and fulfil one's personhood that motivate cultural workers to exert independent agency, of the kind I will discuss in Chapter Seven. The high level of relative autonomy showed by the online editors' case indicates a degraded kind of agency:

people have autonomous capacities to choose for themselves, nonetheless it leads to a negative result, bad working conditions.

However, Ursell (2000: 810-811) argues that the capacities of self-actualisation between people are unequal. And this inequality needs to be understood via structural factors, such as work and market exchange. Likewise, here, there is another side to the coin: this overtime means some workers are forced to work until late at night. Sarah states that the leaders of these online editors, have a roll call every night on their QQ groups – the online instant message groups run by Tencent, where users can organise their own online groups to chat, share files and play online games – in order to confirm that all online editors are still working. In other words, part of these workers' motivation for overtime work come from their ambition to provide good online novel-reading experiences to readers, whilst the other part comes from their leaders, who push them to work overtime at night.

Here, poor working conditions, such as unrewarded overtime, in some sense involves compulsion. It directly indicates a necessity to emphasise the structural factors behind these difficult working conditions: due to their low class position, these online editors are still controlled by the company, which accumulate capital by appropriating the labour efforts. This indicates a sort of exploitation as a force behind these internet workers' complex working-life experiences: they enjoy a high level of relative autonomy, which shows a sort of agency; but the bad working conditions along with this high level of autonomy also show the structural forces behind such experiences – their low class position leads to exploitation. Even though some work in the Chinese internet industries is granted a high level of autonomy, it is vital to recognise the poor working conditions behind such autonomy, and to criticise the structural constraints shaping such experiences.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this section, Chinese internet workers' professional autonomy is characterised by pressure from the state, which distinguishes their working-life experiences from the experiences of workers in other geographical and political contexts. Such tensions between workers' determination regarding creativity and the state's intervention, relate to the complicated relationships between internet firms and the state, which I have discussed in section 5.2: internet companies sometimes contradict the state's desires in terms of determining the extent of internet users' online freedom. A large space for online freedom would attract users, who would bring economic benefits to the companies, whilst such large space would also attract the state's attention, who have the power to easily stop the companies.

Here, internet companies' practices of creating a free online space, which contradicts the state's interests, certainly involves the internet workers' creativity. As a result, the state not only intervenes in the firms' business via

certain policies, but also intervenes in the workers' daily practices, in order to restrict the freedom given to them by their companies.

For example, according to Leo, an interviewee from the first interview group I did in February 2010, who worked in the Open Platform Department at Campus, officials from The State Administration of Radio, Film and Television visit Campus every month, in order to have regular meetings with workers in the Security Department. In these meetings, officials inform the workers about recent sensitive issues, which are usually related to politics and pornography, and ask the workers to delete references to these issues from all Campus' online products, such as forums.

Take the 1989 Tian'anmen Square Protests as an example: according to Alex, another interviewee in the first interview group I did in February 2010, who also works in the Open platform department at Campus, at the end of April every year, the company starts to organise a number of meetings to prepare for the coming 4<sup>th</sup> June, where lots of internet users usually organise various online activities for the anniversary of the protests. The company makes great efforts to stop these online activities, obeying the rules set by the state. Normally, there are two ways the company filters information relating to this sensitive issue: filtering key words using censorship technologies and filtering pictures by manual examination.

The User-generated Content Department and the Security Department take charge of filtering key words, such as 'explosion' and 'bomb'. The state provides a list of sensitive words as a guideline, which includes millions of words relating to the Tian'anmen Square Protests, and asks the company to delete them from its website. Alex's roommate, who worked in the security department, told him that such lists included 7,300 words relating to AV (Adult Video) actresses, not to mention numerous words relating to the Tian'anmen Square Protests, which remains one of the most sensitive political issues in contemporary China. Moreover, such prohibited words on the list include not only those written in Chinese, but also words from many other languages.

The manual examination of sensitive pictures requires efforts from lots of workers. According to Alex, almost all workers, including full-time workers and interns, and even the boss of Campus, work day and night around 4<sup>th</sup> June, in order to filter pictures posted by internet users and delete the sensitive ones. Normally, online pictures are examined after users have posted them, but, during this special period, these pictures need to be examined before being shown on the website. Thus, more workers are required to work overtime in order to filter all the pictures. The workers, who usually work in relays, are required to work together at the same time around 4<sup>th</sup> June, in order to deal with the mountain of work. In other words, the workers are forced to work overtime because of the state's requirements concerning sensitive issues. And

such overtime is not rewarded, as usual, which indicates another sort of exploitation behind these experiences.

Generally, the officials do not provide the workers with lists of sensitive words and pictures that need to be deleted; rather, they give general information about the issues, and the workers need to decide for themselves what kinds of related words and pictures should be deleted. If the workers fail to delete the right things, the company may be punished by the state, through fines, and even through closure. This then creates another way that the state intervenes in workers' daily practices: the state directly stops workers' programs or products, because they may still include certain sensitive issues after the workers have filtered the information.

For example, Leo, the former interviewee from the Open Platform Department at Campus in 2010, said that the popular online game, Godfather, created by the department in 2010 and ranked as one of the top 10 most popular online games by users, was stopped by the Ministry of Culture, because it was perceived to contain sinister gang and gambling-related content. In this case, the workers' creativity was directly intervened with by the state, when they stopped the product because of sensitive issues.

*This is China, where all businesses need to consider political issues. Some companies are closed because of political reasons, such as Fanfou [a Chinese website similar to Twitter, which was closed by the state in 2009, because large numbers of internet users discussed sensitive political issues, such as the Tian'anmen Square Protests, on the website] ... Actually, the Tian'anmen Square Protests is not the only case reflecting intervention by the state; the Xinjiang riot [ethnic violence erupted in Xinjiang Province, a western province in China, in early July 2009. Thousands of people were killed and hundreds were injured in the violence] is another sensitive issue that needs to be deleted from websites. (Alex, former technical worker in the Open Platform Department at Campus, 27<sup>th</sup> February 2010, interview)*

Galeno also provided me with some examples of such direct intervention from the state:

*... Netease, one of the most popular news websites, was suddenly stopped by the state, because it reported the scandal of the President's son bribing... We have had a similar experience: there was a hot topic on our website that civil servants in Beijing were being offered houses for £7.70 per month. Then, we [all the workers in Campus] were asked to have a meeting, as the leader [of China] was quite furious about this news, and asked us to immediately delete all the related news on our website... (Galeno, technical worker in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 20<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

In these two cases, workers' practices were directly stopped by the state, because these practices 'hurt' the state. Put simply, the state assigns the responsibility of filtering sensitive issues to internet workers, by requiring them to delete sensitive words and pictures in relation to certain issues without giving detailed lists. This increases workers' work intensity. When the state is unsatisfied with workers' practices or programs, it easily stops them. Such rough intervention from the state not only influences workers' practices and creativity, but also increases their work intensity, as the Tian'anmen Square Protests case indicated. Therefore, it is now worth discussing how workers themselves understand such intervention.

Some workers regard such intervention as a rule of a game:

*It is a rule of the game [played in the context of China], if we want to join in. We don't care about it too much... (Leo, former technical worker in the Open Department at Campus, 25<sup>th</sup> February 2010, interview)*

*Admittedly, the state's intervention affects our creativity more or less. But it is fair in the industries, because the practices that I cannot do also apply to others. It [the intervention from the state] is just like a circle to all of us [the internet workers], within which we are allowed to compete with each other. Even companies with foreign investment, which enter the market, such as American internet companies, are still required to obey the rules. It then becomes a fair game to all of us... (George, former worker in the User-generated Content Department at Campus, 26<sup>th</sup> February 2010, interview)*

Both Leo and George regard the state's intervention as a characteristic of the Chinese context, which they still think guarantees a fair business environment. These workers choose to accept such rules as a special condition of their work. However, other workers regard such intervention as influencing their practices and creativity in an unacceptable way:

*We [workers] definitely don't like the rule. We prefer to stand with users, who could bring us money. But, as the state could easily stop our service, we still need to follow the rules in certain ways... (Galeno, technical worker in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 20<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

On the one hand, Galeno shows the necessity of balancing the state's requirement and internet users' needs for free space in his daily practices; on the other hand, he states that most workers feel unsatisfied with the state's intervention. Thus, these workers, who are unsatisfied with such intervention, apply their professional knowledge and skills to acts of negotiation and resistance, in order to gain more professional autonomy. Such acts of agency indicate the need to address Banks' question about autonomy: 'what is the

political potential of the intrinsic “permission to rebel” that characterises cultural industries production?’ (Banks 2010: 261).

After emphasising the complicated context of autonomy and the art-commerce relation, Banks (2010: 261-265) introduces two possibilities of autonomy: radical autonomy and negotiated autonomy. The radical autonomy highlights the possible transformations initiated by the ‘inherent tension in the art-commerce dialectic’ (ibid.), such as autonomist Marxist theorists’ work (Hardt & Negri 2001) that predicting social revolutions initiated by the ‘digitally integrated and networked “multitudes” of precarious labour’ (Banks 2010: 262).

However, Banks argues that such accounts of the political potential of the multitudes of precarious labour are far-fetched and utopian. However, he suggests that there remains a vital but often overlooked possibility, negotiated autonomy – ‘workers find themselves engaged in a quotidian “struggle within” to try to mediate, manage or reconcile the varied opportunities and constraints of the art-commerce relation’; and such autonomy is ‘a resource for underpinning a variety of practices and courses of action’ (p.262). This ‘quotidian struggle-within’ refers to how internet workers in this research struggle within the intervention from the state and companies and how they realise creativity under such constraints. These quotidian struggles enable internet workers to be consciously involved in certain ‘political activities’, such as practices in relation to socio-politics. I turn back to this point in Chapter Seven, where I discuss workers’ acts of negotiation and resistance towards internet companies and the state, by continuing Banks and other theorists’ arguments.

In this section, I have discussed two issues that restrict workers’ professional autonomy: pressure within companies and intervention from the state. The difficulty of cooperation between departments partly decreases workers’ freedom of determination. And the difficulty of realising their own innovation and creativity in the workplace also worsens their experiences of professional autonomy. In comparison, some workers still have a high level of freedom to determine their work practices and creativity, such as the online editors in Grand, nevertheless, such autonomy is authorised with some bad working conditions. It is necessary to recognise the agentic desires behind these workers’ autonomous capacities to choose for themselves. Yet, such agency drives to a negative result – workers ‘choose’ to work themselves extremely hard.

Moreover, the internet workers’ experiences of professional autonomy are characterised by intervention from the state, which directly intervenes in their daily practices and creativity at work. Such intervention certainly restricts workers’ freedom to determine their practices and creativity, which indicates a low level of professional autonomy amongst most workers. But workers do not passively accept these restrictions. This then addresses the necessity to

discuss workers' reactions, such as acts of negotiation and resistance, which I consider in the later chapters of this thesis.

## **5.5 Conclusion: Power dynamics within workers' experiences of autonomy**

In this chapter, I have shown how the bureaucratic capitalist class emerges in the Chinese internet industries, by discussing the complicated relationships between internet companies and the state. Both groups in this class, internet companies and the state, do not only cooperate with each other in order to maximise their economic and political benefits, but also conflict with each other, especially in terms of determining the extent of online users' freedom. Practices regarding this cooperation and contradiction create a complicated context in which internet workers have ambivalent experiences of autonomy.

I argue that Chinese internet workers' experiences of autonomy are different from cultural workers' in other geographic contexts: their professional autonomy is not only interfered with by internet companies, but also by the state. The state's intervention focuses on internet users' freedom and the extent to which they are given the freedom to speak out online. This type of intervention not only works at a macro level, such as issuing cultural policies, but also at a micro level, such as directly influencing workers' daily practices.

Intervention in the work practices of internet workers from both the internet companies and the state is another example of how the bureaucratic capitalist class dominates the lower middle class. The state can easily stop internet workers' creative practices, because it controls them. The companies can also force workers to accept limited workplace autonomy and professional autonomy, by making them accept the widespread copycat culture in the industries. Some workers struggle to realise their creativity and innovation, because the companies control the workers' skills, which workers can only sell in the capitalist market to survive.

But this does not mean that all internet workers have low levels of autonomy. Some internet workers do experience a high level of autonomy: either workplace autonomy or professional autonomy. For example, some workers have a high level of workplace autonomy, because of their strong *guanxi* within the workplace. Full-time workers in the online novel department in Grand have a high level of freedom to decide their creativity and practices. However, such freedom is based on unrewarded overtime work. In particular, some of them are forced by the company to accept bad working conditions: to

work day and night without reasonable pay. This is an important issue in the Chinese internet industries that needs to be criticised.

These ambivalent experiences of autonomy indicate affective concerns and agentic desires, such as feelings and emotions relating to the fulfilment of personhood, that drive these workers to self-exploit, a concept that emphasises how workers operate under structural constraints that cannot be fully controlled. This suggests the need to think critically about autonomy, which can be seen as a kind of agency within the working life, precisely because that agency is sometimes used negatively. The potential of such autonomy is a key question for this research. As Banks (2010) points out, the extent to which cultural workers are able to 'offer an alternative vision of life or politically challenging worldview' (p.267) via the exertion of their own agency is an important question. So although I argued that internet workers experience exploitation in the previous chapter, here I am arguing that this is only part of the picture. In addition to that exploitation, we can see that workers have the possibility of acting with autonomy or agency, however limited or negatively applied that autonomy might be. I turn back to these questions of agency in Chapter Seven. First, in the next chapter, I turn to experiences of risk and insecurity in the working life, as a final example of the difficult conditions that workers experience in the Chinese internet industries.

## Chapter Six: Risks and insecurity

### 6.1 Structure of the chapter

In the last chapter, I discussed internet workers' ambivalent experiences of autonomy. I argued that some workers experience limited or low autonomy in their work, despite the internet industries being fetishized as ideal workplaces for providing high autonomy. Some workers may experience a high level of autonomy, but it is vital to recognise a form of exploitation behind such autonomy. In this chapter, I continue my argument about the working life in terms of workers' experience of risk. I argue that all workers experience precarious and risky working conditions, which indicates what I have described as the lower middle class problem in the Chinese context: that is, the increased proletarianisation of this class. In section 6.2, I discuss four issues regarding full-time workers' experience of risk in the industries: job-hopping, lay-offs, health problems and pension problems. As in Chapter Four, I argue that some issues, such as problems relating to pension and health, are the result of a form of structural exploitation. However, some issues are a result of domination, not exploitation – again this shows that whilst useful, the concept of exploitation does not fully explain workers' experiences in the Chinese internet industries. In section 6.3, I provide data about rural students, which was collected from my fieldwork, in order to show the precarious and unsafe situation that large numbers of interns experience in the internet industries. I argue that these experiences indicate the difficult situation of university students, who are an important part of the lower middle class in China. These students become the victims of the rapid growth of the Chinese economy and the reform of Chinese education. In section 6.4, I discuss risks in agency workers' experiences. I argue that agency workers are forced to take on responsibilities in their working lives, which have formerly belonged to the state and companies. They are forced to accept an insecure and unsafe future in their working lives, which is becoming a general problem of the lower middle class. In section 6.5, I conclude by arguing that members of the lower middle class experience different levels of precarity in their working life, which indicates a form of exploitation behind these experiences. Thus like the previous two empirical chapters, this chapter continues to highlight some of the extremely difficult conditions that workers endure in the Chinese internet industries, some of which are the result of structural exploitation, whereas others are the result of some non-economic factors, such as *guanxi*.

## 6.2 From Karoshi to 'no future'

There is a wealth of writing in circulation on precarity, precariousness and insecure work in the cultural industries. For example, Standing (2011: 14-18) defines precariat as a large number of people across the world living and working in a precarious status – moving in and out of jobs without secure roles in the labour market, stable occupational identities, stable social protection, and social memory or an enduring values framework. He identifies many varieties of precariat, such as migrants and young people. Standing argues that these people are increasingly dangerous, because they could produce anxiety, anomie, alienation and anger in society.

Some studies particularly conceptualise cultural labourers' working lives with concepts of precarity and precariousness. Gill and Pratt (2008) distinguish precariousness from precarity by defining the former as 'all forms of insecure, contingent, flexible work', and the latter as 'the multiplication of precarious, unstable, insecure forms of living' and 'new forms of political struggle and solidarity that reach beyond the traditional models of the political party or trade union' (p.3). They sum up debates of precarity as research focusing on 'who best exemplifies the experience of precarity' (p.11), debates concerning 'solidarity across difference', and debates concerning 'the aims of precarity activism'. They argue that the overlap between research on cultural labour, autonomist Marxism and precarity activism involves 'effect, temporality, subjectivity and solidarity' (p.14). For example, autonomist Marxists regard precarity as 'a form of exploitation which operates primarily on the level of time, evaporating distinctions between work and leisure, production and consumption'(p.17). In relation to the research on cultural labour, such precarity highlights free time and free labour generated in the 'participation economy' (ibid.) – people producing and uploading contents on social networking services, such as Facebook and YouTube.

Neilson and Rossiter (2008) claim that precarity usually highlights 'economic and existential experiences of risk and uncertainty' (p.54). They describe precarity as an experience that 'cannot exist without a transversal or transpositional movement between the theoretical and the practical' (p.63). It is 'an experience from which differential capacities and regimes of value emerge' (p.64). They argue that varied work of creative labour shows diverse degrees of precarity. And precarity across varied values, such as 'surplus value of precarious labour, scarcity value of intellectual property rights, cultural and social values of individual and group identities' (ibid.), registers the movement of relations. The 'internal variations, external impositions and mutual inconsistencies' within capitalism and Fordism, which are shaped by 'national, geocultural and historical contexts as well as institutional practices', enable the 'multiplicity of precarity' (p.54), such as varied labour conditions. Thus, it is

possible to address different levels or experiences of precarity amongst different kinds of workers.

All the research also answers why precarity increasingly spreads across the world, such as Chinese internet workers' varied experiences of precariousness shown in this chapter. Generally, autonomist Marxists understand neo-liberalism as an important factor shaping precarity. Standing (2011) argues that precariat, an emerging class, is growing because of the increasing globalisation and the associated rise in neo-liberal institutions, policies and perspectives. Here, precarity is a significant concept to theorise internet workers' insecure and risky experiences, because it signifies varied experiences of precariousness amongst different internet workers, and, simultaneously, possible political subjectivity. As Neilson and Rossiter (2008) argue, precarity, as a political concept, has the potential to produce forms of connection, subjectivity and political organisation. Below, I talk about the different experiences of precariousness amongst different kinds of workers via issues of job-hopping, lay-offs, health problems and pension problems.

## 6.2.1 Job-hopping and lay-offs

The first problem relating to work security is how stable the work is, or how often workers change their jobs. It is quite common to find job-hopping in the high-tech industries, such as the internet industries. Ross (2005) points out that the average turnover rate in the Chinese high-tech industries is about 20 percent. This high turnover rate was reflected in my fieldwork: six out of the seven interviewees, whom I contacted in 2010, had left Campus by the time I contacted them again in 2011. Walter, a technical worker at Campus, whom I interviewed in August 2011, had left to join his friend's self-employed group when I revisited the company in December 2011.

On the day I started my internship in Grand, two employees came to the HR department to resign. After that, during the three months I spent in Grand, there were several workers who came to the department to resign every day. As some of my interviewees say, two years is quite a long period to stay in the same company in the internet industries.

*Most workers in my department, almost twenty people, left in just one and half years... Every time we gathered for team building, I saw new faces... (Galeno, technical worker in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 24<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

*I will not stay in Campus for more than two years. Most people stay in one company for no more than two years... (Louis, former technical worker in the Open Platform Department at Campus, 18<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

This obviously indicates a high turnover rate in the internet industries. Some theorists point out certain problems caused by this high turnover rate. For example, Ross (2007: 34-36) points out that such frequent turnover, results in high costs for training, because workers usually leave after benefiting from training, and then new workers have to be trained to replace them. Indeed, it is also recognised as a problem in Grand, because lots of workers leave the company after benefiting from training. Ross (2007: 34-36) also claims that job-hopping becomes a bargaining tool for experienced workers to negotiate with companies for good pay.

*We are all confident about our skills... The shortage of the reserve of talent in the industries keeps labour prices up. Then, after two years' experience, you are be capable of being hunted by head-hunters, which means you can change your job any time you want... (Galeno, technical worker in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 20<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

As Galeno points out, some experienced technical workers are confident enough to request good pay because of their job-hopping capabilities. Another technical worker in Grand, Tim, told me that he knew he could easily find a position with good pay in another company, because he understood the value of his skills. Such confidence certainly indicates that some workers benefit from frequent job-hopping, because they can receive better pay after bargaining with companies.

But, indeed, this only applies to certain experienced technical workers, who have the high skills to bargain with companies. In contrast, most workers change their jobs because they struggle to earn good money and want an easier working life.

*Now everything's getting expensive, I need to find another position with better pay, so that I can survive in this city... But autonomy in work is the more important reason for me to job-hop... (Walter, technical worker in the Advertisement Department at Campus, 25<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

As I discussed in section 5.3, Walter indicated autonomy as an important reason for him to consider changing his job. Here, he points out that good pay is also an important reason for him to change job.

As in most countries, working and living in big cities is not easy. Some workers, most of whom are in middle class locations, choose the new lifestyle of a 'weekly couple' (*zhoumo fuqi*) or 'monthly couple' (*yuemo fuqi*), which refers to the family gathering that takes place once a week or once a month, because of the high living expenses in big cities. For example, Sam is a senior manager in Grand's Shanghai office, and his family are based in Najing, another city two hours away from Shanghai by train. The high cost of living in Shanghai stops his from family moving there with him, and the terrible traffic

jams, means it takes Sam more than four hours to go back home, and stops him from gathering with his family every day. Then, the only choice for Sam is to be a 'weekly couple' with his wife by going back home every weekend. Peter is another senior manager in Grand, and his family live in Shenzhen, another big city two and a half hours away from Shanghai by air. Both he and his wife cannot support the family if either of them quit their job and move to the other's city. Therefore, they choose the modern lifestyle, to be a 'monthly couple'. This new lifestyle obviously influences workers' life quality, as it separates workers from their families. This goes against the traditional Chinese family life, which is based on living in groups.

It is the high cost of living in big cities that pushes workers to choose this modern lifestyle and decrease their quality of life. It also indicates the difficulty of living in big cities for the lower middle class. Thus, such difficulty pushes workers to consider good pay as an important reason for changing their jobs.

Additionally, there are other reasons for workers to change their jobs, such as the long hours spent on the way to work. Some workers choose to move jobs to companies nearer their homes, because of the terrible traffic problems in China. For example, when I started my internship in Grand, Megan, an experienced HR worker, resigned from the department because of the time she spent on her way to and from work, which was nearly four hours per day.

The long time spent on the way to work is not only because of the distance from Megan's home to the company, but also because of the extremely crowded public transportation. Because of the high costs of buying and running cars in China, most workers choose public transportation, such as the underground, to get to work. However, the unbelievably crowded public transportation (see Figure 6.1) always forces workers to spend long hours travelling. For example, it is sometimes only possible to get on the undergrounds after waiting for more than half an hour during peak time in Beijing and Shanghai, because of the crowds, as shown in Figure 6.1.



**Figure 6.1: Crowded underground in Beijing in peak time**

**Source: News.cn, 15<sup>th</sup> December 2010**

Such terrible transportation problems, means workers spend extra time on their way to work, and this ultimately results in some of them job-hopping.

Put simply, some experienced technical workers do benefit from the frequent job-hopping in the industries, because they have high skills to bargain with companies for good pay. In contrast, many workers choose to change their jobs because they suffer from bad pay and terrible transportation problems in their jobs. These workers pursue a good job, with good pay and a convenient lifestyle, by frequently job-hopping.

Moreover, there is another side to the coin: in some cases, companies lay off workers.

*I had a colleague, who had been at Campus for four years, but he still received the same salary as me, and I had just joined the company... It was one way the company forced us to leave... Finally, he left as most new employees were paid higher than him... If I were my colleague, I would also choose to resign, as salary is a way to evaluate a person's talent and to show respect to that person... It doesn't matter how much you are paid, but it matters how much more you are paid than others, especially people whom you think are less talented than you... (Galeno, technical worker in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 24<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

*Someone left not because of the low salary, but because his salary was lower than others, whom he thought were not better than him... (Carl, technical worker in the Open Platform Department at Campus, 20<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

In these cases, workers are forced to leave by the company in an indirect way, because the company needs 'fresh blood' to bring creative ideas. Workers, indeed, are laid off in an indirect way.

As I stated in section 4.3.2, three months after I finished my internship in Grand, I contacted my friends there, and was surprised to find that more than half of the full-time workers in the HR department had been laid off, because the company wanted to cut its labour costs. According to the work contracts, these workers were informed of their redundancy one month before they left and were paid for one more month's salary as compensation. These workers did not have the time to find new jobs in one month, but they had to accept the situation, because they could not find any way to protect themselves.

Brophy (2006: 630-631) points out US high tech work does not benefit from union protection, and that workers are hardly unionised. He relates this to 'an absence of memory of labour organising to draw upon in order to confront the exploitative relations they face' (p.630); and a feeling of privilege that high-tech workers have, which leads them to refuse the kinds of collective union organisation through unions they associate with factory workers. In China, the situation is slightly different: like US high-tech workers, Chinese internet workers have no memory of organised labour. But in any case, unions in most Chinese industries operate rather differently, taking the side of companies, by persuading workers to accept unfair working conditions, rather than protecting workers, which I pointed out in Chapters One and Two.

In both examples I stated above, workers were laid off in an indirect or direct way, without any protection from the unions. Companies can easily decide to lay off workers, because they have the state, including the unions, as their supporters. This obviously indicates cooperation between capitalists (internet companies), and bureaucracy (the state). The experiences of these unprotected workers show how the bureaucratic capitalist class dominates the lower middle class.

This then highlights an insecure situation in the internet industries: some workers are unreasonably laid-off by companies without any protection, such as job security and recompense. It is then necessary to pay attention to these unprotected workers, rather than simply blaming them for their frequent job-hopping. Some theorists theorise insecure work conditions by using the concept of *precarity*. For example, Neilson and Rossiter (2006) define precarity as 'an increasing change of previously guaranteed permanent employment conditions into mainly worse paid, uncertain jobs', and 'the precondition for new forms of creative organisation that seek to accept and

exploit the flexibility inherent in networked modes of sociality and production' (p.10). Using the concept of precarity, they highlight bad pay, uncertain work conditions, and the acceptance of 'the flexibility inherent in networked modes of sociality and production' (ibid.).

Some Chinese internet workers' experiences affirm this conception of precarity: some workers change jobs because of the bad working conditions they experience, some workers are forced to leave without protection from work unions, because companies want to save labour costs or employ 'fresh blood'. Here, as Neilson and Rossiter argue, precarity becomes a useful concept to criticise creative workers' uncertain work status and the way organisations, such as internet companies, subsuming such 'flexibility inherent in networked modes of sociality and production'. Thus, such inequality and injustice in terms of job-hopping and lay-off remind us of the precarious working conditions with certain good parts of the internet work, such as high level of autonomy which I discussed in the last chapter. I discuss other issues in workers' precarious experiences below.

## 6.2.2 Work until death

According to Gill and Pratt (2009), McRobbie argues that long working hours in creative industries result in a lot of health problems, such as 'exhaustion, burn-out, alcohol and drug-related problems, premature heart attacks and strokes, and a whole host of mental and emotional disorders related to anxiety and depression' (Gill and Pratt 2009: 18). These health problems in relation to excessive working hours are also popular amongst Chinese internet workers. For example, according to a survey conducted by Tencent News – a news website run by one of the largest internet companies, Tencent – 98% internet workers feel their health getting worse after accessing the industries, and more than 80% internet workers suffer from mental and emotional problems, such as anxiety and depression, because of high pressure and excessive working hours.<sup>45</sup>

In Grand and Campus, it was common to find some internet workers experiencing problems with their health, such as hepatopathy – a liver dysfunction that is commonly understood as a result of excessive working hours<sup>46</sup>. Janet, the intern who is in charge of new employees' health checks in Grand, said that, if the company regards workers with liver problems as unhealthy people and rejects them, then the company could not recruit any employee. In other words, liver problems are a common health problem, which

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<sup>45</sup> Tencent News 2007

<sup>46</sup> Xinhua News 2011

lots of internet workers relate to the long working hours and high pressure they suffer from the industries.

As I argued in Chapter Four, internet workers experience unrewarded excessive working hours because of the structural exploitation. Here, the argument is enriched by examining their well-being: internet workers suffer health problems, because they are pushed by the high pressure to have excessive working hours without reasonable rewards.

Moreover, there is another striking issue in terms of the workers' well-being in the industries that is caused by the difficult working conditions: *karoshi*, a Japanese term meaning death from exhaustion. Such extreme cases are usually caused by high pressure, which is a result of the long working hours, low pay and high competition in internet work. In December 2013, a report from People.com – one of Chinese government's official websites – reveals that more than 600,000 Chinese workers die from exhaustion every year, which means around 1,600 workers die from exhaustion every day. This number has become bigger than Japan, which used to be the country with the largest number of people dying from exhaustion. Most workers experience *karoshi* were working in high-tech industries, such as internet industries.<sup>47</sup> Some of the *karoshi* cases mentioned in this report were heard in my fieldwork, which I talk about later. But one *karoshi* case that surprised me was Peasant Dai, the private entrepreneur, whom I mentioned in the beginning of this thesis. He was reported to die from exhaustion on 25<sup>th</sup> July 2013. This report<sup>48</sup> states that most cases of *karoshi* are related to long working hours, irregular meals, and high pressure.

During the time I spent in Grand, I heard of two cases of *karoshi*. One was in Tencent, one of the main portals in China with the famous instant messenger system QQ, where an online editor died because of overtime work. The news was circulated on microblog sites, because the editor talked about his overtime situation on his microblog. Janet showed us the microblog, in which the editor stated that he was tired of excessive working hours. Some of his posts showed that he even worked until 8am in the morning. According to Xinhua News, this editor had excessive working hours for a few days to develop an important new project before dying from cerebral apoplexy. Thus, he was believed to die from the excessive working hours and high pressure caused by the new project.<sup>49</sup>

Another *karoshi* case was in Baidu, the main search engine company in mainland China, where a member of staff in the online game department died

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<sup>47</sup> People.com 2013

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Xinhua News 2011

from exhaustion on 14<sup>th</sup> November 2011.<sup>50</sup> According to this news, the average age of death from overtime in the internet industries is just under 38.<sup>51</sup> Sam, the senior manager in HR department in Grand who I mentioned earlier, says that it is not unusual to find cases of karoshi in the internet industries. According to him, there were some cases of karoshi in Grand before I joined, but they were covered up by the PR department.

Such extreme cases of karoshi call for urgent attention to the high pressure that is pushing internet workers to experience excessive working hours, nevertheless there are other reasons for workers to have long working hours, such as rewards, work ethics and the expectations of their parents. McRobbie (2000: 256-262) claims that the contemporary neo-liberal condition results in the self-responsibilisation: individuals are required to 'take responsibility for him or herself as an individual worker' (p.256), because of the 1980s' neo-liberalism and the post-industrialisation in the West.

However, as Taylor (2012) points out, McRobbie fails to answer 'how an association with the creative arts shapes the complex lived experience of creative working' (p.44). Likewise, as I addressed in Chapter Two, some workers' subjective experiences need to be understood in relation to certain structural factors. For example, as I highlighted in Chapter Four, such high pressure, from internet companies and the state, part of the bureaucratic capitalist class, indicates a form of compulsion in the workers' long working hours. This then implies that the unrewarded overtime work is a result of exploitation, in which the lower middle class' labour efforts are appropriated with a form of compulsion.

Here, this form of exploitation seriously affects internet workers' well-being, and in extreme cases, causes their death. It is said that there is a great difference between manual labour and mental labour. Marx particularly criticises the exploitation of manual labour in factories. However, in this case, the internet workers, an important group of mental labourers, experience the same difficult working conditions as manual workers in factories: both groups' labour efforts are appropriated by the capitalists (and the state in the Chinese case); and the excessive working hours and the creation of a sense of competition among workers sometimes even results in their death. In other words, I argue that the internet workers are a sort of sweatshop worker in the new media industries, who are forced to work until death, as the title of this section indicates. These difficult working conditions caused by the form of exploitation need to be acknowledged in current research concerning the new media industries.

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<sup>50</sup>Tencent Technology, 2011

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

### 6.2.3 Life after retirement

As I have discussed in the last two sections, internet workers experience instability and health problems in their work. But this is not the complete picture of their working life. Rather, they also experience insecurity of life after retirement.

Similar to most countries, in contemporary Chinese society, certain types of retired workers are protected by the pension system. For example, internet workers are required to pay 8% of their salaries into a pension fund, to which the companies give an amount equal to 20% of workers' salaries. The workers will receive a certain amount of this money every year after retirement. Compared to the pension system in which internet workers (employees in private enterprises) participate, SOE workers and civil servants benefit from another pension system, in which they do not need to pay into the pension fund, but will be given more money than private enterprises' employees after retirement. According to a report from Guangzhou Daily, SOE workers and civil servants receive 3 times higher pension fund after retirement than private enterprise workers.<sup>52</sup>

Such inequality surrounding pension systems points to injustice between internet workers and SOE workers: internet workers experience difficult working conditions, such as excessive working hours without reasonable rewards, whilst needing to pay into their pension fund. In contrast, SOE workers have good working conditions and benefit from a state-secured pension. In this sense, the higher middle class, such as SOE workers, seems to have better working conditions than the lower middle class, such as the internet workers, because of the support they receive from the bureaucratic capitalist class. It might be arguable to criticise such injustice with concepts of domination and exploitation, as some jobs provide better working conditions than others.

But, this does not mean that such injustice reasonably exists as a natural result of social development. Instead, this needs to be criticised because it indicates the polarisation of the middle class in contemporary Chinese society: the higher middle class have a good working life, because they are protected by the bureaucratic capitalist class, especially the party-state, as they have similar interests, both economically (to ensure they control most of the economic resources and receive most of the economic benefits) and politically (to ensure they control the lower classes). In contrast, the lower middle class suffer from difficult working conditions, similar to the working classes, as the cost of offering good working life to the higher classes.

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<sup>52</sup> Guangzhou Daily 2013

Another pressing issue in terms of workers' lives after retirement is pension reform: workers need to work longer and pay more into their pension funds than they have done before. Workers deposit part of their salaries as a pension fund, in order to guarantee their quality of life after retirement. However, in China, this amount of money is shrinking, due to the failure of investment in pension funds in recent years. It is reported that the growth rate of pension funds is much slower than the growth rate of the CPI (consumer price index).<sup>53</sup> In other words, the pension that workers will receive after retirement will no longer cover their living costs. This indicates the insecurity of workers' lives after retirement.

Moreover, in the Chinese context, there are scandals regarding pension corruption. Workers are worrying about their lives after retirement, even though they pay into a pension fund every month, because government officials might embezzle their pension before their retirement. For example, there were several scandals regarding pension corruption from 1993 to 2010: around £8.90 million of pension money was embezzled in Guangzhou in 1993;<sup>54</sup> 0.86 million pension money was embezzled in Taiyuan in 2003;<sup>55</sup> and £32 million pension money was embezzled in Shanghai in 2006.<sup>56</sup>

These news reports make workers feel unsafe and insecure about their work, especially about life after retirement. As Monica, my friend in Grand says:

*'I'm not sure whether I could get back my pension after retirement, because it is possible that some officials have already embezzled it before I retire' (Monica, HR worker at Grand, observation journal).*

*I don't know when I could benefit from my pension. The only thing I know is that I must pay it every month... You never know where and how the government spends this money... (Lara, non-technical worker in the Advertisement Department at Campus, 19<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

This pension corruption indicates that workers' labour efforts, shown as the money they pay into their pension fund, are appropriated by government officials: the bureaucratic capitalist class. This certainly implies a form of exploitation: the bureaucratic capitalist class appropriates the labour efforts of the lower middle class due to their political authority. This form of exploitation then makes working conditions in the internet industries worse, and makes internet workers feel anxious about their future. Some of my interviewees even state that they could not imagine their lives after the age of around 40 in the internet industries:

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<sup>53</sup> Chinese Economics, 9<sup>th</sup> July 2013

<sup>54</sup> Youth Times, 11<sup>th</sup> June 2012

<sup>55</sup> Ibid

<sup>56</sup> Ibid

*We [internet workers] sometimes made jokes that we might die before [our] 40s... To be honest, I cannot imagine my life after [my] 40s. Maybe I will leave the industries... (Galeno, technical worker in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 24<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

*Internet industries are really developing fast: we can see the emergence of Group Purchase in just one year, and we can also find the success of a dominant company in just five years. Five years' development in the internet industries means fifty years' development in other industries. It becomes so easy to find a chance in the fast developing industries... But this fast development brings the problem of risk, as my friend said, if she chose to work in the internet industries rather than being a singer, it would be a real risk in her life... (Galeno, technical worker in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 11<sup>th</sup> January 2011, Self-observation journal)*

Galeno's recognition of high risks in the Chinese internet industries echoes Gill's (2002) findings in her study of new media industries in six European countries: work in new media industries is characterised by issues of insecurity, low pay, and long working hours. Taylor (2012) also points out that creative workers are 'strongly motivated yet often precariously employed and poorly paid' (p.42). Brophy (2006: 620-621) defines precarity as an important character of most knowledge work. In his understanding, precarity refers to 'the growing insecurity brought on by the flexible management of the global work force within post-Fordist capitalism', and it entails a range of labour conditions, such as 'informal and part-time work; short-term contracts – or no contract at all; self-employment; little, if any, job security; volatile shifts; lack of unionisation; no benefits; and more' (p.621). Some of the unsafe and insecure working conditions discussed in this section, such as lay-offs, health problems, karoshi because of high pressure, and unguaranteed pension funds, thus, make internet work precarious, which requires urgent academic attention.

Indeed, the precarious working-life experiences of workers in the internet industries, not only reflect the general problems of contemporary cultural work in the world, such as precarity discussed by Taylor and Brophy, but also indicate the lower middle class problem in the Chinese context: proletarianisation. Nevertheless there are different levels of precariousness amongst different workers. These difficult working conditions not only cause internet workers, the lower middle class, to suffer from excessive working hours with the same unreasonable pay as the working class, but also cause them worry about an insecure future as the working class do. As I argued in Chapter Two, precariousness in internet work highlights the proletarianisation problem of the lower middle class in the Chinese context, which is understood as a result of a form of structural exploitation. However, different workers experience different levels of precariousness in the working life. Below I show interns' different experiences of precariousness.

## 6.3 Rural students come to urban companies

Gill and Pratt (2008) sum up certain features of precarious work based on some recent studies: 'a preponderance of temporary, intermittent and precarious job; long hours and bulimic patterns of working; the collapse or erasure of the boundaries between work and play; poor pay; high level of mobility; passionate attachment to the work and to the identity of creative labourer (e.g. web designer, artist, fashion designer); an attitudinal mindset that is a blend of bohemianism and entrepreneurialism; informal work environments and distinctive forms of sociality; and profound experiences of insecurity and anxiety about finding work, earning enough money and 'keeping up' in rapidly changing fields' (p.14). Some of these features have been discussed within full-time workers' experiences in the last two chapters, some features I discuss here with interns' different precarious experiences.

As discussed in Chapter Four, interns in internet companies are university students, and most of them are postgraduates. Thus, interns' working conditions not only depend on the internet companies where they work, but also relate to the universities where they study and live. The story I address in this section is about precariousness in interns' working-life experiences, and concerns Janet, the intern in Grand, and her friends. Meanwhile, I also point out two issues that generally cause interns' precariousness: high tuition fees and employment difficulties, where both internet companies and universities play important roles.

Perlin (2011) argues that internships enable those who already have some enabling, because, in the USA for example, only certain classes, such as the higher middle class, can afford to take internships, as these are often not paid. Such an argument cannot be applied to the Chinese context, because internships in China are like part-time jobs. Internships in China are rewarded with a certain amount of money, though the pay is still low. Indeed, companies usually recruit interns as part-time workers, and ask them to do the same work as full-time workers, in order to save labour costs, a situation I addressed in Chapter Four.

As a result, most university students do internships to enrich their CVs before accessing the job market, and to earn money for living expenses. However, the pay is low. For example, interns in Grand are paid £12 per day, which means they earn around £240 per month (compared to full-time workers' monthly pay £1,000). It is quite low pay considering the work they carry out, which is usually the same as full-time workers. But, it is a large amount of money to most university students in China, because it is equal to their monthly living expenses in the big cities, such as Shanghai. In other words,

internships in China enable university students, especially students from low-income families, to support themselves.

Janet, a postgraduate from a famous language university in Shanghai, is a typical student from a low-income urban family and is doing internships to support herself. Although Janet's family is from the middle class in a developing city in the middle part of China, it is still hard for the family to fully support Janet to live in Shanghai, because of the high tuition fees and living expenses. Thus, as a girl who cannot afford a £3 lipstick in modern Shanghai, Janet was forced to enter the labour market as an intern earlier than other students, in order to earn money to help cover her living expenses.

In recent years, the rise of tuition fees has become a difficult issue for most Chinese families, especially families in the lower middle class and working class. In 2005, according to a report concerning Chinese youth development, university tuition fees had increased by twenty-five times since the 1980s (Yahoo Economics, 2007). By 2005, tuition fees for most four-year undergraduate courses in Shanghai universities had risen to over £7,500 in total (see Figure 6.2). This figure might be lower than in some developed countries, but, compared to the average residents' incomes (the increasing rate of tuition fees in China was ten times more than the increasing rate of residents' incomes),<sup>57</sup> it still causes a lot of families to be in debt.

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<sup>57</sup> Yahoo Economics, 2007

<b>Universities in Shanghai</b>	<b>Tuition fees (four years' undergraduate courses)</b>
Tongji University	£9,062
Shanghai Foreign Languages University	£8,622
Shanghai Jiao Tong University	£8,240
Fudan University	£8,025
Shanghai University of Finance and Economics	£7,800
Shanghai University	£7,390

**Figure 6.2: Tuition fees in some universities in Shanghai in 2005**

**Source: partly translated from *Sohu Education*, 2006**

In 2011, the education forum on Netease, one of the main portals in China, edited a special report about the rise of university tuition fees, which was based on an online survey conducted amongst its users.<sup>58</sup> The results showed that the new century's university students suffered from high tuition fees, fast growing living expenses, and non-guaranteed futures, compared to university students in the 1980s and the 1990s, who were guaranteed jobs by the state. In this report, lots of internet users from rural families and low-income urban communities, who did BAs in the 2000s, had difficulties paying the high tuition fees. For example, some of their families borrowed money from relatives to pay the high tuition fees, but could not pay back the money until the graduates found jobs. This is the experience shared by Janet and her friends, who are from rural China.

Olivia, Janet's friend, is from a rural family in Xi'an, a developing area in China. Before she came to Shanghai, her family borrowed money from all relatives, in order to pay the high tuition fees, but she could still not cover the high living expenses in Shanghai. Olivia then spent most of her free time doing

<sup>58</sup> Netease Education, 2011

internships, which are similar to part-time jobs in the UK, during her six and a half years' study (four years' undergraduate and two and a half years' postgraduate), in order to cover her own living costs. Because she could not find a job soon after her graduation, due to the recent employment difficulties, she did not even have any money for food. When Janet told me that Olivia had asked her whether she could share some of the porridge she (Janet) had cooked, because she had no money for dinner, I felt so depressed that I developed a sense of responsibility to explore the struggles of these rural students in good universities.

Hebe is another friend of Janet. She also came from rural China, and struggled to pay the high tuition fee before she came to the university. In order to support herself, she did an internship at a journal during her undergraduate degree. But, she was fired near her graduation, because of the closure of the company. At that time, she was quite anxious, because she could not find a job to meet her living costs. Then she made a joke with Janet, who had an internship in Grand, that if she could not find a job after graduation, she hoped Janet would share her lunch with her, as she would not have any money to pay for food.

Butler emphasises that 'precariousness is an ontological and existential category that describes the common, but unevenly distributed, fragility of human corporeal existence' (quoted in Neilson and Rossiter 2006: 11). My fieldwork affirmed the 'unevenly distributed' nature of precariousness among different kinds of workers. Interns experienced a different level of precariousness from full-time workers. The following two cases show interns struggling to support themselves through education and to find jobs that would allow them to pay off debt and earn a living. Full-time workers obviously receive much better pay than interns, albeit still unequal to their work efforts. Inequalities of precariousness between interns and full-time workers derive not only from different kinds of work, but also because universities play an important role, which I suggested in section 4.4 and will now explore.

Compared to the struggles of rural students, which are shown in the two cases above, huge numbers of Chinese students, whose families are in the bureaucratic capitalist class, pour into the UK and the USA to receive an elite education: it is not uncommon to find these Asian faces in most UK campuses. There was a report in the Sheffield Newspaper, which stated that overseas students, especially wealthy Chinese students, have pushed up the cost of housing in the city.<sup>59</sup> The sharp contrast between rural students in big cities and these wealthy Chinese students in western university campuses highlights inequalities between classes in China, such as the inequalities between the lower middle class and working class, and the bureaucratic capitalist class.

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<sup>59</sup> Sheffield Telegraph, 30<sup>th</sup> August 2012

Such inequalities generate important social problems: some government officials collect huge amounts of money, which enables them to send their offspring to receive an elite education in the UK and the USA, via corruption, because they own the means of production and have the political authority to allocate these means of production. This enables them to exchange such resources with capitalists for the money they need. For example, according to a special issue on the corruption problem in China on Tencent News – a news website run by one of the largest internet companies, Tencent – the money embezzled by government officials from 1988-2012 (around £241 billion), was more than the state revenue in 2003 (around £217 billion).<sup>60</sup> This amount money is only calculated from the corruption cases reported in these years. In other words, the real figure must be more striking than this. In contrast, many in the working class and the lower middle class, such as interns, are struggling to cope with a difficult working life, and this is affected by corrupt exchanges between capitalists and government officials. Here, the bureaucratic capitalist class have collected large amounts of money via corruption, meaning government officials and capitalists can easily afford to send their children to have an elite education in developed countries. In comparison, as a result of the profit-oriented education reform, the lower middle class and the working class struggle to pay their high tuition fees by selling their labour efforts and skills, all at an unreasonable price.

If the high tuition fees have frustrated large numbers of rural students, then the employment difficulties in recent years breaks these students' dreams about the future. During my three months in Grand, I found that all interns who were close to graduation, usually found excuses to be off work to attend interviews for new jobs. But these efforts did not always bring new jobs to them. Indeed, job opportunities are fairly limited, due to the recent economic crisis. For example, Janet sent out hundreds of copies of her CV to different companies, although she did not find any opportunity until I left Grand. In one of her interviews, she was told by the interviewer that he only got that job after applying to eighty-seven companies. This indicates the high competition in today's job market.

Qiu (2009) blames the education reform, which resulted in large numbers of graduates, as a reason for the employment difficulties, because the job market was not prepared to accept such large numbers of graduates. I discussed this in section 4.2.3: I acknowledged that the problematic education system resulted in huge numbers of low quality university graduates, which became a force behind these employment difficulties.

However, compared to the employment difficulties faced by university graduates, the official statistics regarding graduate employment are quite

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<sup>60</sup> QQ News, 14<sup>th</sup> January 2013

encouraging: the employment rate of university graduates in 2011 was 90.2%.<sup>61</sup> The sharp contrast between official figures and my observation in the internet industries, suggests a necessity to find out how universities and the state operate with regard to employment, and how students, in particular interns in the internet industries, experience risk in terms of employment.

As I found in my fieldwork, two issues contribute to the encouraging official employment rate: universities' activities regarding *beijiuyue*, a term I explain below, and the alliance between employment rates and graduation rates.

In 2009, a new term, 'to be worked' (*beijiuyue*), became popular amongst university students. It is a term that refers to the situation in which 'a person is given a job without his knowledge' or 'a person is given a job that may not exist at all'. The term was used by some graduates to criticise their universities, who falsified work contracts for students without informing them. For example, some universities created fake work contracts for students who could not find jobs, which were signed by some cooperative companies, in order to produce encouraging figures for the National Education Department, who would then publish these distorted figures to the public, as the figure of 90.2% above shows. Obviously, the cooperative companies did not employ these students; rather, they were just used to create a striking figure to cover the difficult employment situation.

Some universities forced graduates to find companies providing fake work contracts. Otherwise, these students would not be issued diplomas. With these activities of 'to be worked', the real employment difficulties were covered by the encouraging official figures. In comparison, university students who need to face these employment difficulties, become the victims. As some graduates satirise, university graduates nowadays are guaranteed jobs as graduates in the 1980s were, whilst the only difference is that such jobs are without salaries and benefits and do not actually exist.

Moreover, universities connect the number of graduates to the employment situation in that year as another way to increase the official employment rate. For example, the National Education Department makes it harder to graduate, for example by making stricter standards for dissertations and vivas, aiming to reduce the number of graduates, which then produces the figure of 90.2% as the employment rate. All interns I knew in Grand stated that it was harder to graduate in 2011 than before, because of the stricter standards for dissertations and vivas. For instance, Janet received the updated dissertation standards, which stated that a dissertation with twenty misused punctuation marks would be failed. Shelly, another intern in Grand, stated that it was quite common for all universities to stop too many fresh

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<sup>61</sup> China News, 2012

graduates pouring into the job market by making it more difficult for them to graduate, because of the bad situation regarding graduate employment in that year.

However, the huge amount of graduates in 2011 was exactly the result of the temporary solution used to solve the employment difficulties in 2008: postgraduate programmes, which were two-year courses before 2008, had been extended to three years in most universities, because of the employment difficulties that year. For example, Lily, the intern in Grand, accepted the two years' postgraduate offer in 2008, but was informed that she had to spend one more year at university on the day she started her course. In other words, the expansion of postgraduate programmes in 2004 and the extension of the courses in 2008, led to a tremendous increase in graduates in 2011, which created new employment difficulties. The alliance between employment difficulties and the expansion of postgraduate programmes then becomes a vicious circle, where graduates again become the sacrifice.

Put simply, by using the activities of 'to be worked' and by connecting graduate rates to employment rates, universities try to hide the employment difficulties, rather than solving them. As a result, university graduates become victims, and experience an insecure future after graduation. This again highlights a vital issue within Chinese interns' precariousness: the state and universities collude with each other in shaping precarious experiences.

However, as I argued earlier, companies such as internet companies, also play an important role in generating precariousness among these graduates. On the one hand, as I stated in Chapter Four, internet companies recruit university students as cheap labour via internships; and on the other hand, internet companies do not guarantee full-time positions for these interns after appropriating their labour efforts for one year.

As I stated in section 4.2.2, an intern who had worked in Grand for more than three months was guaranteed a full-time position at the beginning of her internship, but she was sacked later without any chance of finding a job that year. Such cases are common in the internet industries, although some internet companies do prefer to recruit their interns, because they have relevant work experience and are familiar with the company.

In Grand, most interns would not become full-time workers after finishing their internships; nevertheless, some of them were told that they had priority over others to apply for full-time positions there. Indeed, Grand prefers to recruit fresh graduates from its on-campus recruitment programme, which helps to promote its products, such as online games, amongst university students at the same time. These full-time positions that are open to fresh graduates, do not usually require previous work experience in the internet industries. Thus, interns with work experience do not have any priority over other fresh graduates in terms of applying for these positions. In other words,

interns in Grand have their labour efforts appropriated through unrewarded working hours in their internships, whilst they are not guaranteed full-time jobs after finishing their internships. Brophy (2006) discusses similar precarious experiences faced by agency contractors in Microsoft. These temporary workers also lack 'the basic forms of security that 'the permanent employees they worked next to enjoyed' (p.624). Likewise, as I stated in earlier chapters, interns usually have the same workload as full-time workers, whilst only receive half pay without extra benefits. This also echoes my argument earlier in this chapter: interns experience a different level of precariousness from full-time workers. And it also shows the variety and disunity within internet workers, which I addressed in Chapter Four.

Such an insecure future, caused by both companies and universities, sometimes results in extreme cases amongst graduates, such as suicide. For example, Janet told me that one day she heard a girl, who was living upstairs in her student accommodation, crying for more than two hours, because of her difficulties in finding a job. She guessed it probably also related to the recent suicide cases in the university, which were caused by the employment difficulties. It was quite surprising for me to find Janet talking about suicide in an indifferent tone, as if it was common to hear news of suicide on campus. When I shared my surprise with my interviewees after I finished my fieldwork, most of them showed a similar attitude to Janet:

*It is understandable that these students choose suicide. Some students are from rural families who are in debt because of high tuition fees. But when they realise how difficult it is to find jobs and even support themselves in big cities, after seven years' of hard work, they must feel hopeless. (William, technical worker in the 3G Department at Campus, 19<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

*Every year, in every campus, there are some graduates choosing suicide because of the difficulty of finding jobs... (Lara, non-technical worker in the Advertisement Department at Campus, 19<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

These quotations make clear a sense of depression and desperation surrounding university students' insecure futures. Cedrstrom and Fleming (quoted in King 2012/4) argue that workers' suicide cases are 'failed escape attempts'. For example, they show the example of highly-paid bankers, who killed themselves in dramatic way – 'jumping, for instance, from a prestigious restaurant with glass of champagne in hand' (King 2012/4: 455). In contrast, interns here, do not, and cannot (some of them even cannot afford a glass of champagne), choose to commit suicide in such a 'romantic' way. Neither do interns have a way of escaping from self-exploitation.

Rather, interns are low-qualified university students who are not accepted by the job market, as a result of education reforms. They are forced to become cheap labour in internet companies, in which their supervisors and universities

appropriate their labour efforts, because they need to pay increased tuition fees and high living expenses. They are not guaranteed a stable future, nevertheless they work hard with unrewarded excessive working hours, and most of them experience insecure internships without the guarantee of a full-time job. All these precarious working-life experiences result in their helpless choice: suicide.

This, I would argue, is another form of 'failed escape attempt', based on 'helpless choice', *forced* by the state, universities (including supervisors), and companies, who collude with each other to maximise economic benefits from these poor students. These Words from Janet's friend, Olivia, capture this problem:

*... I thought I was lucky when I received the offer from the university, since I thought I had found a chance to change my fate. I was quite confident studying, working and settling down here, in the big city, and changing my life via my university degree. But, now, I realise that it is impossible and my dream is broken... (Olivia, a rural student in Shanghai, 14<sup>th</sup> December 2011, observation journal)*

The hopelessness and helplessness I felt from Janet and her friends again indicated to me an urgent need to focus on these university students' working-life experiences in both the internet industries, and generally in Chinese society. Most of these students are from families in the lower middle class and working class, and some of them stay in these classes even after being recruited and after they have graduated. These lower class people experience a different level of precarious working life after being recruited as full-time workers in the internet industries: some of them are struggling to separate from family members because of the high living expenses in big cities; some of them are driven to death through overwork; some of them face health problems due to excessive working hours and high pressure. All these examples of precariousness, albeit in different ways and to different degrees, suggest the proletarianisation of the lower middle class.

## **6.4 High risk with no future**

I addressed some code farmers' experiences in Chapters Four and Five, where I argued that code farmers were not reasonably rewarded for their hard work, and were given limited workplace autonomy in their daily practices. Here, I suggest another more striking issue in their work: unprotected benefits and insecure work status. This makes their working conditions even more precarious than those of full-time workers.

As I pointed out in section 4.2.4, commissioning companies, such as internet companies in this research, prefer the labour outsourcing service rather than the labour dispatch service, because the former costs less. There is also another reason for these companies choosing the labour outsourcing service: the commissioning companies are not responsible for key elements of the working conditions of code farmers, such as their social welfare insurance, personal files, and household registration (*hukou*). This reduces the labour costs for commissioning companies, whilst degrading the working conditions of code farmers.

Monica, a full-time worker in Grand, who had worked in several internet companies over the years, said that most internet companies nowadays prefer the labour outsourcing service for certain projects, because they do not need to take charge of workers' benefits. The outsourced projects usually require new technical skills, which are not possessed by the company's full-time employees or require more workers to contribute their working hours. This then requires the companies to recruit new employees to conduct the projects. Compared to recruiting full-time workers, outsourcing these projects to outsourcing companies in the form of the labour outsourcing service can bring many more benefits to the internet companies. Using the labour outsourcing service, these internet companies only need to pay the outsourcing companies, without being concerned with the code farmers' working hours or their benefits. In other words, code farmers experience insecure and unprotected employment in internet companies.

Brophy (2006: 624-625) explores the unprotected employment status of the agency contractors in Microsoft. He points out that these agency contractors suffer difficult working conditions because of Microsoft's labour-control strategy. This includes some experiences, such as temporary workers cannot enjoy benefits (healthcare, paid vacation and sick leave), as permanent employees, who have the same workload as them; temporary workers have a feeling of vulnerability, because the company enforce varied forms of exclusion to 'create a barrier between permatemps and full-timers' (p.624). As a result, these agency contractors initiate the ferment 'Washington Alliance of Technology Workers' (WashTech) to against the strategy.

All these material and emotional disadvantages are shared by code farmers in Chinese internet companies. For example, in both internet companies in this study, it was common to find that code farmers were far removed from all benefits, such as holiday gifts and quarterly bonuses. This distinguished code farmers from the group of full-time workers, which again reinforced their inferior positions in the internet companies, as I argued in section 4.2.4.

Meanwhile, Monica mentioned that code farmers who were assigned to core projects with key technologies were required to sign non-disclosure

agreements. Such agreements prohibited these code farmers from working in another internet company half a year after leaving Grand, due to concerns relating to intellectual property. This guaranteed internet companies' benefits by protecting their key technologies, but also limited the possibilities for code farmers to work, which degraded their quality of working life.

Based on her findings in the UK television labour market, Ursell (2000) argues that institutions of capitalism lead to 'an aggressive degradation of the terms and conditions of employment' and 'a more aggressive exploitation of labour power', in order to stop the 'falling rates of profitability' (p.807). Here, internet companies adopt the aggressive employment form in order to maximise their profitability. This then degrades the terms and conditions of code farmers' working life.

According to the new labour law, it is required that the outsourcing companies take charge of code farmers' benefits. But, evidently, these benefits are less stable and secure than the ones in internet companies. For example, most code farmers are not guaranteed household registration in Beijing or Shanghai (*Beijing/Shanghai hukou*) by the outsourcing companies. Neither do they receive holiday gifts or quarterly bonus from the outsourcing companies.

*... These workers' [code farmers'] low pay can only support them to live in the lowest caste in the big cities. Their low living quality suggests that they are the big-city equivalent of farmers... (Carl, technical worker in the Open Platform Department at Campus, 20<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

Put simply, code farmers do the same work as full-time workers, whilst they are unreasonably rewarded with low pay, unprotected benefits and insecure work status. This then degrades the quality of their working lives, and ultimately results in their inferior positions in internet companies.

Current research has highlighted the working conditions of freelancers and self-employed workers. For example, Fudge (2003) investigates freelancers' working conditions in Canada. According to his survey, freelancers suffer from long working hours, and are not guaranteed a safe career with professional training, social welfare insurance, and reasonable holidays. In other words, such self-employed work is highly risky with insecure benefits and career prospects, when compared with regular employment. Likewise, self-employed workers in the internet industries suffer from such insecure working conditions, such as lacking professional training, benefits and bonuses.

*... There is no future for self-employed workers. On the one hand, they need to live with the risk of failure, which in our case is carried by companies. On the other hand, they are not guaranteed any benefits, such as health*

*insurance... (William, technical worker in the 3G Department at Campus, 19<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

According to William, self-employed workers need to carry risks and responsibilities, which previously belonged to companies and the state, in their work. For example, they need to carry the risk of failure themselves, because there is no company to take care of it. Compared to full-time workers, whose benefits are guaranteed by their companies, self-employed workers also need to work hard to earn more money, because they need to pay for their own benefits, such as social welfare insurance.

As Neff et al. (2005) and Ross (2005) claim, in a post-industrial society, where the idea of 'winner-take-all' (Neff et al. 2005: 310) is widely circulated, precarious employment conditions, such as outsourcing and self-employment, encourage individuals to carry a much more 'profit-oriented-risk' (ibid.). Individual workers, in particular workers in precarious employment, are forced to take on more responsibilities that did not previously belong to them, such as managing the success of company projects and paying for their own benefits. Such self-responsibilisation is criticised by Ross (2008: 8-9), who criticises 'lottery economy' in U.S. new media work: 'the winners take all and the others work in a 'labour-intensive workplace' which, like many other, less prestigious environments' (p.9). Gill and Pratt (2008) also claim that cultural workers, such as new media workers, are representatives of the 'brave new world of work' (p.3), who are expected to take risks and responsibilities by themselves. They are the new 'precariat' – referring to precariousness and proletariat to emphasise experiences of exploitation and new political subjectivity.

Indeed, this precarious work has been largely criticised by autonomist Marxists (Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, Paolo Virno, and Maurizio Lazzarato) and critical researchers (Gill 2002, 2007, du Gay 1996, McRobbie 2000, 2002, Banks 2007, Neff et al. 2005, Ursell 2000). Some theorists (Ursell 2000, McRobbie 2000, 2002) claim that the combination of autonomy and good pay with precarious working conditions constitute a form of self-exploitation, as I mentioned earlier. But, as I also addressed in earlier chapters, some critical theorists, such as Banks (2007), argue that such arguments ascribe too much power and unity to 'the system' whilst ignoring the agency and subjectivity of workers.

Neilson and Rossiter (2008) claim that precarity is a source of 'political subjection, of economic exploitation and of opportunities to be grasped (Lazzarato, 2004)' (p.52). Gill and Pratt (2008) distinguish precarity from precariousness by emphasising the 'potential for new subjectivities, new socialites and new kinds of politics' (p.3) offered by precarity. Put simply, internet workers' precarious experiences, nonetheless different levels of precariousness amongst different workers, also indicate a potential of

subjectivity to against economic exploitation. I discuss this potential in the next two chapters.

Some research concerning freelancers and self-employed workers focuses on the issue of exploitation by arguing that these workers are seriously exploited in capitalist systems (Fudge 2003, Fuchs 2010, Cohen 2012, Storey etc. 2005). For example, Cohen (2012) applies Marx's labour process theory to understand the exploitation in freelance labour, claiming that freelance labour is exploited by corporations via the increase of unpaid working hours and 'the aggressive pursuit of copyrights' (p.142). She then argues that self-exploitation is a cover for exploitation. In fact, in her view, self-exploitation still relates to exploitation.

Cohen's research is valuable in terms of providing a critical approach to understanding freelancers in cultural work, but her use of Marx's labour process theory is problematic. Basing one's analysis solely on Marx's concept of exploitation, however valuable, is also potentially reductive. Cultural labour in Cohen's research is simplified to being labour power, in order for her to criticise the exploitation of freelancers. This actually ignores the specificity of cultural labour generated by workers' subjective experiences. As an alternative, based on what I heard from my interviewees and observed in Grand, my research asserts that the concept of exploitation needs to be discussed in reference to workers' subjective experiences, which highlights the compulsion behind activities of appropriation. As I argued in Chapters Two and Five, self-employed workers receive high pay and enjoy a high level of professional autonomy in their work, but it is important to criticise their high work intensity along with these advantages. Here, it is vital to recognise the compulsion behind such complicated working-life experiences – unrewarded working hours with high pay and the high level of autonomy: with unguaranteed benefits and insecure work status, self-employed workers have no choice but have to work hard, in order to earn money to secure their working life.

Referring to my argument in section 4.2.4, the new labour law, although trying to standardise the outsourcing market, degrades the working conditions of both code farmers and self-employed workers. By encouraging the labour outsourcing service, the new labour law enables internet companies to outsource projects to self-employed groups without taking charge of individual workers' benefits, such as their social welfare insurance. Such responsibilities, which previously belonged to the internet companies, are then shifted to the self-employed workers. These workers are told 'winner-takes-all', and have to become responsible for all risks, such as the failure of their projects, and the protection of their benefits. This certainly forces the workers to have a high work intensity – to conduct as many projects as possible. Put simply, the precarious working conditions of self-employed workers evidently work under

compulsion, in which both the state and internet companies play significant roles.

Admittedly, the precarious working life of self-employed workers is similar to cultural workers in other geographic contexts, such as cultural labourers in the UK (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010) and the 'creative class' in the USA (Ross 2008). But the difference with self-employed workers' experiences of precarious working life in China, is that the Chinese state colludes with the internet companies to appropriate these workers' labour efforts.

## **6.5 Conclusion: indifferent experiences of precariousness amongst different forms of internet workers**

In this chapter, I have addressed issues of risk and insecurity in internet workers' working lives. In the companies I have studied, full-time workers have the danger of being laid off without protection from a work union, although the more positive consequence of this phenomenon, job-hopping, has attracted more academic attention. Admittedly, some workers benefit from their frequent job-hopping, by receiving higher pay and a higher level of autonomy in their new jobs. But more workers change their jobs because of the bad working conditions in their current jobs. Moreover, workers are laid off because the companies need to save labour costs or need new employees to bring in fresh ideas. These workers usually accept unfair contracts, which state that companies can easily lay off employees by giving them one month's notice and by paying them one more month's salary, without workers being given any protection from a work union. This indicates a form of domination where the bureaucratic capitalist class controls the lower middle class, because the former owns the resources of production and has the political power to allocate these resources.

Meanwhile, some of the experiences of risk and precarity of full-time workers can be characterised as a result of exploitation. For example, due to the high pressure caused by unrewarded excessive working hours and high competition in the internet industries, many full-time workers have health problems. Some of them even die from exhaustion. Such unsafe working conditions show that internet workers experience difficult working conditions, because they are exploited in the same way as manual workers in factories, as noted in Marx's work: their labour efforts and skills are appropriated by the bureaucratic capitalist class in forms of excessive working hours and little pay,

which even forces a small number of them to work until they die from exhaustion.

As well as the difficult conditions outlined above, these full-time workers' lives are not guaranteed after retirement, because of the pension problem. Compared to SOE workers, internet workers need to pay more into their pension fund, but are less rewarded after retirement. Additionally, government officials embezzle some workers' pension funds, in which case, full-time workers' labour efforts and skills are appropriated in terms of their insecure lives after retirement.

In this chapter, interns' experiences of risk in the internet industries are illustrated by some of the data I collected from my respondents. These poor university graduates' experiences in both universities and companies is representative of the general status of large numbers of graduates in contemporary Chinese society: their families can hardly afford the increasing tuition fees, which forces them to pour in to the internship market, in order to cover their living expenses. Some families are in debt because of the high tuition fees, which can only be paid back after these graduates find jobs. However, the employment difficulties in recent years put these graduates under extremely high pressure, and even results in some students' committing suicide. In order to survive in the cities, these graduates are keen to do internships, and accept all risk and insecurity associated with the work, such as unguaranteed work positions after internships. Nevertheless, they acknowledge a sort of exploitation there.

Likewise, both code farmers and self-employed workers experience insecurity in their working life. Both groups need to bear the burden of responsibilities that previously belonged to the state and the internet companies: they need to pay social welfare insurance themselves and take responsibility if a project fails. This ultimately results in these workers' working for excessive hours without extra reward. Meanwhile, according to the new labour law, these workers are not guaranteed a stable work status or future career by the internet companies they work at. This certainly shows the insecure working conditions of these agency labourers.

All members of the lower middle class in this research – full-time workers, interns and agency labourers – experience precariousness in their working lives, nevertheless in different levels. Some of these are the results of structural exploitation. For example, full-time workers' labour efforts are appropriated by the bureaucratic capitalist class by experiencing unrewarded excessive working hours, which I argued in Chapter Four. Such structural exploitation further results in some workers' experiences of risks and precariousness in this chapter, such as serious health problems and die from exhaustion. Full-time workers' labour efforts are also appropriated by the bureaucratic capitalist class under coercion via pension corruption: such

appropriation enables the bureaucratic class to send their offspring abroad to enjoy luxury life, whilst makes internet workers feel anxious, and even desperate, about their future.

Generally, internet workers experience precariousness, whilst these precarious experiences are unevenly distributed amongst different forms of workers. For example, interns do not only work excessive hours without reasonable rewards like full-time workers, but also need to struggle to support themselves through education and to find jobs that would allow them to pay off debt and earn a living. This different experience of precariousness derives not only from different kinds of work between full-time workers and interns, but also because universities play an important role. Therefore, as I argued in the last two chapters, although working conditions are difficult, they are more difficult for some workers than others. This can result in tensions and disunity amongst internet workers.

Some theorists make sense of such proletarianisation with the concept of precarity, which also suggests the potential of workers' subjectivity. As I discussed in Chapter Two, this problem of proletarianisation has two significant consequences. On the one hand, it results in difficult working conditions in the internet industries, which causes internet workers' working lives to be similar to the working classes. On the other hand, it results in practices of internet workers' negotiation and resistance towards the state and internet companies, which aligns them more closely with the working class. Such acts can be seen to be related to worker agency, as I have hinted throughout these empirical chapters, and such agency might give us more cause for hope than the difficult conditions I have discussed thus far in the empirical chapters. I discuss this second aspect of the lower middle class problem, worker agency, in the next chapter.

## **Chapter Seven: Agency in the Chinese internet industries**

### **7.1 Structure of this chapter**

From Chapters Four to Six, I evaluated the quality of working life in the internet industries via three key issues: work intensity and pay, autonomy, and risk. Following the work of theorists like Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010), Banks (2007), and Ross (2005), I suggested that certain working conditions are a result of exploitation. I argued that the lower middle class – the internet workers in this research – face the problem of proletarianisation. Nevertheless there are different levels of adverse working conditions amongst different workers. But, as I argued in Chapter Two, the other side of proletarianisation is worker agency, through which the internet workers stand close with the working class – defined here as the internet users for whom internet works build the internet and populate it with content. Therefore, this chapter identifies acts of agency amongst workers and evaluates these acts in the context of contemporary Chinese society. In section 7.2, I start by acknowledging some existing research about worker agency. Some of the research clarifies the definition of worker agency, some research explains where worker agency comes from, and some discusses forms and acts of worker agency. In section 7.3, I identify workers' acts of negotiation and resistance towards improving the quality of their working life. I explore how workers act in order to improve their working conditions, and examine to what extent these acts are meaningful, despite some of them not working. In section 7.4, I acknowledge workers' acts of negotiation and resistance as a sort of internet idealism. I argue that these workers' practices contribute to the creation of a free online space for ordinary Chinese internet users. In certain cases, these internet workers work together with users (who might be seen as the working class) in order to resist domination by the bureaucratic capitalist class. In section 7.5, I argue that internet workers' acts of negotiation need to be understood as an important part of worker agency in the Chinese context. I conclude by emphasising the point that these workers' acts need to be discussed in the context of contemporary Chinese society. The lower middle class co-working with the working class can be understood as offering potential for possible transformation from the bottom to the top in contemporary Chinese social hierarchy. So whilst the former three empirical chapters have focused on some of the problematic conditions that Chinese internet industry workers encounter, this chapter balances the focus by highlighting acts of agency which may give cause for hope, rather than concern, in relation to internet work. As such, it highlights that the concept of exploitation, which I have discussed in various ways in the previous chapters, needs to be used alongside the concept of

agency, in order to make full sense of the working life experiences of Chinese internet industry workers.

## 7.2 Research on worker agency

As I stated in section 2.6, some theorists' work on class conflict (for example, Wright 1996, Burawoy and Wright 2002, and Callinicos 2004) provides a basis for my discussion of worker agency in this research. But this macro level research, focusing on labour processes, can hardly be applied to explain working-life experiences – workers' acts of agency. Therefore, we need to revisit these arguments.

Thompson (1990: 97-103) claims that the labour process theory usually focuses on the capital-labour contradiction in production processes by being concerned only with the control and fragmentation of work. It neglects other practices in the workplace, such as 'workers' resistance to fragmentation' and 'the phenomena of consent' (p.103). For example, Knights (1990) criticises Braverman, a significant researcher on labour processes, for his ignorance of worker subjectivity, restricting his focus to 'the deskilling of labour and the intensification of management control' (p.300). By contrast, Knights (1990) appreciates Burawoy's research on worker subjectivity, recognising that 'interests and ideology are constituted on the shop floor and are not simply a result of class structures or external agencies of socialisation' (p.310). However, Knights also claims that Burawoy fails to 'develop his account of how labour processes fragment, atomise and turn workers into individuals rather than members of a class' (p.311).

But this is not to say that a theory of exploitation does not contribute to an understanding of worker resistance. Indeed, as Cohen (2012: 151) claims, antagonism, the core of Marx's concept of exploitation, indicates that cultural work is a site of struggle. More recently, some autonomist Marxists (Hardt and Negri 2000, Lazzarato 1996, Brophy and de Peuter 2007) have theorised workers' resistance to capitalist exploitation, which 'has the potential to escape capital's control' (p.151). For example, Gill and Pratt (2008) point out that autonomists highlight wage labourers as 'protagonists' in order to show the 'antagonism of capitalist relations' (p.5). And some autonomists are also concerned with 'emergent subjectivities, the possibilities of resistance, the features of subjectivity that exceed capitalist control and regulation' (p.19).

Some of the autonomists' work is helpful to conceptualise internet workers' experiences of autonomy, as shown in Chapter Five. However, Gill and Pratt (2008) claim that autonomists' work fails to specify cultural work, because of overemphasising the affect in work. It also fails to see both pleasure and pain

in cultural work, and ‘their relation to forms of exploitation that increasingly work through dispersed disciplinary modalities and technologies of subjecthood’ (p.21).

As an alternative, some critical theorists’ work on cultural workers’ subjectivity can be applied to analyse some internet workers’ acts of agency. For example, Banks (2010) argues that labour autonomy is a ‘structural precondition for effective capitalist cultural production’ (p.252). He uses Ryan’s work to claim that ‘capital has no particular interest in fully divesting cultural workers of their autonomy, for to do so would undermine the very basis of the value generated in cultural production’ (p.260). Both Ryan and Banks argue that labour autonomy is intrinsic to cultural production, as artistic freedom enables commercial production. In this research, as stated in Chapter Five, there is also a certain scope for autonomy to operate on different levels, which emphasises agents working under structural constraints that cannot be fully controlled. This sort of subjectivity has been recognised as a form of workers’ agency in a negative direction – workers choose to work themselves extremely hard.

But, as Banks (2010) argues, such negative forms of agency still indicate a sort of self-consciousness and self-reflexivity that motivates workers to be involved in some political activities, such as ‘social and community projects, forms of non-capitalist economising, ethical trading and socio-political activism, and/or may mean a more routine participation in the development of socially and personally meaningful “practice”-based communities’ (p.265). Here, these political activities do not only relate to the cultivation of some external rewards, such as money and power, but also to some internal rewards, such as ‘good work for its own sake, and contributing to the standards of excellence and ethical frameworks of the practice in question’ (ibid.).

Moreover, Banks (2010) argues that labour autonomy has a double-edged character that ‘the necessary unfettering of the work process can also lead to unintended consequences in the form of a radical decoupling of autonomy from the instrumental imperatives it was originally provided to serve’ (p.261). Indeed, such radical decoupling of autonomy is the genuine agency discussed in this research, which are beyond the bureaucratic capitalist class’s control. Therefore, cultural production becomes a field where agents, such as free thinking and choices, expand. Here, the internet industries become a field to explore this genuine agency – a more hopeful aspect of worker agency than the comprised agency that I showed in Chapter Five.

Therefore, in this chapter, I develop the theory of worker agency by exploring some more positive forms of worker autonomy. Below, I first clarify some issues in relation to the theory of worker agency, such as what worker agency means in this research, what it consists of, and where it comes from.

Some sociologists' work, such as that of Randy Hodson (2001), helps clarify the definition of worker agency. Hodson divides worker agency into four categories: worker resistance, workplace citizenship, the pursuit of meaning in the workplace, and workplace social relations. This research focuses on workers' acts of resistance and negotiation, aiming to pursue meaning in the workplace, and argues that acts of negotiation are an important part of worker agency.

Most research focusing on worker agency only pays attention to workplace resistance. For example, Collinson (1994) follows the tendency to criticise Braverman's neglect of workplace resistance by identifying strategies of labour resistance. These resistance strategies are often examined by distinguishing individual forms of resistance from collective forms of resistance. Friedman (1977) distinguishes the sabotage act of labour in modern industry and monopoly capitalism – two main terms adopted in Friedman's writing – as individual acts and organised collective acts.

In research on resistance, there has been a tradition of dividing acts of resistance into two forms: collective/organized resistance (for example, Edwards 1979, Friedman 1977, Bodnar 2006); and individual/routine resistance (for example, Scott 1985, Fiske 1992, Fleming & Spicer 2003, Prasad & Prasad 2000, Knight & McCabe 2000, Fleming & Sewell 2002). The former usually happens in the form of 'unions, strikes and coordinated output restrictions' (Fleming & Spicer 2003: 159). The latter frequently materializes in forms of sabotage or 'careful carelessness' (ibid.). Scott's research into peasant resistance in Malaysia focuses on the latter form of resistance, as the subtitle of his book indicates: *Weapons of the weak: everyday forms of peasant resistance* (1985). Here, Scott emphasises the individual and covert resistance of subordinate groups. He argues that subordinate groups frequently resist in ways that 'require little or no coordination or planning', 'represent a form of individual self-help', and 'avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms' (p. 29). The act of 'avoiding any direct symbolic confrontation with authority', is understood as a form of negotiation rather than resistance in this research, as I explain later.

More recently, as Prasad and Prasad (2000) claim, the main focus of workplace resistance research has shifted from formal and collective resistance to informal and routine resistance. But these concepts of everyday, routine and informal forms of resistance cannot explain all forms of small-scale resistance, especially in the context of Chinese society, where resistance is complex. In the Chinese context, it is hard to find large-scale workplace resistance. Rather, there is small-scale workplace resistance. For example, Smith and Pun (2006) explore the collective protests carried out by Chinese 'dormitory labour', labourers who work in factories and live in factory dorms, whose lives are thus dominated by their work. These protests usually take

place in a single factory and focus on issues relating to the working conditions in that factory, such as 'plant closure, unpaid wages, bankruptcy or relocation' (p.1468). None of these protests are 'covert' or 'individual', to use Scott's terms, but neither could they be defined as macro level resistance. Qiu's (2009) discussion of the resistance of subordinate groups in Chinese society is helpful here, as he points out that group acts of resistance can be characterized as small-scale, collective resistance, based on networks of families or small communities of what he calls the 'information have-less'. In other words, some acts of resistance in the Chinese context are undertaken collectively, but are small scale, not operating at a macro level.

However, some acts in the form of negotiation are ignored in most research on worker agency. In Salaman's research (1979) into control and resistance in work organisations, he points out that workplace resistance and bargaining is usually mobilised in subtle forms. Such subtle bargaining is conceptualised here as a form of negotiation. In other words, I argue that the indirect and subtle forms of bargaining need to be discussed as forms of negotiation in certain cases. Negotiation here, is understood as workers' indirect practices against particular working conditions, constraints or state policies. I use the term negotiation to refer to both the discussion and circumvention of particular working conditions. I distinguish negotiation from resistance, as the former refers to covert and subtle acts in both workplace and society that are practiced in an indirect way to bargain against constraints; whilst the latter refers to subtle and visible acts in the workplace and society that are used to challenge constraints.

As I stated earlier, the third issue that needs to be clarified in this section is, where these acts of agency come from. Collinson (2003) emphasises the necessity to recognise the 'conditions, processes and consequences' (p.529) of autonomy. Choi et al. (2008) argue that worker autonomy is the 'freedom from constraint and control over one's own actions at work'. It is shaped by 'bureaucratic structure, production technology, and workers' power' (p.427). They particularly highlight the organisational structure as a significant factor shaping autonomy.

In contrast, some theorists argue that agency should be understood through humanistic accounts of workers. For example, Knights and Willmott (1989) argue that human subjectivity arises from 'the condition of being at once a part of, and apart from, nature'. This leads people to 'seek security in those social identities that are both available and valued in society' (p.542). Some active human agents are motivated by aims of realising 'our personal identities, our personal hopes and projects and longings, in the name of our *sel/ves*' (p.537). Along with Foucault, they regard freedom, the 'self-conscious character of human beings' (p.551), as a motivation for human subjectivity and

‘a condition of human existence’ (p.553). It is the freedom that ‘provides for an emancipatory potential and the permanence of resistance’ (ibid.).

However, such a Foucauldian framework has been criticised for overemphasising the seduction of autonomy (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010: 46-50, Banks 2010: 256-257). For example, Banks (2010) points out that such Foucauldian studies of cultural work understand autonomy, such as the freedom stated above, as the camouflage for its real intentions – ‘to reduce costs, to de-differentiate work and non-work environments, and to attenuate the boundaries between the work and non-work self’ (p.256). Thus, this Foucauldian framework tends to an attenuated view of a genuine agency – a more humanistic account of persons.

As an alternative, Banks (2010) argues for a genuine agency coming from an ‘open dialectic of creativity and constraint’, by utilising Bill Ryan’s work on the ‘art-commerce relation’ (p.259). As I stated earlier, both Banks and Ryan argue that worker agency is intrinsic to cultural production, as artistic freedom enables commercial production. Capitalist production cannot fully divest cultural workers of their agency, because employers’ attempt to reduce artists’ autonomy ‘runs the risk of a shoddy or mediocre and hence unsaleable artwork’ (p.260). Therefore, cultural industries give workers latitude to express themselves and to pursue their interests, which indeed is what the industries sell.

To Banks, worker agency then arises structurally from the art-commerce relation, including cultural workers’ desires to retain their autonomous artistic ambitions and to survive with the best of the working conditions. A genuine agency thus is agent working under structuring constraints that cannot be fully controlled, but can be manoeuvred within. This agency is about a humanistic account of persons/workers, which is a meaningful pursuit of plural forms of life, work and free thinking that rests on a certain theory of personhood – about what human beings are, what they consist in, and are capable of.

In this research, most acts of negotiation do not bring any direct and immediate changes to difficult working conditions, nor do they completely emancipate workers, but these acts still have a significant influence on the long-term quality of working life: some of the acts of negotiation indicate that workers are aware of their difficult working conditions, and are eager to change such conditions through active responses, both individually and collectively. These subtle activities show agents working under structuring circumstances that are beyond their control. And these negotiating acts are motivated by the pursuit of a certain theory of personhood – about what human beings are and what it means to be free thinking human beings. This awareness and motivation probably indicates a potential for improving working conditions through internet workers’ long-term struggles and efforts. In addition, some acts of negotiation relating to online freedom may not immediately force the

state to relax its restriction, but such bargaining acts still indicate a potential for realising a certain 'internet idealism' – to expand online freedom in Chinese society. Banks claims that these subtle activities in relation to both external and internal rewards are carried out by workers to pursue better working conditions for their own individual existence and good/ethical standards and frameworks of practices both in the workplace and society.

In this chapter, I argue that workers' acts of resistance and negotiation show that there is space to rebel, to express oneself, and to be autonomous inherent in capitalism. This indicates a genuine agency – thoughts and actions that are beyond the bureaucratic capitalist class's control. Here, then, I show a more hopeful aspect of autonomy than the highly comprised autonomy to which I drew attention in Chapter Five.

In the next two sections, I identify the complex ways in which internet workers interact with ordinary internet users in these acts of negotiation and resistance, sometimes acting as users, sometimes mobilising their professional knowledge to negotiate systems and structures in ways unavailable to ordinary users without prior access to this knowledge. Most of these acts are carried out by full-time workers, and sometimes by interns, according to my fieldwork. I map out these acts by replying to two of my research questions: what are the responses of workers to the state and companies' control? And why do workers work in the industries, despite the difficult working conditions?

### **7.3 Agency in improving working conditions**

As I discussed in Chapters Four to Six, internet workers suffer from inequalities and injustice in their working lives, due to certain forms of exploitation and domination. In this section, I address workers' acts of negotiation and resistance towards improving these difficult working conditions, for example in relation to solving inequalities concerning working hours and pay, and acts of negotiation with the aim of increasing levels of professional autonomy. Some of these acts might not bring effective changes to the quality of working life, but they still are important to internet workers. Some of these issues might seem insignificant in other geographical contexts, such as the UK, but they still highlight the plight of agents that rest on the pursuit of material supports for individual existence.

### **7.3.1 Resistance to inequalities in working life**

Some scholars claim that workplace resistance, especially in the forms of absenteeism, sabotage and strike, are the most popular forms of workplace agency (for example, Salaman 1979, Edwards and Scullion 1982, Gill and Pratt 2008: 6). One such example in my research is the absenteeism of interns in Grand. As I stated in Chapter Four, Janet was forced to stay in her internship, even though she asked to leave for her studies. After her resignation was rejected by her team leader, she applied for a month's holiday. As she said, it was her way to show her discontent. This could be understood as a resistant act of absenteeism at an individual level. It worked because it temporarily released Janet from the unreasonable conditions of her internship.

According to my observations, there were other acts of resistance workers used to show their discontent towards certain inequalities and injustices in their working life. And some of these acts successfully brought effective changes to their working life. One of these examples was from full-time workers in Campus's Open Platform Department: a department that encouraged internet users and amateurs to create new products by providing them with an open platform for designing. The staff in this department successfully forced the company to change their department's leader, who was seriously intervening in their professional autonomy. For example, the leader, who was not a technical professional, asked some workers to change the designs of their products so they were based on his ideas. As a result, workers in the department threatened to leave the company if their leader was not removed. These workers expressed their discontent and sent several emails, which explained the issue and contained the department workers' signatures, to the head of the company. Finally, they successfully achieved the goal and forced the company to change their leader.

Another example came from the interns at Grand, who helped each other to clock on and off in order to earn more money. Sometimes, some interns could only work for half a day because of their university studies, but they were usually paid for the whole day because they asked other interns to clock off for them at the end of that day. This group act became an 'under the table rule' between all interns at Grand. As a part of this subordinate group in the company, I myself also obeyed this 'under the table rule' by helping other interns clock off, in order to build a relationship of rapport and trust with them. As one intern said, it was their response to their unpaid overtime work.

In other words, this group act of clocking on and off for each other became the interns' resistance to exploitation from the company (such as unpaid overtime work). This act arose from the interns' pursuit of money, and also their willingness to gain esteem at work – 'a revenge for their unpaid overtime

work' by showing their 'power'. This act might be subtle and more 'under the table', compared to full-time workers threatening to resign from the company if their requirement was not realised, but it was still effective to interns: interns do receive the pay for their absent half days and feel a form of dignity by showing their 'power' to the company. As argued at the beginning of this chapter, not only do collective forms of resistance have effective results, but some small-scale and 'under the table' acts of resistance also have significant results, such as improving interns' working life.

In another example, in December 2011, there was a new rule in Campus requiring workers to arrive at work before 10am, replacing the flexible work-time arrangements that had existed before. Meanwhile, free dinner for people working overtime, the only reward for working overtime in the previous system, was cancelled. Instead, a new rule was created, stating that only people working over 12 hours per day could benefit from a free dinner. As a result, a lot of workers showed their discontent by choosing to leave early after coming to work before 10am, and give up their free dinner by working less than 12 hours per day. As Galeno says,

*We leave earlier to show our discontent and resistance to it [the new rule]... (Galeno, technical worker in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 20<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

This shows workers' response towards the new rule, which damaged their rewards for overtime and influenced their working hours; however, the acts did not force the company to change the rule. These acts might not be considered as influential as collective and organised forms of resistance (such as strikes), because they did not bring a change of the rule, but they should not be ignored in the Chinese context, where workers, especially in SOEs, are required to obey rules. As Galeno further explains, it is not the small amount of money that they are concerned about, rather, it is about their dignity at work – a free dinner and flexible working hours that show the company respecting and appreciating their work. In other words, such resisting acts come from workers' desire to gain recognition and esteem at work.

In both companies, there were groups of workers who resisted inequalities in their working lives via resignation. For example, according to some of my interviewees in Campus, some workers resigned because they did not receive any of the stocks promised to them by the company after it was listed on the US NASDAQ stock exchange. In Grand, more than twenty workers in the online novel department resigned in 2013, because they felt that their professional autonomy had been eroded by the company – these online editors were required by the company, which wanted to cut some services/products of the department, to give up some of their creativity, and even stop some of their products. As a result, these workers chose to resign to show their commitment to their own professional autonomy and show their

discontent towards the company's intervention.<sup>62</sup> These two cases both indicate the direct methods adopted by workers to show their discontent towards difficult working conditions. These acts also show one way in which internet workers directly protest against inequality and injustice in their working life. This can rarely be found in the experiences of other workers in the Chinese context, such as SOE workers, who often completely accept companies' intervention, even if it affects their professional autonomy.

### 7.3.2 Negotiation as bargaining power

Some research argues that the act of bargaining is a significant means of worker agency. For example, Edwards and Scullion (1982) highlight the bargaining power in workers' collective actions. As stated earlier, such bargaining power can be seen as a form of effective negotiation in the context of this research. I understand negotiation as subtle acts in the workplace that are practiced in an indirect way to bargain with particular working conditions, constraints or state policies, in order to improve certain working conditions. Compared to workers' acts of resistance, there are more examples of workers' acts of negotiation aimed at improving the quality of working life.

For instance, workers in both companies bargain over some of the conditions attached to their contracts. In both Campus and Grand, workers are required to sign a special contract in addition to the normal work contract, one that prohibits them from working in another internet company for six months after resigning, due to concerns regarding trade secrets. Otherwise, these employees need to withdraw the stocks they have been given as a part of their pay, or are required to make a payment to the companies.

Workers' reactions to this contract are varied, but most of them agree that it is unfair and unreasonable. In Grand, a new employee raised this issue when he was asked to sign the contract. He argued with HR that the contract was unreasonable and against his benefits. By contrast, workers in Campus show their disagreement in a more collective way:

*It's really unreasonable to ask us to sign this contract... The stocks given to us are a part of our pay... We all signed the contract when joining the company, although we think it's unreasonable. But we do have our own strategies: when we leave this company, we never let HR know the next company we will work for. Some of us told HR that we were no longer interested in working in the internet industries, while we just moved to another internet company, so that we could still keep the stocks... [It works, because]*

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<sup>62</sup> Shenzhen Evening Newspaper, 17<sup>th</sup> March 2013

*the company does not have the time to check our next employers one by one... (Carl, technical worker in the Open Platform Department at Campus, 20<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

This indicates a disguised and indirect way of bargaining: workers show their discontent but avoid direct resistance to the company. Instead, they use covert means to eliminate the effect of the unequal contract on their working lives. This act may not directly release workers from the unfair contract, but it does have effective influences on their benefits: most workers successfully change to another internet company whilst still holding stocks from Campus or Grand. In other words, this research finds that certain acts of negotiation can successfully improve working conditions, and therefore the workers' quality of working life.

Some technical workers negotiate their professional autonomy with companies. For example, workers bargain with their managers in order to gain more free space to exercise their creativity.

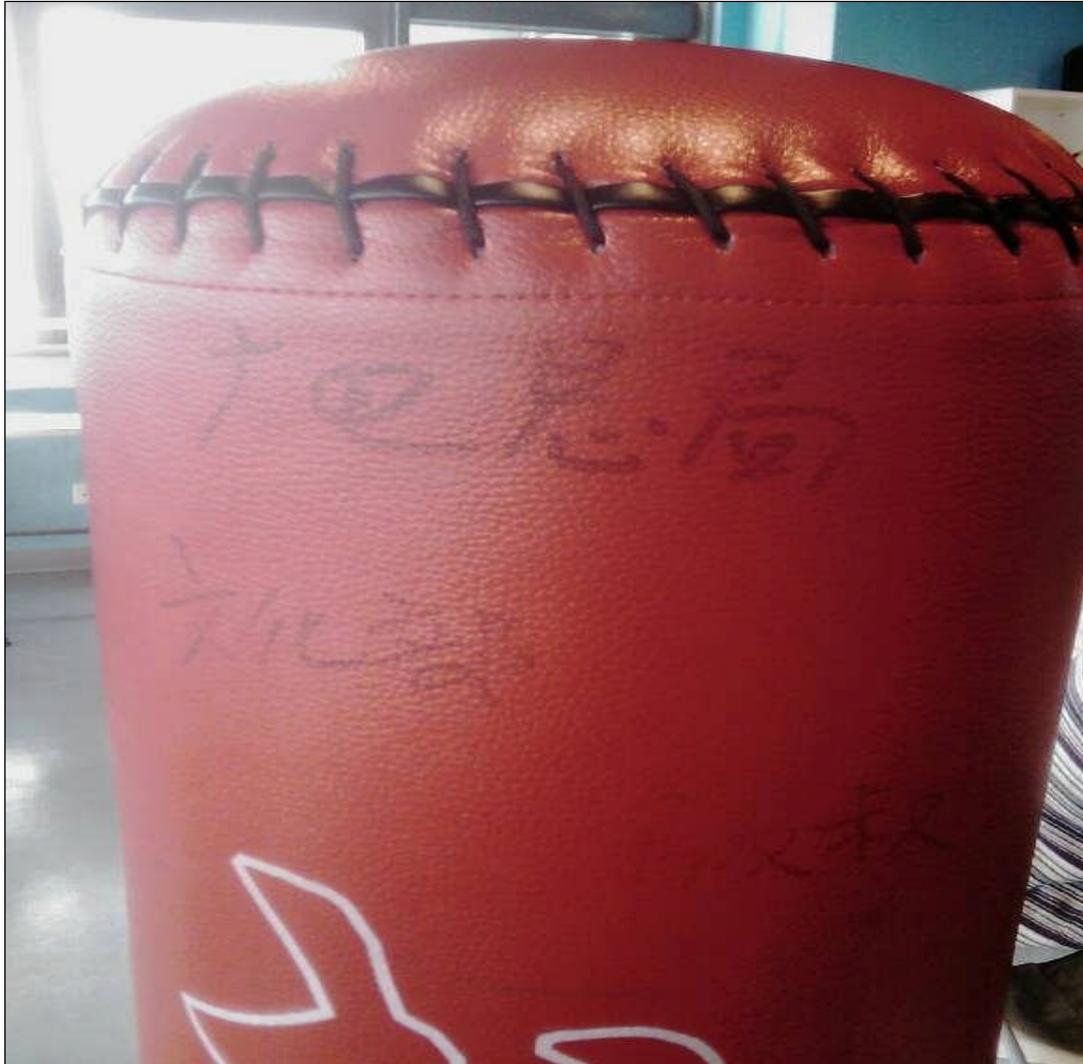
*[If the manager asked me to change my proposal] I would ask him to give me acceptable reasons. I mean I do not simply accept requirements or suggestions without any question. I need him to persuade me with reasonable suggestions... It is a discussion process, which we call PK [Player Killing – a term from an internet game referring to the act of two or more players engaging in combat]... I design my project from the internet users' perspective, because I stand with them, [so], most of the time I win in the PK... (Wynn, technical worker in the Open Platform Department at Campus, 24<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

*I need the 'helpful' suggestions from my boss, ones that really bring positive effects to my project... If I don't agree with his suggestions, I could directly say no. It's quite usual in our work... (Lee, technical worker in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 27<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

These examples indicate certain workers' individual negotiation of professional autonomy in their work, which creates a certain amount of 'creative' space in their projects. It indicates the potential to bring more freedom into internet work. The negotiation to increase such freedom distinguishes internet work from other jobs in the authoritarian Chinese context: not all jobs in China have such space for workers' negotiation.

As I stated in section 5.2, it is not only internet companies that intervene in internet workers' professional autonomy; the state also plays an important role in workers' creative autonomy. As a result, workers not only negotiate the conditions imposed by corporations upon them in covert and subtle ways, but also negotiate with the state for more freedom in their creative practices. For example, as Figure 7.1 shows, workers wrote the names of the Ministry of Culture and the State Administration of Radio Film and Television, who usually

intervened in their creative practices (as discussed earlier in Chapter Five), on the sandbag in the resting area at Campus. Workers who passed the sandbag kicked it to show their discontent at the intervention from these two departments.



**Figure 7.1: Sandbag in workers' resting area in Campus**

**Source: Xia (2012): 261**

This can be seen as a collective form of negotiation amongst groups of workers in Campus: workers use covert and subtle methods to contest control and intervention from the state. Whilst such acts certainly cannot stop the state from intervening in workers' daily practices, it indicates internet workers' intention to seek more freedom in terms of creativity. The struggle to realise such freedom indicates what human beings consist in, forming a certain theory of personhood, as I argued earlier.

There is another example, in which workers also engage in indirect bargaining in a collective form. In an Election Meeting of Candidates of the National People's Congress in Shanghai, which took place during my fieldwork, representatives of workers in Grand expressed discontent about current working conditions, and made a case for more work-related benefits. They asked the local government to build a new kindergarten near the company in order to benefit the workers with children. They also raised the issue of overtime work in the industries. Moreover, these representatives questioned whether their voices could be heard by the departments responsible for bringing in changes via the Congress system. Since I left Grand two months after this event, I do not know the result of such bargaining. But the voices of the workers in this event again indicate internet workers' struggle to improve working conditions, aiming to support individual existence.

Here, workers' collective discussions of issues relating to their working lives are understood as a process of negotiation, aimed at improving their quality of working life, rather than individual or collective acts of direct resistance. This form of negotiation may not be so unusual in other geographical contexts, such as the UK, but such direct questioning of authority can hardly be found amongst workers in other industries in China, such as SOE workers. Internet workers' direct expression of discontent and their questioning of authority mark a fundamental shift in attitudes towards worker agency in the authoritarian Chinese context.

All the cases shown above demonstrate workers' acts of resistance and negotiation aimed at improving their working conditions. Some of these acts might not bring effective changes to working conditions, but they still demonstrate worker agency in the internet industries. From the traditional Marxist approach, this might be the exploited and dominated class – the lower middle class, resisting the exploiter and dominator class – the bureaucratic capitalist class, through acts attempting to eliminate inequalities and injustice in their working life. As Burawoy and Wright (2002: 474-475) argue, the exploited classes tend to resist the appropriation of their labour efforts. However, as I argued in the beginning of this chapter, such an approach has the limitation of despising worker agency. Therefore, I argue that these acts of negotiation and resistance in the workplace show how internet workers fulfil a certain theory of personhood – about what human beings are and what human beings consist in – via a meaningful pursuit of plural forms of work dignity, free thinking and free choices.

## 7.4 Agency of internet idealism

### 7.4.1 Negotiation for moral idealism

This section addresses the question: ‘why do workers work in the internet industries, despite the difficult working conditions?’ Some scholars working in the emergent field of cultural industries have answered this question by acknowledging some of the rewards of working in this sector (Banks 2007, Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010, Kennedy 2012). Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010), for example, create a model of good and bad work which characterises good work as consisting of interest, involvement, autonomy, self-esteem, and the production of products that contribute towards the common good. Banks (2007, 2010) recognises internal rewards, such as good work, and external rewards, such as money, power and status, as significant motivating factors for performing cultural work.

All writers referenced here, argue for the need for a balanced critique (of the difficult working conditions as described in this thesis from chapters Four to Six) and hope (about the rewards for working in these sectors and the possible outcomes of the labour undertaken) in studies of cultural and high-tech sectors. Indeed, such ‘internal rewards’ attached to cultural work include the hope that a certain idealism can be realised, which is explored in this section: internet workers intend to create a good online space, that contributes to ‘the standards of excellence and ethical frameworks of the practice in question’ (Banks 2010: 265). They hold on to the ideal of creating an open and accessible medium for everyone, especially for the most vulnerable communities.

*The industries have developed for ten years, generating lots of technical concepts, creating new commercial skills, as well as blowing so many bubbles. Yet, we still ignore the demands of vulnerable communities. It’s a shame for us as engineers that the screen reader was invented by a blind man... (Galeno, technical workers in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 29<sup>th</sup> June 2011, Self-observation)*

Here, Galeno expresses a sense of shame that the screen reader, an assistive technology used by people with visual disabilities to read out text content from websites, was developed by a blind person, rather than a sighted person sensitive to the needs of such ‘vulnerable communities’, as he describes them. He expresses the hope that, in the future, able-bodied internet workers will turn their attention to developing new assistive devices, suggesting that his company might do so:

*I hope they [blind people] will be able to open their eyes online and embrace the internet like other users in the future, as a result of our help... (Galeno, technical workers in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 29<sup>th</sup> June 2011, Self-observation)*

However, as big internet companies usually focus on projects maximising financial benefits, rather than paying particular attention to these moral questions, then, setting up one's own business becomes an alternative for these idealists to realise their moral concerns.

*Everyone in the industries has a dream of setting up their own business. I am one of them. I'm just waiting for my pals, who are technical workers in other internet companies. I will leave here [Campus] and start my own business as long as my friends gain enough experiences in their areas... You cannot identify yourself as a member in the internet industries if you have not started to run your own business by your 30s. (Galeno, technical worker in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 24<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

*All my pals are doing different technical jobs in internet companies. We plan to study in these companies for five years, then we will group together to start our own business... I come here [Campus] just to learn all the things necessary for starting my own business in the future... (William, technical worker in the 3G Department at Campus, 26<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

*My dream company is Tencent, but I would still leave there after working for a period, because my ambition is to run my own company. (Carl, technical worker in the Open Platform Department at Campus, 27<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

Almost all workers interviewed from Campus indicated their dreams of running their own businesses. For some, the motivation is financial, as William puts it:

*To be honest, one of my main motivations [for starting my own business] is to earn more money than now. It is because of the common understanding in Chinese society nowadays: you can get anything, such as social status and respect from others, when you are rich. And I believe this situation will not change in the coming 30 years. So it forces me to be rich... (William, technical worker in the 3G Department at Campus, 26<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

Some research may understand these workers who hold the dream of setting up their own businesses as conventional capitalists in waiting, because of the financial motivation. But this is not the only motivation. Some reasons relate to pursuing free space for professional autonomy, as I stated in section 5.3. A further reason relates to the ideal of creating an open medium, accessible by everyone, in particular by vulnerable communities, which in turn relates to professional autonomy. For example, William states that he wants to 'control all the things by himself' by setting up his own business. Both Walter

and Galeno express a belief that running their own businesses could make it possible for them to develop products that contribute to the common good, which has been acknowledged in Hesmondhalgh and Baker's model of good cultural work (2010).

Galeno and Wynn speak more directly about the public benefits that might result from the products they could develop in their own companies:

*The most exciting thing to me is finally I would have a platform to realise my dream of changing millions of people's lives. (Galeno, technical worker in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 26<sup>th</sup> October 2009, Self-observation journal)*

*We are striving to create new products, new tendencies, and new fashions in the industries. For example, I hope I could create a new product that would benefit millions of people. I think that's why the industries are developing so fast now... (Wynn, technical worker in the Open Platform Department at Campus, 24<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

This moral idealism concerning vulnerable communities, then gives an indication of why workers persevere in the industries, despite the difficult working conditions they encounter. In these cases, the hope of creating an open medium for everyone to access, especially for vulnerable communities, motivates workers to run their own businesses, which, they say, would not engage in pure commercial production. This might not be an alternative to the capitalist production, such as 'forms of non-capitalist economising' that are anticipated by Banks (2010: 265), because setting up one's own business is still a form of capitalist production. But it is necessary to figure out motivations for such acts to distinguish these acts from existing forms of capitalist production: workers show their free thinking and choices via moving to another place – setting up their own businesses – to benefit vulnerable communities and to contribute to the development of socially meaningful practices. These workers may be capitalists in waiting, but at least, they are not 'conventional capitalists', as they aim to contribute to the common good via more morally-focused practices.

## **7.4.2 Worker agency originates from internet idealism**

A second explanation of 'why internet workers persist in the industries, despite difficult working conditions' relates to the 'idealistic' meanings attached to the internet itself. For example, Kennedy (2012) introduces Berners-Lee's work in her book, whose original dream of the web when he invented it was that it would be an open, interoperable and accessible medium, whose power would be in its 'universality', and to which access by everyone was 'an

important aspect' (Berners-Lee 2003). Kennedy argues that this vision often orientates internet workers towards certain ideals and idealistic individuals towards internet work.

Although this idealistic vision had its geographical home on the west coast of the USA, its influence has had a global reach. As Galeno put it succinctly, '*Most people working in the internet industries are idealists*'. Banks (2007) reminds us that cultural workers not only work to generate profits, but also to create 'concrete political interventions and social benefits' (p.164). In the Chinese context, such political interventions are enabled through workers' acts of negotiation and resistance, which aim to create an alternative space for every Chinese person to speak out.

This could be understood in terms of the political struggles discussed in Burawoy's (1979) study of shop-floor workers. Burawoy distinguishes shop-floor workers' struggles as economic struggles, ideological struggles, and political struggles, according to the objects of the struggles. For example, he defines workers' struggles, aiming to bargain effort with managers, as economic struggles; and workers' active reactions, aiming to improve the relations in production, as political struggles. All acts of these struggles are carried out in collective or individual forms, as traditional workplace resistance research indicates. But, compared to the shop-floor workers' political struggles, internet workers' acts of negotiation and resistance rest more on a certain theory of personhood, which is a meaningful pursuit of plural forms of work, free thinking and choices.

Internet workers sometimes act as internet users to negotiate with the state, in order to criticise social injustice. In some cases, the workers mobilise their professional knowledge to create online products, such as websites and programs, which gives internet users a free online space, to negotiate with and resist the state. And sometimes, workers co-work with other internet users to organise large-scale collective resistance, both online and offline. According to the categories defined above, in the following paragraphs I list examples of workers' acts, which negotiate with and resist the state and internet companies, and which relate to what might be understood as internet idealism in the Chinese context.

In some ways, internet workers are like ordinary internet users, since both groups see the internet as an alternative public space in the authoritarian Chinese context, and they both work towards shaping this space. But in other ways, they are different, since the internet workers possibly contribute more to the creation of such space, due to their greater skills and professional knowledge. Below, Galeno shows internet workers' knowledge of political issues in the Chinese context, in order to indicate that internet workers contribute more than internet users to the creation of an alternative public space. For example, he states that 'May 4<sup>th</sup>'— students in Beijing initiated an

anti-imperialist, cultural and political movement on 4<sup>th</sup> May 1919, aimed at criticising the Chinese government's weak response to the Treaty of Versailles in World War I – is a political issue that could be talked on the internet space in contemporary China, whilst June 4<sup>th</sup> – the Tian'anmen Square Protests in 1989 – cannot be mentioned in the online space.

*We [workers in Campus] know where the bottom line of the state is, and we know how to balance the requirements of the state against the creation of free space for users. For example, we know that we could highlight May 4<sup>th</sup>, but could not mention June 4<sup>th</sup>; we could criticise local governments, but could not say anything about the central government... Admittedly, the Ministry of Culture usually forces us to delete some issues, but if there were too many users focusing certain issues, then the related departments would be pushed to solve problems... Some recommended topics are planned by us [internet workers] to push local governments in to being concerned about certain issues, and demonstrate their abilities in solving problems... (Galeno, technical worker in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 20<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

Evidently, workers negotiate the limitations posed upon them by the state in ways that are unavailable to ordinary internet users. According to Galeno, these acts of negotiation do push some departments to solve certain social problems in some cases. In addition, Carl and Galeno point out some cases, in which the internet workers are empowered with their professional knowledge to circumvent limitations imposed upon them by the key word filtering system.

*We are the same as internet users in terms of posting sensitive content. Sometimes our sensitive posts are also deleted by our own company. But since we know more about how the filtering system works, we are more likely to write acceptable posts. Acting creatively, we use indirect methods to discuss issues... I like applying my creativity to post sensitive issues... It's more about personal choices and individual acts rather than collective behaviour... (Carl, technical worker in the Open Platform Department at Campus, 27<sup>th</sup> August 2011, interview)*

*We are more skilled than most users so we can access many foreign websites. Then we have more information about the 'real China' [compared to the image of China produced by official Chinese media], and are more eager to discuss the sensitive issues against the state... [We usually] discuss these issues on Campus and using microblog platforms... (Galeno, technical worker in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 20<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

According to these quotes, both workers and users are actively concerned with the most popular topics, especially the sensitive issues in society, so they state opinions on their own pages, join discussions on public pages, and create blog posts to call others' attention to the issues. But internet workers are

more likely to succeed in these acts, because of their professional knowledge and greater skills at circumventing the limitations imposed upon them by the key word filtering system. These acts can be understood as a form of negotiation because they show internet workers' indirect way of bargaining with the state over limitations of their online freedom. They circumvent these limitations using their professional knowledge and skills.

These acts of negotiation effectively respond to state-imposed limitations. And, in some cases, these acts successfully push the state to relax certain limitations. In other words, acts of negotiation can sometimes bring about effective changes. Thus, it is apparent that internet workers work alongside ordinary internet users in the creation of alternative spaces to discuss sensitive topics, to negotiate the limitations imposed upon them by the state. Arguably, they are more successful than ordinary users, because of their professional knowledge and skills. Therefore, internet workers make a significant contribution to the production of new forms of online freedom in contemporary China, despite the fact that most of the existing debates, focus on the contribution of internet users in these acts (Kenneth 2011, Lei 2011, Lu 2009).

Banks (2007) talks about a “remoralized” future beyond capitalism’ (p.171) created by the ‘existing and emergent forms of cultural production’ (ibid.). He indicates that emergent forms of cultural production, which do not originate from or aim to produce economic capital, would probably create new forms of capital accumulation that lead to an alternative of capitalism. Based on his argument, I argue that in contemporary China, it is internet workers who create emergent forms of cultural products, which contribute to this ‘remoralised future’, in the form of free online spaces. Here, the emergent forms of cultural products refer to online products, such as websites and programs, that encourage internet users to speak out.

For example, workers in Campus created a public page, named ‘King of Status’, which focused on the most popular and sensitive issues, in order to encourage internet users to freely discuss issues and present their opinions. In the case of Google quitting the Chinese market in 2010, workers posted a status to ironically comment on online censorship on the ‘King of Status’ page, as shown in Figure 7.2. The status post caused 188 users to respond to the issue on the same day. In this sense, workers make efforts to create free public spaces for ordinary users, especially followers of ‘King of Status’ in this case.



**Figure 7.2: Status about Google’s quitting of Chinese market on ‘King of Status’ page**

**Source: public page of ‘King of Status’**

Since this public page was one of the most popular pages from 2010 to 2011, it attracted attention from both internet users and some official departments, such as the Ministry of Culture. As a result, running the page properly – maintaining internet users’ interest and avoiding it being stopped by the Ministry of Culture – became quite complicated and risky: workers were forced to encourage users join the discussion in an indirect and ironic way, so that the company would not be punished, or even closed by the state.

These online products may not immediately cause the state to relax its limitations, but they do draw the attention of Chinese internet users and the state to certain issues that reflect social problems and tensions in contemporary Chinese society, such as freedom of speech, as shown in the Google case. Some of the attention has pushed the state to modify its practices, as Galeno stated, which has enabled certain online spaces for free speech to remain open. Some of the attention may facilitate future solutions to certain social problems where the state may take action to solve problems that are attracting a huge amount of internet users’ attention. This situation is

somewhat different to the 1990s, when the Chinese internet industries had just started. The contemporary online space has concentrated on more social problems, due to the help of online products (such as microblog and the public page service in Campus), created by internet workers.

Meanwhile, such acts of negotiation are also helped by some high level workers within the internet industries, who have worked in liberal newspapers before joining the sector, and are well known for their public positions against the state, in relation to particular social problems. Some of them are said to have joined the internet industries in order to create alternative spaces to give a voice to diverse classes and opinions. As Galeno said:

*A lot of executives in internet companies are opinion leaders and against the state. For instance, Ho is a quite famous opinion leader, who is in Tencent now, and takes charge of editing some online columns. Lots of workers in liberal media choose the internet as a space to speak out and give voice to different voices. (Galeno, technical worker in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 20<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

Galeno then went on to give a specific example of Netease, which is one of the dominant and most liberal portals in China. According to Galeno, some high level workers in Netease were opinion leaders from Southern Weekly – one of China's most popular newspapers, owned by the independently minded Southern Daily Group, and regarded as one of China's most influential liberal newspapers. They moved to Netease, aiming to protest against the state in certain social problems, and give voice to diverse social classes:

*The most famous case is Netease, where plenty of famous opinion leaders have gathered. Some of my net friends, who worked in Southern Weekly before, moved to Netease. Then, you can see that Netease has been created as one of the most influential liberal portals in China, and some of its columns are quite critical and radical... (Galeno, technical worker in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 20<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

These workers do not resist the state in a direct way; rather, they tend to join the internet industries to create online products, such as online columns and online journals, in order to provide a space for ordinary internet users to discuss social problems, and to push the state to solve these problems. These acts then need to be conceptualised as a form of negotiation, rather than resistance, because they show workers' indirect and subtle ways of pushing the state to solve social problems. Put simply, these acts of negotiation not only provide space for internet users to discuss some social problems, but, more significantly, they directly open up a space for the discussion of sensitive topics, and build on increasing social tensions to gather users to directly critique the state.

In the case of Netease's online report in 2011, discussed in section 6.3, the report criticised problems in the Chinese education system, and its editors concluded the report by directly critiquing the problematic development of the Chinese education system and the related economic system. This critical discussion may not immediately have pushed the state to make changes in the education system and economic system, but it later led to a number of critical online discussions concerning the state's economic and education system. In the authoritarian Chinese context, such ironic and radical comments against the state's economic system and education system have significant meaning: on the one hand, they push the state to relax certain limitations in terms of online freedom of speech, and on the other hand, they open a space for different classes to speak, such as working class internet users.

Admittedly, acts of resistance are usually a more direct way for the lower classes – the lower middle class and the working class – to push against the state, compared to acts of negotiation. And in certain cases, such acts bring a more effective result, such as pushing the state to take action to solve certain social problems. In the internet industries, as I stated in the beginning of this section, internet workers sometimes co-operate with internet users in acts of resistance. This cooperation can be seen in some of the cases I discussed earlier, such as the cooperation between internet workers and users in the case of 'King of Status', and the cooperation between workers and users in the radical online report criticising the current Chinese education system. But there are other examples that show a more direct method of such cooperation using acts of resistance.

According to some interviewees, in some big media events internet workers not only organise varied online activities, but also participate in some offline resistant activities. The most significant case is activities on microblog platforms concerning child abduction (*weibo daquai*), which were started by a father whose three-year-old child had been abducted, leading him to post his story on a microblog site and call for help from all internet users. Subsequently, millions of internet users focused on the issue of abduction of children and helped to find some children, including the child of the man who initiated the action. In this event, a lot of internet workers helped circulate the issue, creating a variety of online forms to encourage more users to join the activity, and organised various online activities to support the event.

This resistant act shows the cooperation between internet workers and users, which brought significant outcomes: many abducted children were saved and child abduction has since become recognised as an important issue in Chinese society. Such resistant acts may not be directly against the state in terms of their opposition to political limitations, such as the limits on freedom of speech, but they certainly show the important effects of workers' and internet users' cooperating.

Another example is the Xiamen PX protest. In November 2006, a new plant, which would produce 800,000 tonnes of the chemical paraxylene annually, was planned in Xiamen. The environmental and health dangers of the plant were made public in March 2007 by a professor at Xiamen University, who initiated the anti-PX factory protest. At the beginning of June 2007, tens of thousands of citizens in Xiamen were organised through internet and mobile networks to take part in an offline strike in the form of a stroll, which was called the 'stroll protest' (*sanbu kangyi*), to express their strong disagreement to the project. The strike alarmed officials in Beijing and eventually forced the local government to suspend the construction of the PX factory.

Galeno's friends, who had worked in some of the major internet companies, participated in the Xiamen PX protest. As Galeno told me, some internet workers purposefully organised online activities, such as producing videos and organising internet users to post critical comments on some government official websites. Some of them even organised and participated in the 'stroll protest'. These workers therefore played an important and influential role in the online activities, because of their professional knowledge and skills enabled them to use the internet for these purposes. As Galeno put it:

*In Mainland China, only a few people, mainly in the internet industries, could give a voice to varied opinions and voices... (Galeno, technical worker in the Product Administration Department at Campus, 20<sup>th</sup> December 2011, interview)*

In this case, internet workers and users cooperated with each other in both online resistant activity and offline social movement – the stroll protest, which might have been more peaceful than traditional social movements. These direct acts of resistance, resulted in significant changes: internet workers and users successfully pushed the local government to suspend the PX project. Therefore, the collaborative resistant acts of internet workers and users do not only create spaces both online and offline for varied voices to speak out, but can also successfully push the state to modify its practices.

All cases shown in this section address workers' acts of negotiation and resistance aimed at realising internet idealism – that is, concern about vulnerable communities, freedom of speech and social problems in the Chinese context. Some resistant acts bring effective results, such as pushing the state to modify its practices. But, more significantly, some acts of negotiation, which have mostly been ignored in previous research on worker agency, have significant influence in pushing the state to relax certain parts of its limitations over online freedom; and sometimes indicate a potential from the bottom to the top – for certain people in the authoritarian Chinese context to realise their humanistic account – to obtain dignity at work, to benefit vulnerable communities, and to have free thinking and choices, etc. In other

words, internet workers' acts of negotiation need to be discussed as a significant issue in terms of evaluating worker agency in the Chinese context.

## **7.5 Conclusion: Worker agency as a potential of possible transformation**

In this chapter, I have addressed internet workers' acts of negotiation and resistance to exploitation and domination from the bureaucratic capitalist class. As a way to support individual existence, improving the poor working conditions, some of these acts aim to improve the quality of working life. Meanwhile, workers also hope to realise internet idealism, with reference to concerns about vulnerable communities and online freedom of expression, via these acts of negotiation and resistance.

Some of these acts have effective results, such as improving certain parts of working life and pushing government departments to solve social problems. For example, via acts of negotiation, workers in Campus successfully kept their stocks as part of their benefits when they changed jobs, even though company rules prohibited this. In the Xiamen PX event, internet workers cooperated with internet users to successfully force the local government to suspend the PX project, via acts of online and offline resistance.

Some of these workers' acts did not bring such effective results; however, they still had significant influence on the industries and society. For example, workers questioning the authority of the state in the Election Meeting of Candidates of the National People's Congress in Shanghai indicated that people from the lower classes strived for free thinking and choices in an authoritarian context. This then implies the potential that people in the lower classes might collectively strive for free thinking and choices by resisting the upper class in the future. This sort of autonomy is recognised as a positive agency, in contrast to the negative autonomy shown in Chapter Five. This is not only because such acts bring about positive results, such as solving some social problems, but also because they rest on a certain theory of personhood – to realise free thinking, free speech and choice.

Some effective acts are in the form of resistance, which has been discussed in most research on worker resistance, but acts in the form of negotiation are often ignored in research on worker agency. I argue that acts of negotiation need to be identified as an important part of worker agency, because they bring significant changes to the internet industries and Chinese society. For example, internet workers create certain online products, such as websites and programs, with their professional knowledge and skills, for the

purpose of providing free online spaces to ordinary internet users. Such acts of creation do not directly resist the state's limitations towards online freedom; rather, they indirectly push the state towards relaxing certain parts of its limitations via encouraging internet users to speak out in the new space created by these workers' online products. In other words, these acts of negotiation still bring significant change to internet industries and to online freedom in the Chinese context.

Here, workers' acts of agency indicate the potential that the lower middle class may co-work with the working class, to initiate a transformation from the bottom to the top in Chinese society, in order to realise free thinking and free speech in an authoritarian context. It is apparent that some internet workers strive to create an open and interoperable space that is accessible to every Chinese internet user, which includes large numbers of ordinary Chinese people – who I am calling the working class here. Such acts include recommending sensitive topics to these users, increasing certain free space for users to discuss these topics by creating new online products, and actively engaging in these discussions with the users. These 'standing together' acts then result in an effective cooperation between internet workers and internet users: internet workers organise and participate in both online and offline resistant activities with the users, aiming to push government departments to solve certain social problems and modify their practices – a way to support their own existence, to contribute to good work, and to enable free thinking, speaking and choices, which ultimately form a theory of personhood.

In this way, I acknowledge the other side of the proletarianisation problem of the lower middle class: the lower middle class in the internet industries not only share similar poor working conditions with the working class, as I discussed in the previous three chapters, but both classes also negotiate with and resist the bureaucratic capitalist class via cooperating with each other. It is not my intention to overemphasise such acts of negotiation and resistance, because there is still much exploitation and domination in the internet industries. Admittedly, some of these bottom-up acts result in effective changes, such as improving certain parts of the quality of working life. But, these acts have not yet brought a significant social movement that has completely cleaned up all forms of exploitation and domination in Chinese society, as the CCP defined as its ultimate aim.

Rather, with these acts, I identify the *potential* for transformation from the bottom to the top in the Chinese context: the lower middle class in the internet industries might cooperate with the working class to initiate a possible transformation as a collective form in future Chinese society. This certainly requires more theoretical discussion concerning social tensions in contemporary Chinese society and possible transformation in future China to clarify to what extent this potential could be acknowledged in the context of

Chinese society. Thus, in the next chapter, the conclusion of this thesis, I will further discuss this potential in the Chinese context, through which I anticipate the possibility of a better China.

## **Chapter Eight: Conclusion**

### **8.1 Structure of this chapter**

This chapter concludes my arguments in previous chapters, reflects on and points out some limitations of this thesis. In section 8.2, I summarise the main arguments in this thesis. And I discuss the potential for transformation from the bottom to the top in Chinese society, in order to develop the argument of Chapter Seven. In section 8.3, I highlight what I think are the contributions of this thesis to the broader debates in which it is situated. For example, this thesis expands knowledge about social class, and enriches the research field of cultural labour and Chinese society. In section 8.4, I reflect on the process of conducting this research. In 8.5, I explain the limitations of this research in terms of the representativeness of the cases and translation problems. In section 8.6, I discuss some possible research in relation to this thesis that could be done in future, such as comparative research about internet industries in different geographic contexts. I summarise my arguments below.

### **8.2 Thesis summary and hopes in the internet industries**

This thesis began by identifying internet workers' class position in the Chinese context. I put the internet workers in a general social hierarchy in order to understand their relationships with the upper and lower classes. I did not produce a detailed stratification of the Chinese class structure, classifying certain people as middle class, and some as working class. Instead, I analysed internet workers, who are often highly educated and receive higher pay than peasants and peasant workers, and categorised them as a part of the lower middle class in Chinese society. I considered some general differences between the bureaucratic capitalist class and the lower middle class in the internet industries, aiming to highlight the inequalities between these classes.

By identifying the class position of internet workers, I was able to build a framework, focusing on issues of exploitation and domination, to evaluate the quality of these workers' experiences in their industries. Here, I adopted a neo-Marxist approach to identify various levels of exploitation resulting in the different experiences of different kinds of internet workers in relation to working life, and to explore certain non-economic practices that influence workers' working-life experiences. Based on this framework, I pointed out that there

were two aspects of the lower middle class problem of proletarianisation in the Chinese context: the poor quality of working life in the internet industries, and the agency or otherwise of workers.

I argued that exploitation in the Chinese context refers to the bureaucratic capitalist class's appropriation of the labour efforts and skills of the middle class and the working class. I also argued that there is variety and disunity amongst different types of internet workers.

Based on this specific understanding of exploitation, I highlighted three aspects of working life to evaluate its quality: work intensity and pay, autonomy, and risk. Using these issues, I examined internet workers' empirical experiences in their daily practices, and showed that internet workers suffered from high work intensity with unreasonable pay, low-level freedom in terms of workplace autonomy and professional autonomy, and high levels of risk and insecurity. In other words, I claimed that the internet workers experienced a low quality of working life, and that they were seriously exploited by the bureaucratic capitalist class. But discussion of these aspects of working life did not ignore worker autonomy; rather, I pointed to certain affective concerns and agentic desires that could be identified, even though these sometimes drove workers to self-exploit, albeit on different levels. I emphasised certain agents working under structural constraints that could not be fully controlled, though in a negative direction, such as workers 'choosing' to work themselves extremely hard.

Internet workers in Chinese internet companies I studied are generally compelled to work overtime without reasonable pay, and suffer from high work intensity. Most workers experience a low level of workplace autonomy and professional autonomy in their daily work. Some workers, such as self-employed workers, enjoy a high level of autonomy in their creative practices, but such freedom is based on high work intensity and unrewarded overtime, which can ultimately be seen as a form of exploitation. Meanwhile, most internet workers experience high levels of risk and insecurity in their work: they are forced to be responsible for their lives after retirement, which was previously the responsibility of the state; some are pushed to experience *karoshi* (death from exhaustion), due to the high financial pressures in their work and lives; and some of them lack benefits, such as social insurance, which should be guaranteed by the state and internet companies. Thus, I argued that the internet workers' working-life experiences indicate that the Chinese internet industries are sweatshops of the new media era, where workers experience widespread precariousness.

The second point I argue here is that such difficult working conditions distribute unevenly amongst different forms of internet workers. For example, interns are forced to pour in to the internship market, in order to cover their living expenses and pay back the debt caused by the high tuition fees.

However, the employment difficulties in recent years put these interns under extremely high pressure, and even results in some students' committing suicide. Therefore, these interns are keen to do the work in the industries with accepting all precarious experiences, such as unguaranteed work positions after internships. Agency labourers sometimes experience excessive working hours because of full-time workers' bully. These different experiences thus suggest that difficult working conditions are experienced differently by different groups of workers.

The third point I addressed as the other part of the lower middle class problem of proletarianisation, was worker agency. I argued that acts of negotiation, which have often been ignored in research on worker agency, need to be considered as an important part of the issue. These acts might not always bring about effective results, such as improving the quality of working life, but they are still a significant part of internet work and the internet industries. For example, some acts of negotiation push the state to relax certain limitations over online freedom of expression in an indirect way. This marks a fundamental shift in attitudes towards acts of worker agency in the authoritarian Chinese context. Most acts of resistance and negotiation discussed in Chapter Seven were recognised as a positive agency, in contrast to the negative autonomy discussed in Chapter Five, because they rested on a certain theory of personhood – supporting individual existence, obtaining dignity at work, benefiting vulnerable communities, and having free thinking, speaking and choices, etc.

Therefore, in this research, I argued that there are many negative things about the conditions of internet work, and a lot of the time, this can be understood in terms of structural exploitation, as I defined it. However, exploitation is not the only useful way of understanding these poor conditions - some need to be understood in different ways, such as domination and the practices of *guanxi*. And, not only is exploitation useful (but not enough) to understand poor conditions, but there are also things to be more hopeful about, specifically the acts of agency I discussed in Chapter Seven.

Such significant acts of negotiation and resistance indicate a potential for reform from the bottom to the top in contemporary Chinese society: it is possible that the lower middle class might cooperate with the working class, to realise the humanistic account of persons – such as pursuing freedom, and initiate a transformation from the bottom to the top in future Chinese society. But this potential needs to be framed in the context of existing research on Chinese society, which I will address in the following sections.

A transformation could hardly be anticipated that overcame conflicts and antipathies arising from the variety and disunity between different forms of internet workers. However, Ross (2008) argues that precariousness beyond the creative industries can become a catalyst for solidarity between different

groups in society. Banks (2010) also argues that the albeit-limited autonomy of cultural workers may catalyse social actions, as long as it serves as 'a foundational normative principle for aesthetic and creative cultural practices, and a structural precondition for capitalist cultural production' (p.266). In other words, Banks indicates a potential in social actions initiated by worker autonomy, a genuine agency to pursue the humanistic account of persons. Collinson (2003) argues that resistance, understood as a form of worker agency in this research, may become 'a catalyst for social and organisational change' (p.541). Thus, research indicates a possibility of organisational and social transformation initiated by workers' autonomy. Such autonomy is a meaningful pursuit of plural forms of work, life, free thinking and choices that may overcome disunity between different forms of internet workers and possibly become a catalyst for social change.

Writing about control and resistance in work organisations, Salaman (1979) argues that power distribution in the organisation needs to be related to power distribution outside the organisation, because power only makes sense in the context of the society in which it is operating. For Salaman, 'inequalities of organisation reflect the inequalities of the host society' (p.112). Therefore, worker agency in Chinese internet companies, to some extent, reflects processes in wider Chinese society. And the transformation in online China, brought about by workers' acts of creating open and accessible spaces for Chinese people to speak out, could be seen to indicate a possible transformation in offline China, characterised by dynamics from the bottom to the top in the social hierarchy, which I will discuss later in this section.

Some scholars have contributed to the discussion about the future of Chinese society by asking the question: 'what is the best route to a better China?' Zhang (2001) points out that the difference between these various approaches to understanding future Chinese society comes from variations in understanding 'the most effective way to achieve the best economic result with the least social cost and political risk' (p.11). Generally, there are three routes suggested by scholars as the most effective to achieving a better China: liberalising the market; self-reforming the state; and transformation from the bottom. I deal with each of them in turn, in order to discuss the potential of internet worker agency in the context of Chinese society.

### **8.2.1 Liberalise the market?**

Liberal economist Huang (2008) criticises the intervention of Chinese state policies in the market, because they bring about unequal regional development and urban bias. In comparison, he praises market principles, which he regards as a 'good mechanism for [correcting] income disparities'

(p.257). He regards the inequalities caused by the free market, as a natural and reasonable result of capitalist development. He suggests that China further liberalise the market and weaken the influence of the state in the market, to gradually 'deepen the path to capitalism' (p.90), in order to solve the social tensions caused by state intervention in contemporary Chinese society.

Huang's work has been questioned by many theorists because of his overemphasis on the autonomy of the market. For example, Andreas agrees with Huang that contemporary Chinese social development is problematic because of the large social problems, but he questions Huang's explanation of the forces behind these social problems. For example, Huang (2008) understands that the force behind the urban bias is politics, whilst Andreas (2010) argues that the bias is the natural result of the expansion of capitalism in Chinese society. It is because the free market, which originated in the 1980s when China opened its market to the Western capitalist system, deepens the role of capitalism in Chinese society. He argues that capitalism 'intrinsically has an urban bias' (p.70): capitalism drives the 'rapid expansion of [the] private sector at the expense of the public', which naturally results in urban bias. As a result, Andreas argues that further liberalisation of the Chinese market, as suggested in Huang's work, will only make the problem worse.

As an alternative, Andreas suggests that the main social problem in contemporary Chinese society is that 'wealthy and corrupt officials are lording it over a hard-working population' (p.85). The problem can only be solved when the state makes efforts to stop the exploitation of workers and small local companies by the powerful capitalist companies, who are cooperating with corrupt officials – the bureaucratic capitalist class. In other words, Andreas believes that the state needs to guide, control and modify the market with its policies in order to benefit vulnerable groups, including workers and small local companies – who represent the working class and the lower middle class.

The arguments between Huang (2008, 2010) and Andreas (2010) then raise a question about future China: 'was the crisis of the reform caused by the incompleteness of the market where the only way out would be further privatization and global linking?' (Chun 2006: 97). Chun answers this question by arguing that some modern social problems are the result of market liberalisation, such as 'industrial pollution and the ecological hazard of urbanization' (p.272). She also argues that over-liberalisation of the market only destroys 'social commitment and its welfare foundation' (p.267) in socialist countries, such as China. As an alternative, Chun suggests the only way of solving contemporary social problems is by relying on self-reform of the state.

## 8.2.2 Self-reform of the state?

Wang (2001) points out that less government intervention does not always lead to a higher level of welfare. He argues that state intervention is necessary in the market economy, as it remedies market irrationalities. Indeed, it is impossible to organise market institutions without the support of the state, and China currently faces some challenges that cannot be solved by the market itself. But he does not believe that state intervention is always desirable; instead, he suggests that the state needs to modify its intervention by narrowing its intervention, and also by changing its policy instruments.

Chun (2006) argues that the Chinese state continues to be a central part of social development as it guides the direction of development with its policies. She states:

*'It was not the leadership of the proletariat, nor the power of a worker-peasant alliance, but the state project of national development that had been the foremost preoccupation of Chinese socialism' (p.130).*

Chun (2006) argues that the aim of the Chinese transformation should not be completing the 'western style democracy' (p.201), which excludes groups of 'unemployed workers, sweatshop labourers, and poor farmers' (p.217). As an alternative, the aim of Chinese transformation should be recapturing the state from its alliance to the party-state. The transformation does not rely on the independence of the market from the state's intervention; rather, it centres on 'what the state does (performance), aims to do (nature), and can accomplish (capacity)' (p.221).

Practically, Chun points out that the state has already rethought the transformation because market liberalisation has brought intensification of traditional and modern dilemmas. And the state has made some promising changes, such as introducing the notion of 'Green GDP', improving workplace safety by revising its policies, helping workers retrieve unpaid wages, cancelling agricultural tax, and protecting migrants, etc. (p.275). Chun believes that the only way to solve social problems and tensions is to form a government that is 'politically and financially capable of managing the market transition' (p.283), and a public that is 'equipped to hold the government accountable and the market socially beneficial' (ibid.). In other words, Chun places great hopes for the transformation on the state's self-reformation.

I agree that Chinese transformation needs a supportive government to guide its direction. However, on the one hand, effective policies not only depend on how the state designs them, but, more significantly, they also rely on how the state practices them. What's more, this transformation cannot succeed without the practices of ordinary Chinese people. The state needs to

modify its policies, but workers and peasants also have a crucial role to play in the transformation.

### **8.2.3 Hope from the bottom?**

Zhao (2011) argues that the Special Economic Zones, which were set up in the early 1980s to encourage the export of goods and increase employment opportunities, resulted in unequal regional development, tensions between classes, and divisions between different ethnicities. In order to reduce such inequalities and injustices, she claims that transformation cannot only rely on the self-reform of the state, but also depends on 'elite and popular communication politics' (p.562). She believes that bottom-up power, which refers to the ongoing social struggles, is the future of the Chinese transformation. Zhao acknowledges the importance of these social struggles and resistance from peasants and workers. She regards these practices as the 'agencies and alternatives' (p.559) that will bring an advanced Chinese society. Put simply, Zhao is more radical about the transformation than Chun, because she identifies practices 'from the bottom' as an alternative for future China.

The idea of bottom-up power in Zhao's work has been developed by Qiu (2009). Qiu investigates the experiences of subordinate groups, 'the information have-less' in his terms, in their 'daily struggles and participation in the class-making and history-making process' (p.18). Among the daily struggles, new media events, to which the information have-less make a significant contribution through their practices in the high-tech sector, are regarded as playing a significant role in the transformation in China because they are 'an important harbinger of change' (p.226). These new media events provide opportunities for ordinary Chinese people, the information have-less, to discuss 'the reality they experience' (ibid.) before bringing about possible social change by taking effective and influential action. As Qiu argues, a new working-class is emerging and is being empowered through the development of these new media events, and this would hopefully bring Chinese society into a new era via large-scale social transformation. Put simply, Qiu believes that bottom-up power, which is mobilised by subordinate groups' online and offline resistant acts via new media events, is an effective and significant route to social transformation, and a route to a better China.

Such bottom-up power is similar to the potential of worker agency that I have described in this research: as I argued in Chapter Seven, internet workers' cooperation with internet users indicates a cross-class coalition – a coalition between the lower middle class and the working class, which forms a bottom-up power to fulfil a certain theory of personhood. In other words, I argue that, in a possible transformation in Chinese society, internet workers'

acts of agency will play an important role in the form of cooperating with other people in the lower classes, through such 'bottom-up power' of the 'information have-less', as shown in Qiu's work.

But, I also argue that such bottom-up power might not be the only force behind social transformation in Chinese society. As an alternative, this future transformation may also include the self-transformation of the state. Recently, the new Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, has initiated self-reform of the Party in Chinese society. One significant issue focused on in this self-reform is anti-corruption, which indeed is an important factor in most social problems and tensions in contemporary Chinese society. Xi promised to crack down on corruption from central government to local governments. This self-transformation of the state may not guarantee an effective solution to the current social problems and tensions, but, it indicates the possibility that the state will improve some of its practices in the future through acts of self-reform, such as the anti-corruption movement.

What's more, as some cases in Chapter Seven showed, the state is pushed by internet workers' acts of negotiation and resistance to improve its practices, such as allowing internet users greater online freedom of expression. Thus, it is possible that a future social transformation, which solves social problems and reduces social tensions in contemporary Chinese society, will include acts of negotiation and resistance from the lower classes, and the self-reform of the state.

### **8.3 Contributions of the thesis**

This thesis contributes to the field of cultural industries studies in three ways. First, it expands knowledge about social class. In Chapter Two, I made extensive use of Eric Olin Wright's (1985, 2009) work on social class. My research builds on his work, in particular his discussion of 'the middle class problem', and applies his theory to the Chinese context. My research provides a deep understanding of forms of exploitation in the Chinese context, where I distinguish exploitation from domination. My research explores 'the lower middle class problem' in the Chinese context, which involves the issue of worker agency.

Based on Wright's theories, I characterise the model of exploitation in the Chinese context as constituted by causal relationships between three social classes: the bureaucratic capitalist class, the middle class, and the working class. The bureaucratic capitalist class owns the means of production, and has both the political and economic power to allocate these resources, in order to appropriate the labour efforts and skills of the lower classes. The middle class

needs to be divided into the upper middle class and lower middle class. The upper middle class has close relationships with the bureaucratic capitalist class, which it uses to dominate the lower middle class. Generally, the middle class possesses skills – some own certain means of production, as do the upper middle class – but lack the power to allocate these resources. As an alternative, people in the middle class need to sell their skills in the capitalist market, where the state plays a significant role in the Chinese context, in order to survive. The working class sells the labour power it owns in order to survive. The important issues here are: the bureaucratic capitalist class appropriates labour efforts and skills of the middle class and the working class; and the upper middle class stands with the bureaucratic capitalist class in certain cases, in order to dominate the lower middle class and working class.

I use the concept of exploitation as a mechanism by which to understand inequalities and injustice in internet workers' working-life experiences. It partly explains why the internet workers suffer from difficult working conditions. This concept also leads to an exploration of 'the lower middle class problem' in the Chinese context, proletarianisation.

My research expands Wright's work on 'the middle class problem' in the Chinese context, whereby worker agency is acknowledged as another part of the problem. According to Wright's thesis, the lower middle class problem is understood as deteriorating working conditions, which results in a lower quality of working life for internet workers. However, I identify worker agency in the Chinese context, where the lower middle class stand with the working class to realise the humanistic account of persons, as the other part of the lower middle class problem, proletarianisation.

Second, this research enriches the research field of cultural labour and creative labour with empirical data from Chinese internet workers. My findings indicate that Chinese internet workers in the companies I studied suffer from inequality and injustice in terms of work intensity, pay, and risk. For example, compared to SOE workers and civil servants, who are in the upper middle class, internet workers, a part of the lower middle class, receive unreasonable pay for their hard work. They are forced to be responsible for their lives after retirement, which was formally the responsibility of the state and internet companies. In contrast, SOE workers and civil servants' working lives are completely guaranteed by the state. I investigated these difficult working conditions in two companies, but given what I observed and heard in the industries, these conditions are likely to be replicated in other internet companies.

Some of my work points to the limited applicability of concept from existing research on cultural/creative labour to the Chinese context, and to the need to attend to the specificities of that context in making sense of the working experiences of Chinese internet industry workers. For example, in Chapter

Four, I explained why Chinese internet workers worked excessive hours with reference to certain Chinese characteristics, such as Chinese work ethic and local contingency – the one-child policy. Here, the Chinese work ethic referred to Chinese people's belief that hard work could improve the material well-being and ensure security of their families. Based on the existing literature on the Chinese work ethic, I argued that this traditional Chinese work ethic had been directed into service of the interests of the bureaucratic capitalist group, which were to build a moderately prosperous society. This political subsumption of Chinese work ethic partly resulted in Chinese internet workers' excessive working hours. Some theorists had explored how Chinese one-child policy influenced Chinese cultural labour's working life (Qiu 2009, Ross 2005). I further argued that the one-child policy increased a sense of competition amongst internet workers and pushed internet companies to recruit non-local workers, who were more likely to work excessive hours. This ultimately resulted in Chinese internet workers' excessive working hours.

In Chapter Five, I highlighted the important role the CCP played in internet workers' experiences of autonomy. I illustrated how the CCP entangled with internet companies, which shaped a special context for Chinese internet workers to pursue their autonomy. In this chapter, I also pointed out that Chinese internet workers experience different levels of autonomy, due to certain Chinese non-economic factors mobilising within the working life. For example, I argued that some workers experienced a high level of workplace autonomy, partly because of the way that *guanxi* operated in the company.

Inequalities and injustices surrounding Chinese internet workers' working lives indicate that the precarious working life, which has been criticised in some research into cultural labour and creative labour in the high-tech industries (Ross 2005, 2007) and cultural industries (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010, Banks 2007), has spread worldwide, such as to contemporary Chinese society, where working life was guaranteed by the state in Mao's era. This research identifies different levels of precariousness between different forms of workers, and recognising certain non-economic practices that operate within this variety. For example, some agency labourers experience excessive working hours because of the tensions between agency workers and full-time workers. This research thus contributes to the research on cultural labour and creative labour in Western academia, with working-life experiences in the Chinese internet industries, by assessing the quality of Chinese internet workers' working lives.

Moreover, the low quality of working life in the Chinese internet industries suggests a necessity to criticise exploitation in the high-tech industries in the new media era. Given the rapid growth of internet industries in the world, urgent attention needs to be paid to the struggles of ordinary Chinese internet workers, who are part of this rapid growth. It is important to recognise that such

rapid growth of the industries is based on exploiting the labour efforts and skills of a large number of ordinary workers, in particular in the Chinese internet industries, which have become a new type of sweatshop in the new media era. To fully understand this kind of exploitation, there is a need to explore the quality of working life in the internet industries in developing countries, such as India, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam, which could be seen as a vulnerable part of the world's high-tech production system because of the widespread high-tech outsourcing services based on cheap labour in these areas. Put simply, it is possible that the low quality of working life in the Chinese internet industries is shared by workers in other developing or emergent economies' internet industries. Thus, this research suggests the possibility of connecting the Chinese context to other developing countries, by exploring workers' experiences in internet industries in these other locations.

Third, some of my findings enrich research about Chinese society. As I argued in section 8.2, worker agency in the internet industries indicates a potential for reform 'from the bottom' in contemporary Chinese society, which might initiate a possible transformation in society. These acts of negotiation and resistance echo the bottom-up power shown in Qiu's work (2009): the internet workers' acts of resisting the state's control of online freedom of expression, especially their acts when cooperating with internet users, indicate a cross-class coalition: the coalition between the lower middle class – the internet workers who create online products, encourage internet users to speak out, and co-work with users, aiming to increase online expression freedom – and the working class, the 'information have-less' in Qiu's research. It is possible that the lower middle class in my research and the working class in Qiu's work can be seen as forming a bottom-up power by cooperating with each other to initiate a possible transformation in Chinese society. But, as I argued in Chapter Seven, this bottom-up power cannot be overemphasised, due to the exploitation and domination in the internet industries that still exists. Rather, this power needs to be understood as a *potential* for future transformation in Chinese society.

Moreover, this idea of bottom-up power does not negate the importance of the state's self-reformation. As I stated in section 8.2.2, some theorists of Chinese society claim that the Chinese state's self-reform will be a solution for social problems and tensions in contemporary Chinese society. Here, my research expands upon Qiu's work, by claiming that the possible transformation may also involve the self-reform of the Chinese state, such as the anti-corruption movement under the new leadership of the President Xi Jinping. Therefore, my research indicates a possible solution to social problems in contemporary Chinese society as social transformation initiated by the bottom-up power and self-reform of the state. This enriches the discussion about Chinese society, in particular in relation to a route to a better China,

where workers would be rewarded in a reasonable way, to reflect their labour efforts and skills.

## 8.4 Reflections

As stated in Chapter Three, this research began from my MA research, when I started to pay attention to internet workers. At that time, I was surprised by the difficulties and struggles of workers conducting their work in the face of intervention from the state and their companies. I only recognised how difficult the working conditions were when I conducted my fieldwork in the industries for this PhD research, one year after the MA project. During my observation, I was surprised by workers' struggles and unequal experiences, such as their unrewarded overtime, unguaranteed lives after retirement and cases of *karoshi* (death from overtime). In particular, I was struck by interns' struggles in the industries and universities, where they became victims of the Chinese education reform and economic reform. These empirical cases pushed me to rethink and ask: should these experiences be understood as exploitation?

As a student who was lucky enough not to have many experiences of internships in China, I did not find out how problematic internships were in contemporary Chinese society until I spent time with interns in Grand. Only then did I hear lots of examples about how these interns struggled in universities and how they survived in internet companies. I was surprised by their experiences, which were caused by the problematic education reforms; I was shocked by suicide cases, resulting from employment difficulties; and I was impressed by their attitudes when they were left facing a difficult, seemingly hopeless and helpless working life. As a result, I felt a sense of responsibility to discuss these struggles and criticise these difficulties via my academic work – this thesis and other future publications based on the empirical data – in order to draw the attention of readers both inside and outside of the internet industries to these problems.

But, at the same time, I was also struck by workers' acts of negotiation and resistance. This indicated a hope both in the industries and in society: workers did not accept the inequalities and injustices surrounding their working-life experiences; instead, they chose to fight for their rights and benefits in either a direct way, such as through acts of resistance, or an indirect way, in the form of acts of negotiation. This then gave me a sense of hope that workers might succeed in fighting for their rights and benefits, by improving some of their working conditions and increasing their online freedom of expression in the future, using active acts of resistance and negotiation. In other words, amongst all the difficulties and struggles workers were experiencing, I still recognised a certain hope that might bring about changes

in the internet industries and Chinese society. Thus, on the one hand, I found that the Chinese internet industries had become sweatshops in the new media era, in which internet workers suffered from difficult working conditions. However, on the other hand, I also acknowledged that there was a bottom-up power, initiated by the internet workers, which brought hope to both the internet industries and Chinese society.

## 8.5 Limitations

There are three possible limitations in this research. First, the issue of representativeness of the two internet companies I chose. I noted that microblog became a popular example in the research about Chinese internet industries in recent years, because it became an incubator for social events, where internet users used microblog to discuss social problems and organise online activities. It seemed to be a good case for my research to discuss worker agency. However, microblog was not the dominant social network service at the time when I initiated this research (2010); instead, Campus was an important website where lots of internet users gathered to discuss social problems. As I stated in Chapter Three, the difficulty of access in most Chinese internet companies, including microblogging services, made it hard to carry out participant observation in these companies. Instead, it was more possible for me to conduct fieldwork in Grand and Campus, because I had friends working there. However, given what I heard and observed, I believe that workers' practices in both companies are representative of large numbers of workers' activities in the internet industries.

Second, the transcription and translation of raw data, collected from in-depth interviews, participant observation and self-observation, may not accurately show participants' views. In Chapter Three, I stated that I transcribed all raw data and translated most parts of the data by myself, because of my proficiency in both English and Chinese. Due to the large amount of data, I chose to translate part of the data after discussions with my supervisors and reading some references. However, I do not claim that the data from interviews and observation journals were translated in an accurate way, due to the different cultural meanings and variations of the two languages. However, the translation generally shows the original meaning of interviewees and participants.

Third, the generalisability of this research becomes another potential limitation. This research focuses on two internet industries in the Chinese context, which raises the issue of its transferability and applicability in other geographical and political contexts. Because of the different social contexts in other areas, such as Europe, USA and Southeast Asia, it is possible that some

of the findings in this research cannot be applied to these areas. But, as globalisation proceeds in the internet industries, through processes such as the outsourcing services that Chinese internet companies are providing to the world, there is a possibility that most of my findings can serve as a model for understanding internet workers' working lives in different countries, to varying degrees. For example, one of my PhD colleagues, who had worked in the censorship department of a Malaysian TV station for seven years, told me that the Malaysian government intervenes in TV production in a similar way to the Chinese government, because of the similar cultural and political contexts. This suggests a possibility that certain findings about Chinese internet industries in this research, such as the state's intervention in the internet industries, can serve as model for understanding the situation in the Malaysian internet industries.

## **8.6 Thoughts on future work**

The low quality of working life of internet workers indicates a possibility for future work to focus on the working life of cultural workers in other industries in the Chinese context, such as workers in the hardware high-tech industries that provide outsourcing services to the world (for example, the Apple factories in mainland China). This would develop our understanding of the well-being of people in the lower classes, such as the lower middle class and the working class, in the Chinese context. It would also develop our understanding of social problems and social tensions in Chinese society, as this research indicates.

Given this research is a general assessment of working life in two Chinese internet companies, it is also possible for future work to construct comparative research projects, which compare the Chinese situation to other Asian countries, as I stated in the last section. Because of similarities between certain Asian countries (such as between mainland China and Hong Kong) the similar political context between others (such as mainland China and Vietnam) and similar production models in others (such as mainland China and Thailand, both serving as the cheap labour factories in the world capitalist system), it would be possible to construct certain research to compare working life in the internet industries in these different countries, in order to create a general model of working life in the Asian internet industries, which might be different to the working life in the Western internet industries. This would certainly strengthen our understanding of the other parts of the global internet production system. As I argued in section 8.3, it is possible that the low quality of working life in the Chinese internet industries explored in this research, would be representative of a tendency in other developing countries: a new

type of sweatshop in the global internet production system, where internet workers are exploited.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Guide

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1. What is the main work of the interviewees?
  2. What are the backgrounds of interviewees? (such as academic background, career background, and reasons of choosing the companies)
  3. How about the working situations in the companies? (such as working hours, working stress, working overtime, and payment etc.)
  4. What are the social networks between workers in the companies? (such as relationships between different departments, working relationships between labourers, private social networks between colleagues, and forms of communication between workers etc.)
  5. What is the motivation of creating in the working process?
  6. How do all the creativities come and work in the interviewees' work?
  7. How about the lives of the interviewees? (including both work and life experiences)
  8. What are the rules in the companies?
  9. What are the restrictions in the labourers' work, especially in the terms of creativity?
  10. What are the restrictions/rules from state, such as departments of Ministry of Culture and General Bureau of Radio, Film and Television, to the work of interviewees, especially in terms of creative autonomy?
  11. How do companies reply to the restrictions/rules from state?
  12. How do interviewees reply to the restrictions/rules form state?
  13. How do interviewees feel when their creativities restricted by the companies and state?
-

## Appendix B

### Information Sheet

#### Labour in the Chinese Internet Industries

*You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.*

This project is to explore the macro social change in contemporary China via a micro discussion of workers' dynamics in the Internet industries. The project will last for three years where more than fifty workers in Internet companies will be involved. Workers in the companies, who are interested in the program and eager to talk about their working experiences, are invited to participate in the project.

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. You can still withdraw at any time in any way. You do not have to give a reason.

The whole project will last for three years, while the participants will only be involved in the interviews. During the process, participants are required to answer some open questions related to their working experiences.

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will contribute to the research of labour in Chinese Internet industry.

All the information that we collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. For example, you will be fully anonymous in the research and the final report. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications.

In order to explore the labourers' dynamics in the industry, the working experience and social networks of these labourers will be investigated. The audio and/or video recordings of your activities made during this research will be used only for analysis and for illustration in conference presentations and lectures. No other use will be made of them without your written permission,

and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings.

The results of the research project are likely to be written up as a PhD thesis in the end of 2013, when you will receive a copy of the final results. In any related results of this research, you will be fully anonymous and will not be identified.

If you have any further enquiries, please contact to:

Bingqing Xia

Telephone number: 07772296358

Email address: [csbx@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:csbx@leeds.ac.uk)

Address: Institute of Communications Studies, Clothworkers' Building North,  
University of Leeds, Leeds, West Yorkshire, UK. LS2 9JT

You will be given a copy of the information sheet and a signed consent form to keep. Thank you for your participation in the project.

## Appendix C

### Participant Consent Form

Title of Research Project: Labour in the Chinese Internet Industries

Name of Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_Bingqing Xia\_\_\_\_\_

*Initial the box if you agree with the statement to the left*

- 1 I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet (02, MAR, 2011) explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.
- 2 I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline. (Contact number of researcher: ).
- 3 I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.
- 4 I agree for the data collected from me to be used in future research
- 5 I agree to take part in the above research project and will inform the principal investigator should my contact details change.

_____	_____	_____
Name of participant (or legal representative)	Date	Signature

_____	_____	_____
Name of person taking consent	Date	Signature

_____	_____	_____
Lead researcher	Date	Signature

## Appendix D

### Check List of Self-observation

Categories of workers	Things to record
Technical workers	Main work
	Working situations, such as working hours, strength of work, and situation of overwork etc.
	Forms of communicating with colleagues both at work and after work
	The atmosphere or environment of work
	Workers' creativities in terms of production
	Entertainment after work
	Dynamics with other categories of workers
	Managements of their creativities from companies

## Appendix E

Research Support  
3 Cavendish Road  
University of Leeds  
Leeds LS2 9JT



Tel: 0113 343 4873

E-mail: [j.m.blaikie@adm.leeds.ac.uk](mailto:j.m.blaikie@adm.leeds.ac.uk)

Bingqing Xia

Communication Studies

University of Leeds

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### **PVAR Faculty Research Ethics Committee**

#### **University of Leeds**

11<sup>th</sup> August 2011

Dear Bingqing

**Title of study:** Labour in the Chinese internet industries

**Ethics reference:** PVAR 10-057

I am pleased to inform you that the above research application has been reviewed by the Arts and PVAC (PVAR) Faculty Research Ethics Committee and following receipt of the amendments requested, I can confirm a favourable ethical opinion as of the date of this letter. The following documentation was considered:

<i>Document</i>	<i>Version</i>	<i>Date</i>
PVAR 10-057 researcher's response 2.txt (email)	1	10/08/11
PVAR 10-057 Revised Ethical_Review_Form.docx	1	24/07/11

PVAR 10-057 Appendix 4 Check List of Self-observation.docx	1	24/07/11
PVAR 10-057 ICSHouldsworth20110518122750.pdf	1	18/05/11
PVAR 10-057 Appendix 1 Information Sheet.docx	2	24/07/11
PVAR 10-057 Appendix 2 Participant_Consent_Form.doc	2	24/07/11
PVAR 10-057 Appendix 3 Interview Guide.docx	2	24/07/11

Please notify the committee if you intend to make any amendments to the original research as submitted at date of this approval. This includes recruitment methodology and all changes must be ethically approved prior to implementation.

Please note: You are expected to keep a record of all your approved documentation, as well as documents such as sample consent forms, and other documents relating to the study. This should be kept in your study file, which should be readily available for audit purposes. You will be given a two week notice period if your project is to be audited.

Yours sincerely

Jennifer Blaikie

Research Ethics Administrator

Research Support

On Behalf of Professor Chris Megone

Chair, PVAR FREC