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Dialogue on creator and wanghong studies: Conceptual challenges and global approach

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Abstract

This dialogue between communication scholars Lin and Craig explores the conceptual and terminological challenges inherent in "creator and wanghong studies," particularly regarding the global diversity and local specificity of the emerging creator and wanghong cultures. Both scholars critique the inadequacy and ambiguity of established terms, noting that industry, academia, and creators themselves often resist or redefine these labels due to their loaded connotations. Furthermore, the dialogue analyses the growing role of state intervention in global and Chinese creator economies, with comparative cases in China, Southeast Asia, the US, and Latin America reflecting diverse trajectories, as further framed by and indicating the rise of platform nationalism. Emerging trends such as live or social commerce, performative and platformized authenticity, and the precariousness of creator labor are discussed as central to creator economies. The authors ultimately call for a global but locally grounded epistemological approach, integrating ethnographic depth and comparative frameworks, to better understand how creators and wanghong, platforms, and followers, amongst other stakeholders, mutually constitute changing media landscapes.

Keywords

creator studies, terminology, global approach, platform nationalism, wanghong

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Dialogue

Lin: Both of us have confronted the terminological challenges inherent to creator studies. Whether considering global creators or "wanghong" in China, it remains difficult to identify a precise term that encompasses the full diversity of these actors. How do you address this issue, and how would you define creator studies?

Craig: Over time, I have become less invested in proprietary terminology. Although my co-author, Stuart Cunningham, and I adopted the term "creator" in *Social Media Entertainment* (2019) and subsequently in our anthology about *Creator Culture* (2021), this was a contingent choice reflecting industry usage at the time, specifically the adoption of "creator" by platform companies. The marketing and advertising industries, by contrast, continue to use the term "influencer." In researching Chinese creator culture, we confronted analogous terms—KOL, "zhubo," and "wanghong"—ultimately aligning with "wanghong" due to existing literature on the "wanghong" economy. Nevertheless, any single term is inevitably inadequate, as it excludes certain groups. Nonetheless, scholarly consensus is necessary, particularly in the formative phase of establishing a subfield; some degree of epistemological and ontological alignment on terminology and meaning would be highly beneficial.

In *The Death of the Author*, Barthes (2016) contended that the meaning of a text resides with the reader, not the author. Good luck identifying such equivalents in creator culture. The term that I find used most frequently is "content creators," which I find frustrating because it reduces social media to just a content distribution service while ignoring how creators use the content as a social practice for engagement and interactivity. While a bit cloying, I believe that referring to creators as content creators is like referring to clergy as speech writers. Of course, they write speeches, but that's not the sole purpose. They're building a community through their sermons. To further complicate matters for scholars, beyond their content, creators engage in a host of other social practices that prove hard, if not impossible, to observe and measure. This includes how creators observe and engage with their followers through comments, likes, shares, direct messages, meetups, live streams, and more.

Lin: That's indeed the same for our decision to use wanghong instead of other terms, which similarly reflects both pragmatic and analytical considerations. (Craig et al. 2021) "Wanghong" is widely employed in Chinese public discourse and by some creators themselves, and the term captures the ambiguities surrounding this category, embracing social media creators, influencers, and KOLs. Importantly, many Chinese creators resist being labelled as "wanghong," as exemplified by Dong Yuhui, one of China's leading live commerce personalities. Despite his public rejection of the term, he is still widely described as such, highlighting both the contradictions and complexities of the sector and its related discourses.

Craig: The qualitative notion behind these terms is a little bit different in this context, outside of China. I've yet to find a creator who prefers the term "influencer," despite the fact that the industry, marketing, advertising, and many other scholars do. They all rejected that term because it connotes manipulation and deceit. Ironically, wanghong seems to carry a similarly pejorative undertone in China, and yet we adopted this term for our work.

Lin: But for different reasons. While "influencer" denotes the capacity to affect others, "wanghong" often implies virality achieved without traditional credentials or cultural capital, rendering the label controversial, particularly among intellectual elites and conservative groups in China.

Craig: This can be read through Bourdieu's dynamics of field production: "wanghong" operates as a pejorative in contrast to the valorized "KOL" (Key Opinion Leader), which signals expertise and reputation. The historical trajectory in China began with KOLS and later transitioned to "wanghong", following a different path than outside of China, where "creator" emerged as a destigmatized alternative to "influencer." Thus, semantic shifts reflect wider industry and cultural transformations in both contexts.

Lin: The divergence also exists between scholarly and industry practice. Industrial actors, including Multi-Channel Networks (MCNs), rarely use "wanghong" to describe their own creators, preferring terms like "daren," KOL, or "creator" to avoid stigmatization. Yet, my rationale for using "wanghong" is not to perpetuate stigma but rather to foreground the contradictory and complex realities of these actors and the industry at large.

Craig: Legacy media figures in Hollywood now sometimes adopt the "creator" label, although official crediting (e.g., via IMDB) still adheres to traditional roles such as writer, producer, or director. This shift reflects the broader cultural and economic valorization of creator identity.

Lin: This may explain why academic publishers, such as NYU Press, favor the term "Chinese creator economy" as the title of my book over alternatives like "creative workers."

Craig: The rapid uptake of "creator" parallels earlier debates about the "creative industries," as articulated by Stuart Cunningham (2002) and others. As media industries' boundaries have become increasingly porous in the digital era, the distinctions between "creative industries" and "creator industries" have blurred—an outcome of the extraordinary pace and scope of change in the sector.

Lin: The expansion of creator industries over the past decade has dramatically increased diversity in terms of platforms, geographies, and participant backgrounds. Formerly limited to YouTubers or Instagrammers, the field now encompasses a wide array of professionals, including architects, designers, educators, and travelers, complicating efforts to delimit and define the term "creator."

Craig: In addition to Barthes, I draw on Foucault's (1979) discussion about the "author function": the significance of a term lies less in its ontological stability and more in the function it serves within industry, public discourse, and academic analysis. "Creator" is valorized as more wholesome, "influencer" is pejorative, and these connotations shape our understanding and classification. However, algorithmic changes—exemplified by platforms like TikTok, with its discovery-oriented, non-relational model—are altering both social media and creator practices. Even the term "platform" is becoming conceptually ambiguous.

Lin: The notion of "platform" has also become increasingly indeterminate, as distinctions between platforms, portals, and services are rendered less meaningful. Conceptual fuzziness is inevitable; perhaps we should acknowledge or even embrace this ambiguity as reflective of empirical realities.

Craig: Terminology is always in flux, conditioned by evolving practices and stakeholder interests. As soon as theoretical concepts like "platformization" or "creator culture" become established, they risk becoming obsolete due to rapid change. It becomes almost a marker of time and space in the context in which these concepts were first introduced. Just as quickly, the meaning and purpose of these concepts shift often at a pace comparable to the speed of disruption in this space. There are so many variables that inform the constant churn of what creators do, how they operate, and the skills and ways in which they use these services. We used to call them services. Remember that? Before they were platforms, they were services. I think we could go through the whole lexicon of both creator and wanghong studies and identify all the fuzziness. I mean, to me, the even more profoundly difficult challenge that we have is that I've never met; I've never come up with a good word to describe the people who follow creators and wanghong. I mean, I call them community, but when you talk to creators or wanghong, they don't like that word. They don't like fans or followers. They hate the audience. They don't think of them as viewers, users, or consumers; none of these terms would appear to "fit."

Lin: Among Chinese creators, alternative terms for followers, such as "jiaren" (family members), "laotie" or "xiongdi" (brothers), reflect varying degrees of intimacy in online relationships, distinguishing the social dynamics in creator culture from those in traditional media industries.

Craig: This echoes insights from mid-twentieth-century literary and cultural theory—poststructuralist semiotics—where words acquire meaning contextually and contingently. Despite a decade of research, we still lack stable terminology that adequately encapsulates our study objects, compelling us to revisit and reinterpret established theoretical frameworks.

Lin: Revisiting prior theories and vocabularies can enrich our understanding of current realities. Engaging with previous scholarship on culture and sociality enables us to reassess the status quo and develop more insightful analytical approaches.

Craig: Ours is not the first scholarly attempt to theorize cultural and social production at scale. My current project involves re-engaging with twentieth-century postmodern and cultural theories to interrogate how they can (or cannot) account for emergent practices in the creator economy.

Lin: Our perspectives have evolved alongside the field itself, revealing both historical continuities and transformations. Despite the rhetoric of innovation and disruption, patterns from previous decades persist in contemporary platforms and creator cultures.

Turning to a related topic, my upcoming co-authored book, *Chinese Platforms: A Critical Introduction*, Lin et al. (forthcoming) examines the resurgence of the state in platform governance, both in China and globally. This pattern—a reinvigorated state role in directing the creator economy and broader platform sector—can be observed worldwide, from the US to India to Southeast Asia. What analytical strategies should we use to understand this trend?

Craig: This is the crux of my recent research, conducted as a Global Fulbright Scholar over the past year. I've come to think in many ways of creator culture operating off US platforms as one system, and the one operating off Chinese platforms is another system. Now, these platform systems are competing for global domination, thereby fostering an

array of responses from various stakeholders, whether corporations and governments, activists, or anarchists. For example, in Thailand, the government actively leverages creator culture as soft power while also sponsoring visits by Chinese wanghong and offering visas to Western "digital nomads," operating primarily off US-owned platforms to promote "cultural tourism." These dynamics underscore the global proliferation of state intervention in creator and platform economies.

Lin: Local governments in China have also initiated strategic collaborations with creators to stimulate urban cultural promotion—in effect, creator tourism. While this dynamic is especially prominent in East and Southeast Asia, it also reflects the broader context of "platform nationalism." This trend traces back to China's initial efforts to establish Internet sovereignty via the original Great Firewall in the late 1990s; today, domestic platforms have expanded globally, prompting defensive responses in the West, sometimes justified in terms of security concerns. How can we conceptualize this interplay among state, nationalism, and globalized creator cultures?

Craig: First of all, this resurgence can be interpreted through the lens of political economy, highlighting how states, including China, have incubated national platform systems to foster domestic competition and resist external dominance. In some respects, China's regulatory environment is more interventionist—more "Keynesian"—than American neoliberalism, resulting in both protective and competitive measures (e.g., antitrust action against Tencent and Alibaba). Meanwhile, US platform nationalism has emerged from both corporate and populist interests, with politicians leveraging the issue for partisan advantage. Moreover, in other regions like Chile, platform nationalism manifests primarily as cultural populism rather than state policy, as seen in the popular embrace of the Latin-American-owned and operated e-commerce platform Mercado Libre.

Lin: The situation is further complicated by the politicization of creator culture itself. Donald Trump might be the biggest influencer nowadays, and his use of social media, including TikTok, in contemporary US and international politics exemplifies how creators have become central political actors. Creators' roles in fostering platform nationalism and statism, often as both agents and subjects, raise questions about approaches to creator studies, including the ethical and regulatory dimensions of creator governance.

Craig: Particularly in the West, where creator culture originated largely as a youth movement, there has been insufficient attention to creator literacy in education, leaving young people ill-equipped to navigate the complexities of social technologies. Moreover, emergent labor movements among creators are hampered by platform fragmentation, practice differentiation, and, as previously discussed, terminological confusion. Regulatory frameworks, both in China and elsewhere, struggle to balance creator accountability with protection against exploitation. Algorithmic governance further complicates regulation, as platforms intervene selectively in content moderation and distribution.

Lin: The governance of creator culture is particularly fraught. In China, despite the proliferation of regulations, effective enforcement to achieve positive outcomes, such as reducing hate speech or misinformation, remains elusive. The interplay between technological and human oversight in algorithmic moderation highlights the ongoing challenges of regulating the sector.

Another significant trend is the rise of live commerce, or more broadly, social commerce, especially in China. Unlike mere live streaming, social commerce encompasses broader forms of creator-driven sales and community engagement. These practices raise questions of authenticity, as creators must perform a persona to build trust and identification with their audiences. Yet, the reality for merchants and manufacturers participating in live commerce is often precarious, given low-profit margins and the power of platforms and MCNs.

Craig: I tend to favor the term "social commerce," yet in Thailand the term "seller creator" is prevalent. Seller creators are typically live-streaming influencers who spend extensive hours, often six to ten per day, presenting brands, products, and services to their audiences. This model complicates the notion of the "social creator" as it foregrounds commercial consumption over social interaction.

Nonetheless, figures such as Li Jiaqi, China's "Lipstick King," illustrate that even the most sales-driven creators maintain complex relationships with their communities. His 2023 scandal—when he told viewers, "Maybe you need to make more money so you can afford my products"—was widely criticized for violating norms of intimacy and respect, underscoring the social dimension of these communities. Comparable controversies have surrounded other high-profile wanghong such as Viya and Zhang Dayi. These recurring scandals reveal the ongoing tension between commercial imperatives and genuine social connections in the live commerce sector.

Lin: Earlier this year, I wrote a chapter on *wanghong* authenticity and ethical dilemmas. As you noted, the term "social commerce" is apt because creators predominantly sell their persona or performed identity. Success in this space requires projecting an image of authenticity—appearing "real," approachable, and relevant. However, online authenticity is less about genuine self-revelation and more about identification: the ability to foster a community and gain trust from audiences. Only by appearing authentic in the eyes of their target audience can creators successfully monetize their personality, which in turn enables effective product sales.

In my research over the past two years on live commerce sellers, including emerging cross-border commerce between China, the US, and Europe, two core questions arise. First, the popularity of live and social commerce in China can be largely attributed to the country's expansive and diversified manufacturing sector, which provides an abundant supply of products for sale. Second, the commercial infrastructure—particularly MCNs and platform companies—plays a crucial role. Conversations with scholars and MCN managers in Beijing revealed that platforms generate significant revenue by selling visibility and traffic to live sellers; akin to offline rent, merchants must pay for exposure on platforms like Douyin or Xiaohongshu.

Despite the immense traffic and growth driven by these models, many manufacturers and merchants experience contradictory outcomes. While compelled to collaborate with prominent live sellers and MCNs, they often contend with low-profit margins and must sell products at reduced prices, resulting in limited financial gains despite substantial investments in creator partnerships. This complex and sometimes precarious reality of China's live commerce industry raises questions about its development and sustainability abroad. For instance, it remains to be seen how profitable or widespread live commerce is in markets such as Thailand or the United States,

especially in light of ongoing trade restrictions and logistical challenges related to cross-border product supply.

Craig: In Thailand, the predominant form of creator culture is centered on "seller creators" engaged in social commerce. Two main groups are evident: digital nomads who promote cultural tourism and Thai seller-creators active on live-streaming platforms. These creators primarily conduct live commerce via major e-commerce platforms such as TikTok Shop, Shopee, and Lazada—the latter of which is funded by Alibaba, while Shopee, though Singapore-based, is widely recognized for its close connections to Chinese capital. The growth and profitability of these platforms have enabled seller-creators to thrive.

In contrast, traditional content or cultural creators—those emerging from YouTube or Instagram—are experiencing a decline in sustainability. YouTube does not offer monetization partnerships in Thailand, and Instagram creators rely exclusively on brand deals. In comparison, selling directly on Shopee, Lazada, or TikTok Shop offers creators a more reliable revenue stream. The situation is markedly different in Chile, where TikTok Shop has not yet launched. Although platforms such as Shein and Temu are present, Chilean creators are hesitant to collaborate, expressing concerns about these companies' reputations despite being consumers themselves. Mercado Libre holds a near-monopoly over Latin American e-commerce and has only recently begun to introduce creator and live commerce programs, but these remain nascent. However, the impending introduction of TikTok Shop in Latin America is expected to disrupt the market, compelling Mercado Libre to become more competitive.

In the United States, Amazon's dominance in e-commerce has stifled competition and innovation. Unlike the diverse landscape in China, where platforms such as Taobao, Pinduoduo, and Jingdong compete vigorously, Amazon faces little pressure to evolve. Notably, although Amazon owns Twitch—the world's leading live-streaming platform—it has not integrated live gaming with live commerce, treating Twitch as a separate entity within its corporate structure. This highlights the limitations of traditional political economy approaches in fully explaining platform strategies and industry dynamics.

Lin: But now, with the Trump administration and its tariff war, it seems to also undermine the dominance of Amazon or any other E-commerce platforms. Recent statistics indicate that over 50% of third-party sellers on Amazon originate from China. Moreover, a significant proportion of products available on Amazon are manufactured in China. This reliance underscores a fundamental dynamic of platform-based commerce: platforms require a steady and diverse supply of goods to remain competitive and profitable. Without access to Chinese manufacturers and sellers, platforms like Amazon would face serious challenges in sustaining product variety and meeting consumer demand.

Craig: I think this is bigger than platforms. This is how can our economy survive? This is why we are in the middle of a free fall. We are a consumer-driven economy. Our GDP comes from more than 50% of consumption. So, this is one of the most bizarre paradoxes of this tariff policy. Another one of my annoying phrases is, "Every superpower needs a supervillain." While the geopolitics between the US and China are fraught, they are far more complicated than a Manichean view. Besides, if you know anything about the history of China for the last hundred years, they may be more justified in

taking extreme measures to protect and preserve their way of life from external threats by the West.

Lin: In reality, internal diversity within both China and the United States undermines these binary framings. Moreover, "global" creator studies must not be limited to empirical comparison across cases; rather, a global perspective recognizes the influence of transnational and supranational forces on local phenomena, as well as the reciprocal impact of local developments on global conditions. Locally grounded, situated research is essential to a global understanding of creator culture.

Craig: Over the past decade, my research and teaching on media industries have been framed by a systems approach, emphasizing the importance of analysis at macro, meso, and micro levels. This perspective applies equally to globalization, which operates on dimensions of the global, regional, and national, as well as the cultural and linguistic. Thus, while there is no singular "global creator culture," common structural and material conditions shape both wanghong and non-Chinese creator cultures through the affordances that platforms provide. Vital distinctions, however, persist at the national and cultural levels.

At the cultural level, we increasingly observe transcultural, cross-border, and even "stateless" creator cultures. The concept of stateless creators is particularly salient in my recent fieldwork. For example, in Thailand, digital nomad creators—often foreigners promoting cultural tourism—generate revenue that flows back to their home countries, primarily via Western or Chinese platforms, rather than remaining within the Thai economy. Another form of stateless creators involves refugee communities in Thailand, which, despite being excluded from formal national belonging, are active in producing creator content using mobile technologies. A third, more unconventional example involves "Buddhist creator culture," where Instagram-famous temples invite tourists while monks offer courses on how to be a creator. These cases illustrate the diverse and increasingly transnational configurations of creator culture today.

Lin: Indeed. I also saw studies on religious creators—both in China and Indonesia (Nisa, 2018), for example—that use digital tools to cultivate both community and commerce, raising further questions regarding the intersections of platformization, digitalization, and cultural practice.

Craig: This phenomenon complicates conventional understandings of both state and capitalist systems. The advent of YouTube-based clergy securing virtual goods and digital sponsorships, such as YouTube Super Chat stickers, can be interpreted cynically as commodifying spiritual experience, with individuals effectively "paying for their souls." However, these exchanges go beyond mere monetary transactions; what is truly being offered is a sense of communion, companionship, and belonging—forms of collective identification and commitment that transcend both nationalism and market logic.

Similar dynamics are evident in contexts such as Chile, where indigenous creators primarily identify with their native tribes rather than with the nation-state. These examples suggest that the category of "stateless creators" is analytically valuable for examining forms of creator culture that are supranational and transnational, operating outside traditional frameworks of the nation-state and even conventional notions of culture or cultural industries. Ultimately, this challenges us to reconceptualize how

societies construct meaning and belonging beyond geographical, national, or linguistic boundaries.

Lin: I also believe that the epistemological challenge for the global creator and wanghong studies is not merely empirical aggregation; it is to theorize the mutual imbrication of local and global factors. This discussion concerns broader debates around knowledge production. In my research, for example, my aim is not to provide an essentialized account of "China," but rather to interrogate how local practices are embedded within and shaped by global dynamics. There is no singular China, just as there are multiple Americas, Latin Americas, and Africas; my familiarity with the affective and cultural nuances of wanghong motivates my locally grounded inquiry.

Theoretically, I am increasingly critical of conflating global studies with comparative or multinational case collection. I may argue that a truly global approach recognizes that all local phenomena are influenced by transnational forces. For example, in my work on Chinese creators and platforms, I seek to highlight how developments within China are mutually constituted by global actors, organizations, and cultural processes. Thus, a global perspective emerges not merely through empirical breadth but through an analytical framework that situates the local within the global context.

Craig: This is precisely why Stuart Cunningham and I were drawn to your work: you employed unlikely or peripheral creator cases as heuristics to explore broader dynamics in human-technology relations. This brings us back to the central challenges and opportunities in creator and wanghong studies. First, it highlights the importance of phenomenological inquiry—your deep engagement with wanghong culture allows access to affective nuances and local meanings that outside researchers might not perceive. Such local expertise and phenomenological sensitivity are crucial for understanding how structural and material conditions are refracted through specific cultural contexts.

Lin: That's also why I think your ongoing research is crucial. While creators in Chile, the Middle East, or "stateless" contexts may empirically occupy peripheral market positions, epistemologically, their practices illuminate both local conditions and broader global dynamics. Peripheral cases provide insights into global structures, just as studying the United States or China can reveal these interconnections. This, I believe, constitutes the essence of a truly global perspective.

While comparative research across various regions and global powers (such as China, the US, Russia, and India) remains essential, I also find value in approaches like Chen Kuan-Hsing's (2010) concept of "inter-referencing," which emphasizes comparative analysis among neighboring societies and cultures. Such methodologies yield especially rich insights. Ultimately, while global comparisons are vital, situated, locally grounded research is equally important for developing comprehensive understandings of creator or cultural studies. A robust epistemological framework must integrate both comparative and contextual approaches to capture the complex interrelations between the local and the global.

Craig: The next development for this emerging specialization or field may demand more integrative, comparative, and ethnographically informed approaches. Long live creator and wanghong studies!

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