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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Critique of creative labour: indebtedness and subsumption of labour in Hong Kong's filmmaking industry

Ngai Pun[1] · **Haocheng Yang**[2]

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Abstract

In contrast to the concept of bonded labour or agency labour, we coin the concept of indebted labour to analyse the creative workers in Hong Kong's filmmaking industry. Unlike bonded labour, which involves forced labour to repay debts, and agency labour, which is a form of mediated labour subcontracted by third parties to work in various industries, the concept of indebted labour refers to a nuanced and interesting labour process that turns free labour, without debts, into a prolonging delayed payment for their labour value. This creates an indebted situation for workers who work but are constantly without pay for months or sometimes years. Critically reviewing the Marxist theory of subsumption of labour, this article analyses how a capital-intensive, avant-garde, and highly specialised film industry creates the most absurd but inevitable form of labour, putting creative workers in a constant indebted situation, a vicious circle of work without pay for a few months and for them to survive, receiving more jobs and more delayed remuneration. Thus, an incessant process of indebted work, constantly owing to the prepaid labour power that sustains the filmmaking industry.

Keywords Cultural and creative labour · Indebtedness · Subsumption of labour · Filmmaking industry · Hong Kong

✉ Ngai Pun
npun@ln.edu.hk

Haocheng Yang
howardyang@cuhk.edu.hk

[1] Department of Cultural Studies, Lingnan University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, Hong Kong

[2] Centre for China Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Introduction: the concept of bonded labour, agency labour, and indebted labour

Recent studies on cultural and creative labour disclose precarious work and lives, as well as the contested identities of creative workers. In particular, the nonstandard employment in the creative economy—part-time jobs and independent contractors—intertwining with complex labour processes challenges previous understandings of work and labour. Once seen as the rosy prospect of the postindustrial society and highly educated population, the thesis of the creative class is challenged by the thesis of exploitative creative labour (Florida 2002; Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2010a; Kim 2024; Ross 2008). Nonetheless, perennial casual labour remains problematic and deserves theoretical underpinning and analysis: Why does nonstandard employment persist like a curse that could never be expelled? How does a capital-intensive, avant-garde, and highly specialised film industry create the most absurd form of labour, putting creative workers in a constant indebted situation, engendering a vicious circle of work without pay for a few months, and for them to survive, receiving more jobs and more delayed remuneration? Existing studies contribute to the understanding of cultural production, consumption, and digital labour issues, and yet satisfactorily analytical and explanatory studies of such an absurd form of labour in the creative industry are still pending.

Critically reviewing the Marxist theory of subsumption of labour under capital, this article challenges the association of progressive and linear logic of modernity and their accrued standard employment in industrial and postindustrial societies. It explains the persistence of formal subsumption of labour, rather than entering the real subsumption of labour, in a capital-intensive, highly specialised industry in an advanced capitalist society. Examining the case of the filmmaking industry in Hong Kong, we found that under the minimal role of state and legal regulation, the capital-intensive industry produces and reproduces a more than flexible production in the industry that dictates the persistence of formal subsumption of labour. We further discern that through extensive layers of outsourcing, the risks in filmmaking are transferred from the investors onto the independent production houses at the lower echelon and the individual freelance workers. Compare and contrast with the concepts of bonded labour—unfree labour associated with debt—and agency labour—temporary workers with multiple employment relations with several employers—we found the nuanced labour process of filmmaking workers that they are free labour but confined in enduring "indebtedness", meaning that they have to support their own means of production and are trapped continually in delayed payment for his or her labour value. Embedded in a situation of a constant supply of creative workers, the high cost of on-the-job training, limited and nontransparent hiring processes, shorthanded labour protection, and conservative funding practises, creative workers tend to accept their precarious employment in the hope of retaining employment and mobility in the industry. With insights from the studies of the hybrid form of subsumption of labour, including the expropriation of means of production, direct capitalist control,

class struggle, and legal and state mechanisms (Das 2012; Praznik 2018; Skillman 2023), we coin the term indebted labour to capture this enduring yet seemingly backward form of labour in an advanced industry in an advanced capitalist economy.

Often, the concept of bonded labour is associated with antediluvian forms of accumulation, such as forced labour and slavery in the pre-industrial mode of production. Essentially, bonded labour or debt bondage is a creditor-debt relationship; nonetheless, mostly in the situation of severe inadequacy in alternative income or credit, debtors have no choice but to pledge for borrowings, even despite high interest rates, resulting in a vicious cycle of extended low-paid labour and continuous indebtedness (Kara 2012). In most situations, workers have no alternatives but to "opt for" serfdom (Genicot 2002), making them classified as unfree labour in the Marxist sense, which is compatible with the globalisation of capitalist accumulation through an international division of labour (Brass 2024; Kalb 2024) and a profitable strategy of labour discipline (LeBaron 2014), as documented by both official statistics and ethnographies in South Asia (Srivastava 2005; Kara 2012). We introduce the concept of bonded labour here to distil the unequal exchange between the debtors and the labourers that can be borrowed to understand the labour process of creative workers: first, the situation of indebtedness in labour discipline and control; and second, the embeddedness of informal labour arrangements in the broader labour market and legal framework. Compared with unfree bonded labour, filmmaking workers are free to enter or exit their employment; nonetheless, as we will show, they are commonly subjugated in debt relations with their immediate hirers. The debts here work in two directions: economically, delayed or nonpayment for their labour power are common, yet freelance film workers have to rely on social ties to secure the ensuing projects, thus normalising debt relations. Their freelance status requires the creative workers to acquire self-equipped means of production and a self-entrepreneurial career, causing prior indebtedness. In other words, under an informal setting, when legal protection is limited and the sectoral labour market is tight, workers have no alternatives but to enter debt relations for them to work in this industry, and debt operates as a labour control to secure a low-cost workforce.

We also want to underline the concept of agency labour because of the prevalence of subcontracting in the filmmaking industry that relies on informal networks to link investors or contractors, subcontractors, and work teams or freelance individual workers (Dex et al. 2000; Ross 2008). Labour in the film industry is argued to be run on group dynamics that require workers' efforts to secure and maintain their jobs (Blair 2001; Blair et al. 2001; Morris et al., 2023). Baumann (2002) contends that owing to the lack of skill standards, firms use social mechanisms such as restricted access and intermediaries to reduce uncertainties in unpredictable markets. Described as a two-way process, Baumann (2002) records that freelancers also prefer using intermediaries to maximise their chance of employment, thus creating an "informal occupational labour market". Depicting employment as a level playing field, however, neglects the histories of changing labour relations and the form of control in the interests of capital accumulation (Martin 2015, 2022).

In the following sections, we first review the Marxist theory of subsumption of labour and its relevance in understanding the large-scale reemergence of formal

subsumption in the age of digital labour (Joyce 2020). Then, we will explicate the case of the filmmaking industry in Hong Kong, sketch the analytical framework, and present the persistent formal subsumption and rampant indebtedness. Ultimately, we argue that outsourcing and indebtedness develop mutually, and thus, perennial formal subsumption is an absurd but logical consequence of ongoing ultra-outsourcing filmmaking labour in Hong Kong. These findings have significant implications in understanding the ongoing platformisation of society when more and more labour is being outsourced, and labour remains formally subsumed.

Marxist theory of subsumption of labour and its debates

The theory of subsumption of labour under capital pivots the Marxist theory of capitalist accumulation, describing the process of the capitalist subsumption of labour and, along with it, the changes in social relations. In the *Results of the Direct Production Process*, Marx (Marx & Engels 2010) differentiated two types of subsumptions: formal and real. Marx termed subsumption of labour under capital, referring to:

> The labour process becomes the instrument of the valorisation process, of the process of capital's self-valorisation — the process of the creation of surplus value. The labour process is subsumed under capital (it is capital's own process) and the capitalist enters the process as its conductor, its director; for him it is at the same time directly a process of the exploitation of alien labour (Marx & Engels 2010, p. 424).

Marx and Engels (2010) also made a direct correspondence between the type of subsumption and the type of extraction of surplus labour, as well as the level of development of productive powers of labour and the change in the mode of production:

> Hence, a given level of development of the productive power of labour and a mode of labour which corresponds to this productive power, surplus value can only be created by prolonging labour time, hence in the manner of absolute surplus value. Therefore, where this is the sole form of production of surplus value, we have the formal subsumption of labour under capital (Marx & Engels 2010, p. 426).

Formal subsumption precedes "the further developed" real subsumption, and the latter is realised when a mode of production "transforms the real nature of the labour process and its real conditions" (Marx & Engels 2010, 34, p.429). This notion of transition from formal to real subsumption, however, has induced some debates. First, the stage thesis, generally that formal subsumption is a stage preceding the destined real subsumption, is challenged by a nonautomatic or coexistent thesis (Das 2012; Tomba 2015). For one, the perpetuity of unfree labour suggests the compatibility of unfree labour and capitalism, and thus, subsumption is stagnated in certain places. For another, the transition from formal to real subsumption is mediated by other social processes, such as bottom-up class struggles and top-down state and

legal transformations, that also impact the logic of capital (Das 2012; Praznik 2018). This line of argument enlarges the analytical ambit of the subsumption theory to the seemingly problematic nature of the latest forms of digital labour (Fuchs 2018), particularly those associated with platforms.

Platforms for transportation (Nordli Oppegaard 2023), care work (Yin 2023), and other purposes remake pre-existing forms of employment and social relations (Lazar 2023). For instance, it is common for platforms to deny legal employment relations with workers and require workers to equip themselves with their own vehicles and tools for work. In this sense, what we have seen is, as described by Joyce (2020), "a large-scale re-emergence of formal subsumption, as big capital (often in the form of venture capital) reorganises existing labour processes under its own domination" (pp. 546). Thus, we can see that industry-specific labour arrangements may induce specific forms of subsumption similar to the historical forms of circuits of capital discussed by Marx, namely early colonial capitalism, antediluvian forms of capital (merchant and usury capital), slave labour, industrial capital, and worker cooperatives (Gill & Kasmir 2016; Kasmir & Carbonella 2008; Skillman 2023; Vrousalis 2018). It is worth noting that formal and real subsumption can coexist in the process of capital accumulation (Das 2012; Praznik 2018), and the hybrid form of subsumption provides insights for us to understand how formal subsumption can apply to the understanding of current creative workers' exploitative conditions, particularly the filmmaking industry in Hong Kong. As legal and state mechanisms, such as cultural and education policies, are evident in the filmmaking industry, they influence the process of labour subsumption in Hong Kong (Praznik 2018). All these factors facilitate the emergence of indebted labour as an absurd form of formal subsumption in the city of "capital paradise", where the autonomy of cultural workers is ideologically maintained. In contrast, their labour is increasingly subordinated to capital. Yet the daily conflicts with and against capital, in which class struggle is situated (Das 2012), also shape the concrete process of the subsumption of labour in the contemporary filmmaking industry.

By engaging with the theory of subsumption of labour, we, therefore, enable an analysis to include many forms of labour relations—self-employment, independent production coteries and contracted workers—in the filmmaking industry and explain why and how the indebtedness was embodied in the labour process of these variant forms of creative labour. We explore the contradictions embedded in formal subsumption and free exchange relations of labour power, subordination of labour in production, and unpropertied labour (expropriated means of production) that induces the vicious circle of reproducing indebted labour in creative industries.

The filmmaking industry and labour in Hong Kong

Hong Kong has been a longstanding media capital and was once dubbed the "Hollywood of the East" owing to its golden age of film exports and influence from the 1970 s to 1980 s (Cheung 2018; Chiu & Shin 2019; Chiu & Siu 2022). However, the prospect of the industry plummeted in the 1990 s as local productions were outcompeted by the globalised monopoly of Hollywood productions (Shin & Chiu 2016).

Against this backdrop, local actors, including the Hong Kong government and investors, have resonated with other governments to implement supply-side manoeuvres and build a global production infrastructure that exploits film labour (Curtin 2016). The most notable supply-side policies include government subsidies and the expansion of higher education in filmmaking. Through the Hong Kong Film Development Council (HKFDC), the local central public funding body, more than 1.1 billion Hong Kong dollars (approximately 144 million USD) is poured into the industry (HKFDC 2024). The number of student intakes of local full-time creative industries-related programmes at sub-degree and undergraduate levels accounts for 13.9% of total student intakes in Hong Kong and that of the graduates occupied 13.1% of the total graduates in 2019/20 (CreateHK 2022, 2023).

However, with an increasingly educated labour supply and shrinking industry prospects, employment in the industry could only remain highly casualised (Pun et al. 2022). The number of persons engaged rose from 14,676 to 16,408 before the COVID- 19 pandemic and gradually recovered (Census and Statistics Department, 2009–2022). A substantial escalation in the number of establishments since 2008 demonstrates that small-to-medium scale productions are gaining traction in the industry. According to the HKFDC (2023), 93.4% of filmmaking companies are small and medium enterprises (i.e. less than 50 employees), and 57.2% have less than or equal to 10 employees. From our findings, many of these production companies are coteries of filmmakers who registered a company status to better source projects from marketing or production agencies.

Research methods

This article draws on data from a broader research project on youth poverty and employment in Hong Kong. From 2023 to 2024, we conducted 45 semi-structured interviews with local filmmakers via snowball sampling. Initially relying on our network, we were then able to expand the sample to include advanced-level professionals in film, documentary, streaming, and advertisement, as well as representatives from trade unions, with a mix of pre-production, on-site production, and post-production (see Table 1 in the Appendix for a summary of respondents' profiles). We acknowledge the transferability of filmmaking skills and therefore espouse a general understanding of films, referring to productions in commercial films, TV, documentaries, microfilms, and video advertisements, between which the boundaries of these sectors are blurry. Freelance workers are likely to bid for jobs in multiple industries, exacerbated by the tight labour market since the COVID- 19 pandemic. Likewise, we adopt a broad definition of filmmaking workers, referring to the diverse specialties in the whole film production, i.e. pre-production, on-site production, and post-production. An interview guide was developed based on extant literature on creative labour, precarity, unconventional employment, and policies in creative industries. During the interviews, informants were asked about their entry into the industry, employment mode, work routines, and project-seeking processes. We also asked the interviewees to describe their thoughts on the outlook of the industry and government policies. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Indebtedness: new forms of formal subsumption in the film industry

We attempt to explicate how indebtedness was created by the conditions for formal subsumption, which are free exchange relations, expropriation of means of production, and direct capitalist control. We perceive indebtedness as a relational concept by drawing on informants' work conditions and socio-economic experiences (Graeber 2018). Through an inductive approach, we found three recurring themes that can be analysed with indebtedness: nonpayment for works, possession of limited means of production, and socialisation and maintenance of networks. From here, indebtedness acquires a financial dimension, a social dimension, and an ideological dimension. Financially, nonpayment and delayed remuneration are common in the industry, and indebtedness is provoked when immediate employers owe unpaid labour to workers. Socially, a varying degree of expropriation of means of production is observed amongst filmmakers, such as the ownership of specific production machines and related techniques, most notably amongst lighting and sound specialists. However, as major investors monopolise film production, distribution, and production processes, these workers have little choice but to depend on the requests from the head of production for jobs. Thus, this industry characteristic determines that the ownership of the means of production does not equate with autonomy but rather a transfer of the cost of maintenance of the means of production to workers. Workers are indebted due to owning the means of production to work as filmmakers in the formal subsumption of labour. Lastly, as explained, the maintenance of group and network identity is essential to creative workers (Baumann 2002; Blair 2001; Dex et al. 2000), and we further analyse this phenomenon by showing that workers have to, despite low pay, delayed payment, and ultra-high intensity of work, be thankful and indebted to the industry or stick with certain heads of production for future jobs. This ideological dimension of indebtedness interestingly contrasts with the freedom and autonomy of cultural and creative labour that the industry believes (Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2010b; Morgan et al. 2013; Na & Pun 2023).

Free but indebted exchange relation: nonpayment for labour power and ultra-outsourcing

Formal subsumption of labour describes a capital accumulation process with parts of the production process under workers' control. In contrast, initial capital and commodity investments, post-production circulation, and reinvestment are controlled by a capitalist logic (Skillman 2007). This is reflected in the project-based structure in filmmaking, where producers look for their crew when the initial investment is ready. Under this logic, multiple levels of outsourcing for creative labour are supported by highly mobile and informal filmmaking workers. Most of our informants are informal workers in the broad sense. With some exceptions, such as the assistant directors and production assistants who are commonly employed temporarily on fixed terms to oversee the whole production, the majority of technical personnel are freelancers, such as screenwriters, gaffers,

make-up artists, prop masters, and lighting engineers, receiving either daily or per-project remuneration. In some cases, informants identify themselves as owners or partners of independent production companies so that they can tender a project; nonetheless, these production companies are, in fact, coteries of freelancers of the necessary roles in video productions, targeting small productions, such as promotional videos, event documentaries, microfilms, and music videos.

This informality resonates with digital labourers from the West, who are supposedly at the higher end of the value chain of cultural commodities (Fuchs 2014; Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2010a; Ross 2008; Tsing 2013). These filmmakers are free in an additional sense: they are free labour on the market. They can also engage with productions and crew partners whenever opportunities arise. Cultural and creative workers often associate with autonomy and agency and are indifferent to in-house or nine-to-five jobs (Fraser & Gold 2001; Morgan et al. 2013). Nonetheless, this autonomy comes with the cost of an invisible "bare working life" situation; freelancers commonly face incredibly long working hours, no compensation for overtime work, no written contract, and delayed or nonpayment for work. Filmmakers often take it naturally to live by the delayed payment three months prior, making their earnings extremely precarious (Pun et al. 2022; Tse 2022). Multiple layers of outsourcing from the client to a central marketing agency, to a production company, to front-line film workers engender high administrative costs and loopholes for delayed or nonpayment, leaving the small producers and their work teams to absorb all outsourcing layers of indebtedness:

> The way I feel uncomfortable, now that I own a production house, is because I am responsible for paying wages to others. The issue of arrears of payment is that clients would not pay us immediately, but always keep delaying. We must advance the pay (to crew members). Somehow, I do not understand why I keep working but make advanced expenditures. (Betty, owner of a production house)
>
> Christy described to us how she had to "bring money to work" for film production when she worked as a costume designer:
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> The work in films requires us to make advance payments for purchases because we need to buy a lot…For example, the budget [for costume] is nine hundred thousand, and they [referring to production executives] would give you a hundred thousand cheque, which is very little… You will spend it all in a week. But you cannot wait for them [referring to production executives] to clear and reimburse the receipt… So we keep using our money to buy the company's stuff. That is why we bring money to work. I mean, I only get paid for the first month, but I have already used fifty thousand [advance payment] … You do not have time to organise the receipt, and they do not reimburse timely, but you keep buying stuff… The production of advertisements and music videos is worse. Three of us in the department [of costume] chipped in for a hundred thousand, and nine months later, we finally recovered the payment. It took nine more months to recover our pay… I thought that the advertising company had gone bankrupt. (Christy, freelance costume designer of films)

Unpaid work is done every day in creative industries to gain entry and employment, and recent research has found that the social capital thesis cannot fully explain the consequences because there is no guaranteed reciprocity for the unpaid work (Siebert & Wilson 2013). Putting the whole phenomenon of prolonged and widespread unpaid work under the broader framework of political economy, state policies, and industry structure, we can see the structural transference of risks to make precarious workers indebted (Pulignano et al. 2023). On the one hand, most of our informants do not have a written contract before they start their work, relying primarily upon verbal or written messages on social media as agreements. On the other hand, numerous layers of outsourcing and unclear work agreements increase the cost of recovering wage arrears. When freelance workers rely on informal networks for future jobs, it makes sense for them to be appeased by the possibilities of future collaborations and jobs instead of engaging in tedious processes of wage recovery. Typical words of pacification include "the client has not issued the money" or "the client is not satisfied with their own product", and to a certain extent, these claims are assured by some owners of production houses.

The severity of unpaid labour power varies amongst various occupations in the filmmaking industry. Except for full-time employees in TV stations and film distributions, owners of independent production companies and freelance creative workers commonly face frequent and prolonged indebtedness. Sandwiched between clients and crew members, these owners of independent production houses not only have to beseech their clients to pay them on time so that they can pay the crew members but also have to face insecure income themselves. Betty, the owner of a small production house, regretfully told us that "I would rather suppress the wage (of my crew members). I would not delay the payment", although she sometimes has to find a part-time job to make a living:

> Usually, the first thing we do is not get our pay. By ours, I mean the four major people [in our company]; we would not all be getting paid. Then perhaps there is some money left from the previous production, and we would use that to cover the current cost… So before we [referring to her production house] get on track, I needed to keep having a part-time job and do my own production… totally irrelevant… but a job for sustaining life… I just stopped working a part-time job a few months ago, and if we cannot win any tenders later, I will have to return to that part-time job. (Betty, owner of a production house)

Comparatively, administrators such as assistant directors and production assistants are required to oversee the whole production process, from securing investments to distribution. Suppose they are recruited, though not necessarily as employees in the legal sense, these administrators will be paid regularly and are thus called monthly-paid workers. On the other end of the spectrum are the daily-waged workers, usually gaffers, boomers, and sometimes videographers and their assistants. Since their expertise and labour power are more replaceable, especially those assistants, they are paid after each long filming day, typically ranging from nine to more than 13 h, with no overtime compensation.

Apart from industrial labour arrangements, the state's labour policies and subsidies also contribute to the making of indebted labour since institutions and social

relations outside the workplace can act to mediate the relationship between work and the worker (Hammer & Ness 2021; Kasmir & Gill 2022). Such mediation does not eliminate or qualify the character of work as precarious. Still, it can modify the potential impact of precarious work on the worker by either amplifying or cushioning risks (p.318)" (Campbell & Price 2016). The welfare system of Hong Kong is described as residual, meaning that social security and protection are family-centred and market-oriented, and the governmental universal welfare is at the minimum level (Chan 2002). Since the existing labour protection is dependent on legal employee status, freelance filmmakers lack the already limited social securities:

> Everyone has strain injuries, I mean, wounded hands and lower back injuries… When I graduated, everyone thought we were making some money. Still, when you are approaching your forties, you do not have any protection because you do not have a company [referring to an employer], you do not have medical insurance, and your MPF [referring to Hong Kong's compulsory pension saving scheme] lacks contributions… Hong Kong does not have a sound social welfare system. You will be in big trouble when you get old. (Nathan, owner of a production house)

From the above, we can see that indebted labour resulted from the filmmaking industry's specific labour arrangement and its embeddedness in the absence of social welfare. Extensive outsourcing networks engender nonpayment for labour power tolerated by truncated labour protection; labour cost is suppressed, and hidden class injuries are produced and reproduced in the formal subsumption of labour under capital.

Ownership of means of production and indebtedness

Demonstrating that a certain production process is under workers' control also means that the workers own the means of production, an indication of formal subsumption of labour that induces them into indebted labour. In the case of filmmaking labour, ownership of certain machines is common for some occupations to secure jobs, including gaffers, boomers, and other on-site production specialists, due to, as explained, the outsourcing of production in the industry. Typically, in Western industrial capitalism, where labour is entirely subsumed under capital, workers provide only their labour power in the production process, whereas the cost to own, store, and maintain means of production is borne by capitalists. This typical story of the separation of means of production in industrial capitalism was challenged in many ways by labour anthropologists (Kasmir & Gill 2022). Our study further confirms that a monopoly of ownership of means of production and a clear separation of means of production is not the dominant form even in a highly condensed capital film industry in a post-industrialised city, Hong Kong. An ambivalent configuration of means of production is more attractive to capital accumulation in cultural and creative industries. An extra cost to own, store, and maintain these means of production is imposed on the filmmaking workers to keep them in the labour market.

Owners of independent production usually rent a studio as an office and a storeroom for gear. When we entered Nathan's studio in Kowloon Bay, an industrial area in Eastern Hong Kong, he showed us his rich collection of cameras and recording gadgets and his tactics to co-own the equipment with his partners to suppress the cost:

> We have one, two, three, and four companies, and ours has six people. By six, I mean three shareholders, and the others are just partners… It is because our job natures are so different, and here is an environment where you can invest very little money to get things going… With three of us working and renewing the gears, you just need to chip in, and the problem is solved. (Nathan, owner of a small production house)

Ownership of the means of production makes filmmaking workers the direct sufferers of the downsizing of production and technological improvement. Bobby, who entered the industry as a boom operator and was now promoted to be a sound mixer after a decade, told us the necessity to own a whole expensive set of professional audio equipment before being recognised as a mixer and able to bid for jobs. A common saying in this industry is that "you bring your means of creating wealth to this job", which means that bringing means of production to subsidise this industry is expected. However, Bobby doubted the sustainability of the sector:

> Most people start as boom operators and put aside some money to buy equipment because it is costly. At a professional level, the microphones are forty to fifty thousand each, and you need 12 to 13 of those, so at least four hundred thousand for microphones. Then you have the mixer, so a total of seven to eight hundred thousand for gears. So, we work very hard… But gear updates and changes rapidly. You cannot chase it… Cameras now have a single system that can link to two microphones. We used to link one microphone to a camera but not two; now you can have two. So, people think having a mixer costs you four thousand [referring to pay], and why should I do that? I would rather buy a wireless [camera] for probably twenty thousand, and that expense will be covered by four to five jobs [referring to cutting the sound mixer]. (Bobby, a boom operator of films, TVs, advertisements, and streaming platforms)

Forced to own their means of production, freelancers have widespread complaints and grievances about purchasing expensive equipment to complete their projects or work. When some informants face prolonged payments and must borrow money to feed themselves, owning means of production becomes a double burden, far from providing them autonomy and freedom. Previous studies in the West found that freelance creative workers and small independent production companies are the most vulnerable actors facing structural transformation and uncertainties in the industry (Dex et al. 2000). We argue that their hidden injuries stem from their formally subsumed labour by outsourcing the ownership of the means of production to the workers. Not only do workers get indebted to own and be able to produce, but they also endure the risks of being obsolete in terms of technology and skills upgrading, thus generating continuous indebtedness.

The ideology of indebtedness: informal networks and identity maintenance

Informal networks are widely reported to significantly impact job entry, skill and ability recognition, and securing future jobs for filmmaking workers (Baumann 2002; Blair 2001; Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2011; Ursell 2000). Against Baumann's (2002) contention that this informal labour market originated in the lack of skills standards in filmmaking and produced extra costs for firms' recruitment, we found perpetual informality in Hong Kong's filmmaking labour market despite a substantial expansion in higher education in creative disciplines. In Hong Kong, the expansion of education goes hand in hand with the demise of the local filmmaking market. Thus, a large reserve army of creative labour is structurally created, engendering much room for wage suppression. "Even if you don't do it, many people will do it" is a typical phrase workers hear when clients attempt to suppress their remuneration. The consequence is that workers are indebted to tolerate long working hours and low wages to keep themselves relevant in the labour market; for example, Kenneth described his experience in dealing with wage arrears:

> You will not be able to recover the arrears, I mean not literally, but my relationship with him is not very bad, and I have known him for some time. He offers me some jobs from time to time. I mean, he would delay but not default [the payment]. In my eyes, if clients delay but do not default, then I will not forcefully complain and protest. It is not like he will disappear or blatantly default. As long as this is not the case, I would not resort to forceful means to keep this not-so-healthy relationship. That is why wages keep being delayed. The reason why there is a rampant rate of delayed payments in this industry is that you do not want to break down the relationship. (Kenneth, owner of a production company and producer of films)

Yoshida (2021) associated indebtedness with paternalism seen in labour management of foreign labour in Japan and defined it as a social relationship that involves "passively incurred mental obligation" expected to be returned or "paid". An ideology of indebtedness, meaning that workers are indebted by being given opportunities to work, is in function, as reflected in many claims of limited jobs, suppressed wages, and control and hierarchy in the filmmaking industry:

> You should feel happy if you have a job to do. Many fresh graduates compete for a project. Working for no earnings is better than no work, as work will allow you to accumulate experience and skills so that you can have a better earning capacity in the future. Filmmaking is a unique work; you must equip yourself by bringing your body, money, and skill. (Dave, a senior producer and distributor)

Grievance and anger look futile and even a waste of time when the deadline to complete a project is pressing. Furthermore, the power of the ideology of indebtedness is also exemplified in some docile workers in the face of unfair treatment. Most of our interviewees are afraid of badmouthing when they make public

complaints that would discredit their ability to cooperate and further limit their chances of securing jobs:

> The biggest problem in this industry is that if you speak out, you will have no job. Plus, the "aura of being an artist" makes us tolerate exploitation…The culture of the TV and film industry is unhealthy, having its own rules and stratification. Workers have to adjust themselves to adapt, thus internalising wrong values. (Sammy, freelance screenwriter of TV programs)

The coupling of indebtedness and obedience can also be seen in the association of filmmaking labour. Creative workers reportedly face unique difficulties in unionisation in the West and the East (Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2010a; Kim 2024; McRobbie 2016). In Hong Kong, according to the Annual Statistical Report of Trade Unions, there are only five active registered unions for motion picture, video, and television programme production, sound recording, and related activities, covering a mere 2.3% of the working population in the industry (Registry of Trade Unions, 2023). The Federation of Hong Kong Filmmakers, the most representative association of filmmakers, is not a registered union but a limited company. Joined by 14 member associations of various filmmaking occupations, the Federation is the commissioner to disseminate economic relief to more than 2000 freelance filmmakers during the COVID- 19 pandemic. However, unlike the Writers Guild of America that some of our informants look up to, the Federation does not function as an institutionalised channel for workers and film companies to negotiate wages, nor does it guide industrial bargaining. Described as a "clansmen association" by Sammy, the structure of the Federation and the vision of individual member associations nullify its potential function as a union. For one thing, the Federation includes members such as movie production executives who tend to side with movie companies since their job nature is bookkeeping and cost management. Any fights for better wages and remuneration would first be diluted at the workers' level. Moreover, senior executives seem reluctant to broaden their membership to the large pool of young freelance workers as the latter do not have recognition in terms of published works and experience. The tight labour market and transferability of skills constitute a unique dilemma: because of limited opportunities, workers are forced to seek jobs in other industries, yet the more they make a living in advertisements, TVs, and streaming platforms, the less they can prove themselves in the filmmaking industry. Thus, it makes it even harder for indebted filmmaking workers to engage in union activities and improve their work conditions and wages.

Conclusion

Critical reviewing and engaging with the theory of subsumption of labour under capital, we deepen the analysis of the nuanced production processes and modes of employment in the filmmaking industry. Centering on indebtedness, we challenge the Western-based assumption of the subsumption of labour as a linear and progressive process. Formal subsumption of labour is a perennial feature of capital accumulation in the filmmaking industry in Hong Kong, which usually stands as

an avant-garde, capital-intensive and highly specialised industry. Contradictory to its hegemonic role in shaping high modernity or post-modern cultures, the filmmaking industry appears to create the most absurd form of labour, putting cultural and creative workers in a constant indebted situation, engendering a vicious circle of work without pay for months and for the workers to survive, receiving more jobs and more delayed remuneration. An unceasing process of indebted work, constantly owing to the prepaid labour power, sustains the filmmaking industry. Specifically, we argue that the perennial formal subsumption of labour in filmmaking creates indebtedness in its workers in financial, social, and ideological senses. Workers are socially indebted to gain entry into the industry, indebted to remain technologically ready and up-to-date, and indebted to live by the delayed payments to their labour power, as well as repaid or paid for their means of production and forced to own them despite running into credit debts. Learning to live with indebtedness becomes a lesson if creative workers want to live by filmmaking. The concept of indebted labour poses a production-centred conceptual challenge to concepts like agency labour and a modern correspondence to the concept of bonded labour.

The indebted labour in filmmaking provides a significant collocation with the platformisation of cultural labour and society (Nieborg & Poell 2018; Tse & Shum 2023). Whilst one may argue that cultural production has a much longer history of outsourcing, whereas care work, transportation, and many other industries in the gig economy have only undergone similar changes assisted by digital platforms; nonetheless, despite divergent trajectories, one penetrating feature is the deprivation of legal-employment relations with the capital-labour exchange (van Doorn 2017). Indebted labour presents itself as a novel conceptual intervention to conceptualise the free but indebted exchange relationship between capital and labour in the labour market. On the digital platforms on which everyone is seemingly working for themselves but, in fact, the workers engage in a nuanced sense of debt relations when workers strive to stay available to be used, to reproduce their labour power, prepare their means of production, and adapt to the changing milieu of the industry, despite the neo-liberal promise of better and more interesting jobs in the creative industries and youth entrepreneurship for upward mobility. Indebted labour presents itself as a novel conceptual intervention to conceptualise the free but indebted exchange relationship between capital and labour on these platforms.

Appendix

Table 1 Profiles of interviewees

Pseudonym	Gender	Age range	Occupation
Justin	M	18–29	Full-time employed videographer and editor of films
Keith	M	18–29	Freelance videographer and gaffer of documentaries, films, and TV
Betty	F	18–29	Producer and owner of a production company making TV, advertisements, and promotional videos
Richard	M	30–39	Freelance videographer of short films, advertisements, and social media content
Zion	M	18–29	Freelance screenwriter and actor in online videos
Bob	M	18–29	Full-time employed screenwriter, producer, and distributor of advertisement
Stark	M	18–29	Freelance director, videographer and gaffer of various video productions, and owner of a production company
Yuki	F	18–29	Freelance translator for films
Long	M	18–29	Full-time employed host of online videos
Nathan	M	18–29	Owner of a production house making advertisements, films, and short films
Snowy	F	18–29	Freelance actress in online videos and short films
Raccoon	M	40–45	Freelance screenwriter, director, assistant director, art director, prop master, producer, and distributor of TV and films
Vicky	F	18–29	Freelance make-up artist in TV and advertisement
Ricky	M	18–29	Freelance director, screenwriter, and producer of films and promotional videos
Lydia	F	18–29	Freelance producer of films and TV
Taylor	F	18–29	Full-time employed screenwriter of TV and streaming platforms
Wade	M	30–39	Freelance screenwriter for TV and streaming platforms
Carmen	F	18–29	Freelance video editor, sound specialist, and animator of online videos and promotional videos
Gigi	M	30–39	Freelance assistant director of documentaries
Sammy	M	18–29	Freelance screenwriter of TV
Kyle	M	30–39	Owner of a production company and director, videographer, and video editor of advertisements, short films, and music videos
Bobby	M	30–39	Boom operator of films, TVs, advertisements and streaming platforms

Table 1 (continued)

Pseudonym	Gender	Age range	Occupation
Brandon	M	18–29	Owner of a production company and director, videographer, gaffer, and video editor of advertisements and promotional videos
Pierce	M	30–39	Freelance assistant director of films
Harvey	M	18–29	Freelance art director of films and TVs
Audrey	F	18–29	Owner of a production company and producer, video editor, and animator of advertisements
Yuri	F	30–39	Freelance assistant producer of films
Miffy	M	40–49	Freelance producer of films and TVs
Christy	F	30–39	Freelance costume designer of films
York	M	18–29	Full-time animator of advertisements and social media content
Noah	M	30–39	Freelance actor in TV programmes, advertisements, and short films
Rookie	M	30–39	Freelance assistant director of films
Yvonne	M	18–29	Owner of a production company and producer of films
Yannis	F	30–39	Full-time employed producer of films
Yuen	M	30–39	Freelance assistant director of films
Tony	M	30–39	Freelance gaffer and post-production specialists in advertisements, short films, and TV programmes
Rosie	F	30–39	Full-time employed director and producer of online videos, music videos, and social media content
Louis	M	30–39	Owner of a production company
Anna	F	30–39	Freelance assistant director of films
Kenneth	M	18–29	Owner of a production company and producer of films
Marcus	M	40–49	Freelance fight choreographer of films and TV programmes
Tiffany	F	30–39	Owner of a production company and costume designer of films
Mia	M	30–39	Freelance actor in films and advertisements
Yvette	F	40–49	Owner of a company of make-up artists and a freelance make-up artist of TV programmes, advertisements, and short films
Dave	M	60–69	Senior producer and distributor

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