

# Faces of the Young Creative Class in China

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Yu-Tsu Chen, Ph. D.  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

中國年輕創意階級的樣貌  
陳又慈博士  
伊利諾大學香檳校區



## 摘要

創意不再只是某種特定的人格特質或者特定的作品；在當代的脈絡下，創意更常應用於與社會變遷、商業、都市化相關的多種實踐。在世界各地興起的創意階級就說明了一種追求創意以振興經濟發展的全球性浪潮。作為世界第二大經濟體，中國正向世界展示他們對這一波經濟變革的決心，而中國的年輕創意階級就是這場經濟變革中不可或缺的份子。本研究透過正式/非正式訪談7位中國的年輕創意工作者並援引其在社群網路上發佈的圖片，試圖一窺中國年輕創意階級的樣貌與目前正在進展中的創意轉向。本研究發現中國年輕創意階級與西方有許多相似處：他們熱衷工作更熱愛玩樂，因為高體驗性的玩樂生活能激發創意靈感。其次，他們視身體為創意展現的競技場。最後，他們跨國工作的背景令他們較同齡人更具批判性思維。

關鍵字: 創意階級, 理查.佛羅里達, 創意, 八零後, 中國

## Abstract

Creativity is no longer merely a fixed personal trait or output; rather, in the contemporary context it has been applied to multiple practices bound by social changes, business, and urbanization. Emergence of the creative class worldwide illustrates the global trend of pursuing creativity on the merit of economic development. As the second largest economic entity in the world, China is showing its intention for the next economic revolution, and their young creative class is an integral part of this economic change. Based on formal/informal interviews with individual creative workers in China juxtaposed with images they posted on social media, this study presents both a snapshot of the young creative class as well as a broad view of the creative turn now occurring in China. The study found that the young members of the creative class share similar values toward life and work with the Western creative class in three ways: they work hard and play even harder in order to create the experiential atmosphere for stimulating new ideas; they see their body as an arena for creative expression; and they demonstrate more critical thinking than their contemporaries, attributing this ability to their overseas experiences.

Keywords: creative class, Richard Florida, creativity, the post-80s, China

## Era of the Creative Class

The emergence of the creative class signals an era nurtured by the prevalence of the Internet and the maturity of globalization. This “flattened world” (Friedman, 2005) has not only greatly reduced the cost of manufacturing for better designs, it has also produced a more accessible and affordable quality of life (Pink, 2005). These changes have led to major shifts in many aspects of human life. Sociologists in the United States have been aware of these transformations since the 1990s. Brooks (2000) observed that a fusion of two distinct social classes—the bourgeois and bohemian (aka the Bobos) have become a trendy, lifestyle merging into the urban scene. Florida (2002) researched the emergence of the creative class and indicated that the new social structure is the pillar of a successful creative economy. To nurture the future creative labor force, art education has long been recognized as the site for cultivating

creativity, but creative self-expression alone is apparently inadequate for today’s needs. In response to the era of the creative economy, art educators have recently advocated cultivating divergent/critical thinking, entrepreneurship, interdisciplinary cooperation, problem-solving skills, social interaction, and risk taking through contemporary art-based approaches rather than merely training students for testing and standards (Delacruz, 2011; Efland, 2010; Freedman, 2007, 2010; Parsons, 2010a, 2010b; Smilan, 2007; Zimmerman, 2009).

Members of the creative class possess intangible creative capital for making their living. Florida (2002) classified the core of the creative class as those working in the arts, design, music, education, science, and engineering— people who “produce new forms or designs that are readily transferable and broadly useful” (p. 11). The creative class also shares similar tastes and

attitudes toward life and work. Moreover, Florida (2002), identified four of their characteristics: (a) they prefer a no-collar workplace where the atmosphere is rather free and relaxed; (b) they desire multidimensional life experiences in order to index themselves as “creative”; (c) they pack work and play together with many creative stimuli; and (d) they tend to live in or form a community in order to connect with other creative minds to reinforce their identities and generate ideas. Dramatic global shifts have also catalyzed the birth of the creative class in China. According to the national Twelfth Five-Year-Plan, the creative sector was expanding and estimated to contribute 3% to 5% to the country’s GDP by 2015 (Hong, 2011). However, who comprises the creative population? Do they have similar values as their Western counterparts, or do they differ in some ways?

## **The Young Creative Class in China**

This study defined the young Chinese as those born after 1980 (aka the “post-80s”). This generation has witnessed China’s cultural and economic shifts in Deng Xiaoping’s Open Door Policy. The post-80s are the only child in their families due to the enforcement of the One-Child Policy launched in 1978 and also grew up in a relatively stable and affluent environment as the country’s economy strengthened and opened up. Scholars argue that these 24- to 35-year-old adults have bridged the closed and xenophobic China to a nation described as a globalized powerhouse (Elegant, 2007). Also, dramatic social changes have caused this special demographic group to have different viewpoints and attitudes compared to the previous generation (Moore, 2005). No different from the same age group around the world, the post-80s’ childhood experiences were filled with Disney

cartoons, Nintendo, Japanese manga, and the boom of personal computers; now as adults they are immersed in the explosion of the Internet and social media with smart phones like elsewhere.

Furthermore, this study adopts Florida’s definition of the creative class as people devoted to the creative sector. The 7 participants of this research were artists, jewelry designer, photographers, graphic designers, interior designers, and fashion designers working in downtown Shanghai who were born between 1980 and 1986. Interview questions mainly focused on their attitudes toward work, lifestyle, social interaction, creativity, education, and their thoughts regarding some of their posts on social media. To illustrate a part of the creative class’s life and some of their ideas, a few images were selected and analyzed along with the texts from the participants’ posts on WeChat (the most popular social media in China). These images were viewed

as mirrors of the young creative class’s preferences and lifestyle rather than references of the participants’ creativity.

The study found the young Chinese members of the creative class shares three significant commonalities. First, they work hard and play even harder in order to create the experiential atmosphere for stimulating new ideas. Second, they see their body as an arena for creative-expression. Third, they demonstrate more critical thinking than their contemporaries and considered it a result of receiving education outside of China or their frequent overseas travel.

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### **Work hard, play even harder**

In China the norm for the young creative class is to hold multiple jobs and work over 12 hours a day. To earn enough money to support what they love to do, and also to maintain their inclination to work with different groups of people, it is not unusual for them to hold several jobs concurrently. For example, among the research participants an independent interior designer owned a European antique shop, a photographer founded a gallery, and a fashion designer ran a yuppie coffee house, a place where people who have same interests gather. In terms of work patterns, the young Chinese creative class, just like the creative class identified by Florida (2002) and Currid (2007), tired of staying in





offices with the 9-to-5 routine, prefer a more relaxing working atmosphere with a relatively flexible schedule. Interestingly, many of them described themselves as night owls who start their day at 1:00 p.m. and keep working until late at night. They have a fabulously active nightlife but their delayed biological clock makes them feel they live in a different time zone. Figure 1 is artwork made by Nana (26y, jewelry designer) posted on WeChat with the text "Getting up early in the morning makes me feel sick..." (03/19/2016).

Figure 1.



Furthermore, the young creative workers tend to blend work and play. For most of them, working is fascinating, challenging, full of fun, and any kind of play facilitates their work. They like to create a playful and relaxed working environment and believe it helps to generate ideas. Figure 2 shows Viko (26y, photographer) and her colleagues making funny faces at her studio. She said: “a playful workplace inspires creative thinking (10/31/2015)”

Away from the workplace, periodic travel is one of the types of play they consider a must-have ritual for inspiration. Almost all of the participants claimed that travel is significant for creative minds and they travel overseas at least twice a year. Figure 3 represented Miaomiao’s (28y, felt artist) adventure in Turkey noting that: “to travel is to start an unexpected adventure, to expose yourself to danger that you would never encounter in China (06/13/2015)”.



Figure 2





Figure 3

### **The body as an arena for creative-expression**

These young creative workers are very concerned about their appearance. According to the participants, they saw their body and clothing style as an extension of their creativity, personality, and profession. Among them, it was very common to see females exhibiting a masculine style, wearing very short hair and simple/neat clothing or males wearing tattoos and messy hairstyle to accent their persona. These body images may fall into another stereotype but looking good and creative helps to make the creative workers look reliable to their clients. Florida (2002) noticed the growing awareness of seeing the body as a form of art among younger creative class in the United States, and he argued that it was not only a shift of personal aesthetic, but also a way to market themselves to prospective partners or customers. Figure 4 shows the participant,

Shawn (27y, fashion photographer), tattooing himself in his friend's shop. He shared this image with a description on his profile: "You are cool enough that you don't need recognition from others (08/15/2013)".



Figure 4

The young creatives are also bored with the popular mass-produced fashion with its similar patterns and cuts, so they prefer

wearing clothes and accessories either made/redesigned by themselves or found in flea markets. "Vintage" was the term they frequently used to refer to the recycled fashion that carries a valuable historical sense and meaning and that also became a visual characteristic of this group. Figure 5 shows Yutaka (28y, fashion designer) and his wife wearing his own designs with vintage accessories they found in Japan.



Figure 5

## Critical thinkers

The young creative workers demonstrate more critical thinking than other young Chinese. For example, instead of being obsessed with posting selfies and food pictures on social media, they show more concern about issues related to social justice, intellectual property rights, education, freedom of speech, and human rights. Although posting sensitive statements on social media sometimes causes some trouble (the post may be deleted by China's Internet censorship, the user account may be suspended, or even worse), the young creatives know how to navigate the gray areas. Figure 6 is a photo posted with the title "#JATB" by Haihai (31y, graphic designer) in response to a social event: new officials called Jin-An-Te-Bow appeared in Shanghai's streets to secure people's safety and direct traffic. According to Haihai, the JATB wore white jackets to look like the storm troopers in Star Wars,



and his intention was to criticize the safety guards acting like cold robots that had inconvenienced him and made him feel under surveillance. Haihai said that by looking at the simple image with the concise hashtag people who were aware of this social event would understand his point.



Regarding the issue of education, none of the participants recognized that the art education they received in China had significantly contributed to their creative work. Critical thinking is crucial to nurture creativity, but the participants claimed that the schools mostly neglected this area of education. Viko said the education she

received in China trained her to be a “docile sheep” and compared it to the education she experienced in Canada that let her grow as a “wild hungry wolf.” According to Viko, the Chinese teachers taught her how to get the best solution without wasting time in making mistakes, whereas the Canadian teachers encouraged her to be bold, critical, and learn from her mistakes. It was this latter pedagogy that influenced her to become a creative worker. It is noteworthy that for a short period of time 5 out of 7 participants had received some education in foreign countries, including Canada, Japan, England, Singapore and the United States; moreover, most of them were fluent in English and frequently traveled abroad. They felt their overseas experiences facilitated their ability to think critically and allowed them to better understand China through a different lens.

Figure 6

Emergence of the creative class in China announces a new, desired lifestyle in tandem with new type of developing economy. Although China has been criticized for restraining creativity in some areas, it hasn't slowed down the pace of the growing creative economy. As the second largest economic entity in the world, the changing China has showed the world its intention for its next economic revolution, and these young, creative people are an integral part of this economic change.

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