Slash youth in China: From precarious strugglers to successful exemplars

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Abstract
Slash has become a new phenomenon and practice as a growing number of youth, no longer in long-term employment with clear future security, create a contingent combination of careers. Its recent prevalence in China marks a visible consequence of the national restructuring policy of labor flexibilization over the past decades. Dismantling of the historical norm of full employment, encouragement of flexible digital economy, short-life expectancy of new businesses, and generalized insecurity due to intense competition at individual level, are the major factors contributing to the emergence and expansion of slash youth. Based on empirical and ethnographic evidences, this article identifies the complexity, diversity, and creativity embodied in individual slash experiences, suggesting that slash youth are stratified and they demonstrate differentiated ability to translate uncertainties into opportunities under the condition of individualization. This article is part of the special issue Creative Labour in East Asia.

Keywords
Creativity, employment, flexibilization, individualization, labor, slash youth

Introduction
We are living in a world of uncertainty and unpredictability. This unpredictability also makes up our contemporary laboring situation: career is becoming shifting. Instead of sticking to “one job at one time,” a growing number of young people choose to pursue multiple careers at the same time. They are popularly tagged as “slash youth.”

Slash, first coined in the United States by Marci Alboher (2007) to capture the emerging working style of the millennials, has become a growing phenomenon across the globe in the recent decade. Slash implies working across differences, which leads to a mixture, a hybridity in one’s
creative composition of his or her career. In China, the term slash came in to vogue in 2016 and since then it had become a popular phenomenon among young people. According to a survey of 1988 people aged between 18 and 35, conducted in 2017 by China Youth Daily’s Social Investigation Center, 52.3% of respondents were found to be acquainted with the term slash youth, 11.1% identified themselves as slash youth, and 46.3% aspired to become slash youth.\(^1\) Although slash youth marks a significant facet of youth employment in China, little attention has been paid to address this issue. This research aims to fill this gap by investigating the experience of slash youth in China.

The main argument is that the rise of slash youth in China represents the state-market-media construction of a social group that operates as a creative proponent of labor flexibilization, which blurs the fact that slash youth are differentiated in their reflexive ability to adapt to increasingly institutionalized flexibility and individualism on the basis of stratified socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. The article is organized into four sections. The first section provides a brief review of literature on the conception of slash youth and the methods used in this research. Section “The concept of slash youth” deals with the structural condition of employment flexibilization and the specific political-economic context in China. Section “The making of slash youth in China,” drawing upon empirical and ethnographic evidence, constructs four categories of slash youth on the basis of their differentiated narratives. The final section discusses the major findings and the theoretical implications of slash youth.

**The concept of slash youth**

Slash youth is a social and symbolic construction (Du, 2017), representing youth groups with two or more concurrent careers and having hyphenated professional identities (Reeder, 2012). As a nascent and relatively unexplored concept, mainly traced to media representations, slash youth is commonly constructed as an occupational identity. Being positive by default, it connotes a perception that some young people live a successful, dynamic, and adventurous life by the acquisition of material possessions and in pursuit of creativity and self-fulfillment; the slash youth has the ability to develop multiple professional skill packages and to balance diverse passions (Zhu & Cai, 2019). Slash youth is described as “an attitude toward life” (Q. Li et al., 2019), under the rubric of “independence, self-discipline, confidence, strong core competitiveness, entrepreneurial mindset, and experienced skill in new media” (Ren, 2019). However, slash youth is not an internally homogeneous group; most prominently, geographical, demographical, educational, and motivational differences underlie its compositional heterogeneity (Zhu & Cai, 2019, p. 152). While slash youth in China mostly pertains to generations born after 1980 (Huang, 2017a), some scholars identify those who are born after 1985 (Q. Li et al., 2019). A quantitative study on slash youth has collected data from the respondents aged between 18 and 44 (Cao & Luo, 2018).

In studies of slash youth in China (Ren, 2019) and slash career in Brazil (Azevedo 2014), the notion of slash is discussed primarily from two perspectives on careers: boundaryless career and protean career. The boundaryless career, as is espoused by Arthur and his associates (1996; Arthur, 1994), refers to a career unfolding beyond physical as well as psychological boundaries. It emphasizes employment mobility across the boundaries of different employers and of organizational hierarchical reporting and advancement principles; it is, as well, sustained by external, personal reasons and information (Arthur, 1994, p. 296). Introduced by Hall (1976), the protean career has been characterized as an orientation in which career development is managed by the person rather
than organizations; the core values are freedom and growth, and the main success criteria are subjective. In short, the protean career reflects a more self-directed and value-driven mindset about career (Briscoe & Hall, 2006). Slash youth, as is discussed in the literature, combines all of the potential of boundaryless career and protean career: physically and psychologically boundaryless in pursuit of personally meaningful goals (Du, 2017; Q. Li et al., 2019; Ren, 2019).

In China, slash youth is also defined in relation to specific sociopolitical context. Officially, its emergence has been seen as a “positive result” of the booming cluster of Internet-based business structured by the state policy of innovation, entrepreneurship, and creativity which creates a host of new commercial avenues and new types of employment, especially for unemployed young graduates. Obviously, Chinese literature on the subject traces the link between slash youth and the context of mass entrepreneurship and innovation, technological innovation, and digital economy promoted by state policy initiatives (Du, 2017; Q. Li et al., 2019; Zhu, 2019). It is argued that conducting productive activities through digital channels is a prominent characteristic of slash youth in China (Xie & Lv, 2019).

It is important to distinguish slash youth from job-hoppers, multipotentialities, moonlighters, and multiple job holding. While job-hopper indicates people who experience frequent movement from one job to another but with only one job at one time (Du, 2017; Malute, 2012), slash youth implies simultaneity in career development. Multipotentialite stems from multipotentiality, a psychological theme mostly discussed in literature on career choice of the gifted individuals (Achter et al., 1996; Rysiew et al., 1999), which usually describes people with multiple patterns of specific competences and multiple interests. Becoming slash youth can be one approach to realize multipotentialities, but it is not always so. While not all multipotentialites are slash youth, since they may choose to develop one career only and the plurality of their potentials and interests is not necessarily visible, not all the slash youth have multiple careers by choice. Besides, slash youth always implies an element of financial necessity (Zhu, 2019), which is not an essential feature of multipotentialites.

Moonlighters refer to dual-job holding people that have a primary job in formal sectors and at the same time engage in the informal economic activities as a complementary job (Averett, 2001; Timothy & Nkwama, 2017). Essentially, slash youth suggests career parallelism, which means balancing and sharing commitment among different careers rather than hierarchizing careers with primary and secondary engagement (Kirton, 2006, p. 50). Finally, multiple job holding (MJH) is defined as working for different organizations as an employee, or having more than one paid job as an employee while also being self-employed (Bouwhuis et al., 2017). The content of the work can be practically similar (Azevedo, 2014) or different (Bouwhuis et al., 2017), but the typical aim of MJH is to increase individual employability. In the case of slash youth, the content can be related but not the same. Moreover, slash youth challenge conventional style of laboring which is highly “compartmentalized” by the wage-labor economy (Alboher, 2007; Harvey & Krohn-Hansen, 2018). In addition, for slash youth, their loyalty is not paid to organizations but to one’s own careers (Du, 2017, p. 79).

With all the overlap, interconnectedness, and differences between concepts, and the specific context in China, in this article, while maintaining that slash youth is an evolving concept, I use the term slash youth to refer to young people born after 1980 with two or more different careers concurrently. The slash youth has more or less equal subjective commitment to each career in pursuit of specific values and personally defined success primarily through Internet-mediated networks and infrastructures.
Research methods

This exploratory study adopted the qualitative approach to collect data of the experiences of being slash youth in China through semi-structured interviews and observations. In-depth interviews were conducted in 2019 with 18 respondents, belonging to different age groups (between 27 and 37 years) living in diverse locations (Beijing (first-tier city), Wuhan (new-first-tier city), Taiyuan (lower second-tier city), Guilin (third-tier city), and Jiexiu (third-fourth-tier city)). These respondents had different educational backgrounds (High School Graduates (22.2%), Bachelors (33.3%), Masters (33.3%), and PhDs (11.2%)) and varied income levels (ranging from 30,000 to 1,000,000 Yuan per annum). These interviews were supplemented by observations of the daily life of some respondents and informal interactions with them.

The making of slash youth in China

Structural conditions: employment flexibilization

The national experience of flexibilization in China is closely intertwined with the recipe of development. Marked as pragmatic and gradualist, the pro-flexibilization reform of “untying (song-bang)” commune labor and economy on a private basis throughout the 1980s has generated various new labor institutions and workplaces especially in private sectors (Yan, 2010). The burgeoning of individual enterprises (getihu) in urban economy has largely reshaped the form of urban employment in China. During the planning era, full employment was only for those who were selected by the state, which was closely associated with the complete employment security together with the whole set of benefits covering almost all the aspects of livelihoods regardless of labor’s and enterprises’ performance (Saha, 2006, pp. 183–184). On the contrary, the post-reform era has experienced the rise of small-scale commerce in urban area which legitimated the employment status of those previously excluded by the state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and absorbed a large number of labor working in trading small commodities (Yan, 2010, pp. 495–496). The quick expansion of small private business has generated massive informal labor markets and produced rapid creation of jobs in cities (Zhou, 2013). This phase of limited flexibilization without privatization of SOEs has created a dual-track employment in state and non-state sectors, which largely helped solve the problem of rising unemployment and declining economic growth (Yan, 2010, p. 496).

Further reform on flexibilization was carried out during the 1990s. Since late 1980s, the government started to dismantle state assignment of jobs to labor and gradually turned to market-oriented employment by contract, by individual and by agencies (Davis, 1999; Yueh, 2004). The year of 1992 marked the end of the “iron rice bowl” when official statements made it legal for SOEs to freely hire and fire workers. The following Labor Act 1994 further promoted flexibilization by implementing labor contract that permitted enterprises to dismiss workers based on “competence” and “performance.”

There is an overall agreement on the expansion of informal employment as the main channel to mitigate the stress from mass layoffs after 1995, the vast majority of which were from SOEs. From 1996 to 2004, there was a tremendous decrease in formal employment with the total number of 66.53 million people, where the layoffs constituted 76.2% (Hu & Zhao, 2006, p. 113). During the same period, there was an increase of 108.29 million people employed in informal sectors. Drawing on the calculation from Hu and Zhao (2006), and Zhou (2013) based on data from Chinese Statistical Yearbooks, the share of informal employment has risen from 19.7% in 1995 to 60.4% in
2008, showing that informal employment has changed from supplementary to dominant form of urban employment. The trend of flexibilization is also reflected in government documents. In the 10th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development, 2001, “flexible employment” first officially appeared. Three years later, State Council Information Office (SCIO) highly valued the significance of flexible employment in promoting economic restructuring in the White Paper.

After 13 years of labor flexibilization, The Labor Contract Law of People’s Republic of China (LCLPRC) 2007 (Revised) (The Central People’s Government of the People’s Republic of China, 2007) was aimed at pursuing stabilization of labor markets and formalization of employment relationship by strict and explicit requirement of signing written contracts in response to the growing labor unrest due to the lack of protection (Kroncke, 2016). However, it was noticeable that overuse and abuse of labor subcontracting became a widespread phenomenon under the mask of rising numbers of formalistic employment with the implementation of the new Law (Gallagher et al., 2015; K. Li, 2017). In 2011, estimated 37 million workers (13.1% of urban employees) were subcontracted (All-China Federation of Trade Unions, 2012). Enterprises that had benefited from employment flexibility in deepening financialization started to fire regular employees at massive scale and turned to aggressively hiring contingent labor as an alternative (K. Li, 2017, p. 150).

While the National People’s Congress revised the new Law in 2012 with the specific theme to restrict the overuse of dispatched or subcontracted labor, in 2016, the focus was explicitly redirected toward the priority to promote further flexibilization. Minister of Finance Lou Jiwei gave a speech on the Chinese Economists 50 Forum, pointing out that the revised Law provided insufficient protection for enterprises and rigidified the labor market due to the major focus on wage-labor and the lack of consideration of reallocating labor at market level. The following 13th Five-year Plan for Economic and Social Development then suggested giving greater support to flexible employment and self-reliant employment. In today’s China, while stabilizing labor market and ensuring full employment is still of prominent significance, stability of employment has largely been reduced.

Political-economic context in China

Liquid times: “we are living in a rapidly changing society.” Since the late 1980s, contemporary age has been characterized by a series of sociological studies as “liquid times” (Bauman, 2007) and “risk society” (Beck, 1992) with pervasive “anxiety” (Giddens, 1990), where people are dislocated and disembedded from previous stable social structure and can hardly find “solid” institutions to “relocate” as their long-term frame of reference for social practices.

One significant shift in the occupational system during the passage to “liquid” society is the erosion of standardization. Employment in China even before 2000 was largely standardized in its fixed categories of labor, contract, payment, working site and hours, and so on, as well as of work and non-work, formal and informal employment (Beck, 1992, p. 142; Liu, 2009). The coming wave of flexibilization witnessed a profound change in this system. The dismantling of the historical norm of full employment, the geographical diffusion of labor and working locations, and the pluralization of employment and unemployment, all contribute to an emerging regime of a fluid, mixed, and ambiguous system of employment. In LCLPRC (Revised) 2007, a redefined legal category of “worker dispatch” was made, which legitimated the separation of labor and person when the company who “use” their labor is different from the company with which they sign the contract (Huang, 2017b).
The normalization of dispatched labor is one salient example of fluid employment that has blurred the previously solid boundary and opposition between standardized and non-standardized jobs, mixing plural forms of employment into general underemployment. While it raised the rate of employment and reduced the long-term unemployment, it also produced an increasingly precarious labor market (Shen & Zhang, 2011).

**Industrial restructuring:** “the new era.” Since President Xi Jinping stated that China was entering into the phase of New Normal, innovation has become a major concern of policy and social organization. In the Report on the Work of the Government 2019, Premier Li Keqiang stated that there was an average of over 18,000 new businesses opening daily with more than 100 million total market entities. Innovation as the new driver of growth and rapid structural change is largely fostered by Internet Plus Initiative. Apart from the implementation of Broadband Strategy and New Hardware Project, government has launched many pilot programs of crowdfunding and given support on Internet startups. According to the State Council, the most prominent marker of thriving new economy-digital economy, has contributed 22.58 trillion Yuan in 2016, comprising more than 30% of GDP in the same year.

The encouragement of new economy, particularly digital economy, is another significant factor that helps transform the major pattern of employment from relatively stable labor relation between working people and company to multiple, flexible service relation. The Internet Plus Initiative as a national strategy is the core factor to develop new forms of employment, especially the mode of “platform plus individual (pingtai jia geren),” the main characteristics of which are “flexible employment relationship, fragmented working contents, elastic way of working, and Internet-based startups.” It fosters the growth of a multiplex regime of employment with diminishing boundaries between different positions.

**Short-time expectation of singular employment:** “shuffling, and reshuffling.” In China, new areas of employment spring up like mushrooms, but at the same time a host of commercials have only a short period of growth and withered into the soil of innovation, where there is a whole new wave of businesses burgeoning and flowering in a second. New Internet-based business, compared to traditional, standardized business, are much more agile and flexible, whose expansion can be explosive. In its fever, the rapidly overgrown branches of business generate a large demand on labor supply in a short time. However, recruited workers assembled by companies into casual positions in accordance with expansion would soon become a burden to be cast off during the phase of shrinking or avalanche. It becomes a general picture of how a pluralized flexible labor reserve serves the fluid market.

Companies are expected to manage risks and provide stability; however, they are now the main sources of uncertainty for their employees. The short life expectancy of a vast number of new businesses makes it a rare experience of sticking to one position in one company. Seeing from the other side, full dependence on one kind of employment is risky, because it means that one is tied to the floating market competition, which makes it even more difficult to project himself or herself into the future. “Lineal expectation would not work any more,” said Fang, 32 years, PhD/online writer/freelance dubber in Guilin.

**Generalized insecurity:** “the reality is that stability is a fragile privilege.” Permanent temporality due to non-standardization and casualization has three implications: first, permanent unemployment is
declining; second, stability is detached from employment; third, it incorporates constant dislocation. In this sense, it would be misleading to adopt unemployment rate as the sole indicator to describe current situation of labor. In fact, labor is becoming floating and everyone is touched by it. “I know I’m employed, but I also know that I’m not irreplaceable. I’m just in a job, and I never really have it,” said Sun, 29 years, sales manager/basketball coach in Beijing.

Competition does not just occur between companies; instead, it has been stretched to individual level. One of the most visible examples is overtime working. In recent years, the working culture of “996” (working from 9 am to 9 pm for 6 days a week) has been widely adopted by various industries, especially the high-tech and Internet companies.¹⁰ As an open secret, the routinization of unpaid overtime working is largely supported and accelerated by strategies of intensifying the sense of insecurity and boosting competition through management mechanisms of key performance indicator (KPI) evaluation in which any kind of “inefficiency” would discount one’s assessment, which legitimates pay-cuts or weed-out of “the bottom” by the employer based not only on the absolute score of the form, but also on the relative performance between employees.

Recent heated debate started from an online campaign on 27 March 2019 at GitHub. The name of the campaign, 996.icu, also became a slogan referring to “work by 996, sick in ICU.” Until now, there are 218,877 users supporting the protest and marking “star” of the domain. According to data analysis by Alfred_Lab, most of the protesters are youth employees with working experience from 0–5 years. Facing the collective dissent, Liu Qiangdong, the founder of JD.com Inc, responded on WeChat Moment that “Jingdong never required a 996 schedule,” “but ‘slackers’ are not my ‘brothers’ (JD employees),” and “every JDer should have the desire to push to the limit.” Jack Ma, the founder of Alibaba, stirred a wider discontent by saying that working by 996 is a “blessing.” The performative power of language decorates the unpaid overtime working as the work ethic of “diligence” and transforms it into a moral code, which becomes an inevitable requirement for employees who are threatened by the fear of being left behind by their colleagues.

Precarious working condition fostered by intense competition generates not just objective but also subjective insecurity among young people. The relative competition between employees for security leads to “a struggle for all against all” that “destroys all the values of solidarity” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 84).

The complex world of slash youth: differentiated categories and experiences

The experience of slash youth could probably be seen as one of the most vivid facets of youth employment under the condition of increasingly institutionalized individualism, that is, individualization. Individualization, theorized by Ulrich Beck (2002, pp. 4–5), refers to a structural change in which identity is no longer a given fact but a task, a compulsion that is fragmented into options and individuals are compelled to actively plan for and perform actions on the making of this task. Consequently, traditional workplace, occupations, and other previous social communities are losing their significance in identity formation. Personal modes of work and life are at the center: individuals are increasingly becoming reflexive and “self-referential” in the sense that their identities, as a “non-linear, open-ended, highly ambivalent, ongoing process” (Beck, 2002, p. xxii), have to be constantly maintained and renewed by themselves (Beck, 2002, pp. 32–35). Such tendencies toward declining structural forms of determination are often understood as manifesting the ever-increasing power of agency “unleashed” from rule-bound Fordist structure (Lash, 1994).
There is, however, a large body of literature that challenges the thesis of individualization. Most notable are from the theorists of “traditional forms of industrial society” with great emphasis on the social category of class. Goldthorpe (2002) observes that transformation of work and labor market has not removed class character regarding inequality; on the contrary, class structure-based on the differentiation of employment relations still persists at the central place. Similarly, drawing upon the work of Bourdieu, Atkinson (2010, p. 427) argues that despite the destruction of stability and the increase in flexibility in the labor market, the force of class (objectified and embodied capital) continues to differentiate employment experiences. Brannen and Nilsen (2005) find it problematic that the grand narrative of individualization thesis rests primarily upon the “decontextualized nature” of arguments and exhibits a great rhetorical power. This qualitative study of young people’s view about future, work, and family in Norway and Britain has lent support to the argument that traditional categories of social class and gender still plays an important role in shaping life course trajectories. According to these scholars, the individualization theory downplays structural aspects in the agency-structure dynamic.

There are also scholars seeking to mitigate the agency-structure “schism” by introducing the question of stratification to individualization. For instance, Nollmann and Strasser (2007) point out that individualization and class are not as opposite as they appear to be, by emphasizing that “human behavior is more or less individualized within social structures” (p. 96). Individuals with higher class positions, they argue, tend to see themselves more as individualized decision makers (Nollmann and Strasser, 2007, p. 94). Rasborg (2017), following a series of efforts to combine Beck and Bourdieu to construct the idea of “reflexive habitus,” point out that reflexivity is embedded in the patterns of inequality, which means that individualization is differentiated, or stratified, according to the differences in possession of economic, social, and cultural capital. By the same token, Lobato et al. (2018) observe qualitative correlation between class and degree of individualization, proposing to understand individualization as a process through which class differences are manifested.

The qualitative data collected in this research was categorized according to the substantial variances of individual material conditions and subjective aspects of their self-identification as slash youth. Within each category there is dispersion. The empirical findings supported the hypothesis of stratified individualization and confirmed that slash youth deal with individualization differently according to their socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds.

**Successful exemplars**

By categorizing some of the informants as successful exemplars, the author refers to those who are relatively rich in economic capital (as represented by indicators such as income, housing property, stocks, and wealth management products) and cultural capital (measured by educational credentials) and have experienced obvious upward social mobility through venturing onto slash career. Slash youth of this category showed not only career parallelism, but also balanced advancement of personal interests development and ability of moneymaking. This is a group of people who were able to embrace flexibility imposed by the increasingly institutionalized individualism.

Liu is a 27-year-old slash youth in the WeMedia sector of some renown. At the end of his every online publication, Liu claims his identities as writer/individual management specialist/special guest writer in 36Kr and LinkedIn/columnist at MoMo. Liu got his Master’s degree from Peking University in 2016. After graduation, he was employed as a journalist in the party committee paper of Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC). This job allowed him to be registered with a
Beijing hukou; according to the signed contract, he had to work for CAAC for 6 years. He started feeling frustrated when he found that the money he got from this job could hardly sustain his living in Beijing:

Can you imagine? My first-month income was 800 Yuan in 2016. In contrast, the monthly rent of a small guest bedroom, in which I was living, was more than 3000 Yuan. It perplexed me, making me to question what life was really about. Even after working there for two years, my monthly income was only 4900 Yuan.

As a response to the hardship, Liu was able to mobilize a variety of resources to embark upon the adventure of becoming a slash youth and to make the middle-class imaginary of expressing creativity through work into reality. His family provided him with 200,000 Yuan to pay for the penalty of breaking the contract and quitting the job at CAAC. His extensive social network with his supervisor and classmates in Peking University and friends from other universities also brought him the opportunities to expanding the reader base of his newly established WeChat Official Account. With the stable material as well as emotional support he got from his connections, Liu had a smooth start of his slash life. The regional advantage from studying and living in Beijing enabled him to catch up with the new wave of popularity monetization on digital platforms that eventually improved his quality of life. Now he earns around 1,000,000 Yuan in a year. In spite of his claiming that his experience is not a free choice, the reality is that he was enabled to choose between a stable formal job with relatively high level of respect and assumed competence and slash careers supported by his well-educated friends and affluent family for his own benefit to “live a meaningful life.” He told the author that people should “actively adapt themselves to the trend for continuous self-improvement,” and that thinking reflexively really matters:

Let me tell you why I quit. First and foremost, the wage is far too low. Everyone in my family has told me it would secure me because it was stable. But what can such a low payment secure in Beijing? The bottom level of living. Second, it is actually not stable at all. All the public institutions are in transition. Before 2020 CAAC will be transformed into a self-operated, self-financed and self-sustained state-owned enterprise, and it will also follow the contracted employment directed by its market performance. Third, speaking of market, print media is not favored by capital. The state scheduled CAAC with an annual increase of its turnover of 10%. How can it be possible? What is more, the US-China trading war has restricted our import of printing paper, and the regulation on environmental protection largely raises the price of domestic printing paper. These are not the “fatal strike.” Since 2018, CAAC started to allow the use of mobile devices during flight. With a mobile phone in hands, who will read our newspaper? Let alone to get the newspaper on flight, we have to pay more than 4 million Yuan to the airline company . . .

Ran, 30 years, is a photographer and a geomancy specialist who graduated from the faculty of digital media technology at a University in Shanxi in 2013. Before the outset of his slash careers, he had a chance to get a formal job in a locally based state-owned mining bureau. Considering that this stable life could be “constraining and boring in regard to the moderate income and repetitive content of working,” he rejected this offer in pursuit of, in his words, “freedom and self-fulfillment.” Together with his wife, Yun, a 30-year-old freelance cartoonist/flower arrangement teacher, Ran started a home photography studio with the startup capital they received from their marriage. He also decided to study geomancy with a master in Chengdu, saying that, “I know this sounds crazy. But it is a dream worth a try. After all, I’m a weirdo and I’m happy about that.” However, the start of his slash careers was not smooth. Ran said,
Here people are so traditional in the sense that they prefer one-station service at, say, a traditional wedding planning company, where photographers are asked to take out-of-date pictures. I say that we will make a meaningful difference, but no one listen.

With a shift of target audience to overseas graduates, he was eventually able to activate their professional individuality. Ran attributed his success to his “keen market sense,” but he also admitted that the reason that he experienced low level of insecurity when trying to turning flexibility into opportunity was that the cost of trial and error was digested by his family. Moreover, with the support from his family, he actively translated his parents’ contacts—middle-class families with a child having overseas experiences—into material success.

**Practical planners**

Unlike successful exemplars, practical planners can mobilize limited economic and social capital. They may have a sense of investment, knowing how to get the best return on their cultural capital. But without a more extensive support from the outset, they have to compromise both on their personal pursuit and regular income. Of this group of slash youth, the consequence of precariousness due to limited resources is a constant concern.

Yu, a 29-year-old cost engineer/beauty salon owner/WeChat businesswoman, expressed her concern in her narrative of individuality and aspirations. Yu said,

> For my parents, that I have a life-long job in a state-owned enterprise is perfect. But for me, a life that I can foresee its end is horrible, especially when it has nothing to do with my own interests and desires.

From 2014 to 2016, the sprawling WeChat business involved tens of millions of practitioners in China. Yu also became a district agent with more than 50 subordinate agents. Her income from WeChat business exceeded her formal salary in 2016.

> “I started to feel that working in my danwei is worthless in every sense. No holiday, meager income, complicated interpersonal relations . . . It’s not like my father’s time when everyone recognizes you and respects you as an engineer in a state-owned enterprise. Now I’m nobody in and outside of my danwei . . . every aspect of life now needs money . . . anything that cannot be turned into money is impractical,” said Yu, “but I can’t quit. Otherwise my parents would go crazy. Besides, although I earn too little, I really benefited from the housing provident fund associated with this job . . . 4000 Yuan per month is no small amount of money.”

Yu’s narrative of her professional individuality is always concomitant with her awareness to “make the best use of what I have- time, money, etc.” In contrast to Ran, Yu was not able to draw on the support from her family. “My parents, as well as my husband, think that ‘doing facial massage for others’ and ‘selling cheap clothes to your WeChat friends’ are just goofing around,” said Yu, “they are saying ‘how can you say that as your career?’ But they don’t care how self-fulfilled I can be from its advancement.”

Similarly, practical concerns about how to build slash careers without enough initial amount of capital played a determining role in constraining Fang’s professional individuality. With unstable income from freelance translation and dubbing, she described herself as vulnerable. But her narrative also displayed her confidence in her ability to translate her interests into professional competences, “If only I get the chance,” said Fang. Without a financial cushion from family, Fang displayed a reflexive awareness of individual responsibility as a “dilemma”: on one hand, she
wanted a relatively stable job to prevent her from downward mobility during uncertain crisis; on the other hand, she expressed her aspiration for flexible careers of meaningfulness and creativity. She said happily, “You know what? I took on a task from one American company. There will be twenty books published with my name on the cover page! Children will be learning Chinese by listening to my voice!” In spite of the dilemma, her future plan was clear: after completing her PhD, she would find a job at a not-so-competitive University, which provides her with a stable income, basic security, as well as enough time for her slash identity building as a “knowledgeable sociologist who is an artistic voice actor.”

“\(I\)” definers

Slash youth who are “\(I\)” definers exhibited higher level of “free agency” than successful exemplars and practical planners-free in the sense that explicitly, they put individuality ahead of material conditions of existence and were less constrained by the perception of the success of others.

“There is no role model for me to define myself,” said Wan, 32 years old, who is an investment manager/oriental dance teacher in Wuhan, “I don’t want to be a ‘decent manager’ or a ‘skillful teacher.’ I want to be me, and I want to like myself more.” This finding, to some extent, deviates from the argument of some culturalist class theorists that class origin is a major point of reference from which individual identity takes shape (Mendez, 2008), Wan’s narrative showed both an awareness of the power of classification and an overt resistance to it, to any rhetoric attempts to establish “normalness” and create cultural and symbolic boundaries between Us and Them. “I don’t feel that working is a compulsion. Instead, any kind of work is a way to express one’s self. I work because I want to create something, meaningful or not . . . Slash youth? I don’t know whether I am one of them. In fact, people are so different. Friends said to me that they are doing multiple jobs due to anxiety, and they need to have multiple resources of income to mitigate this anxiety and live up to the expectations of their parents and society. But for me, I work for fun and for self-fulfillment,” said Wan, “and I like myself so much in my parallel careers! Clearly, my diverse identities make me feel my charm: as an investment manager, I’m calm, sophisticated, determined, and rational; when I turn into a dance teacher, I’m affectionate, tender, enchanting, and sentimental.”

For Wan, to establish individuality is not to deny one’s origin and the collective identification. “I don’t want to be a socially-classified middle-class salariat like my parents, but I don’t either have to assert that I’m different by downplaying their values. I don’t have to be the same as or different from anyone else,” said Wan. Talking about her family, Wan thought that she was lucky to have parents who were willing to let her take full responsibility of herself without giving her pressure on any of her choices. In fact, her parents, like other middle-class parents, considered having a formal job in a state-owned enterprise, or in governmental or public institutions is the socially accepted best way in the face of generalized insecurity. But Wan perceived their viewpoint as a “suggestion” rather than a “regulation”: “Money and social status is important, but it is external.” What should not be misunderstood is that Wan’s individuality is not purely free from any social relationships. She also mentioned that she has many friends thinking alike. Peer influences may also play a role in shaping her subjective explanatory habitus.

Precarious strugglers

This group of slash youth is characterized by a strong tendency of drawing a demarcating line between material pursuit and creative aspirations and taking the former over the latter, for the
reason that they are less capable of undertaking the experiments in individualization due to lack of economic, cultural, and social capitals. These constraints are translated into their obliged life choices and subjective perceptions.

Hong, 32 years, an eloquent class teacher in a private preschool in Jiexiu, is also a freelance master of the ceremony (MC) in Yonghong, a local wedding design and planning company. Born in a working-class family, she has been largely disadvantaged in labor market with a high-school degree. While she used to be a contractual host in Jiexiu TV station for a street interview program due to her nice appearance and lucid expression, housework required by her parents-in-law after marriage and birth of child put an end to it. Her husband, Yang, is a college graduate working in the copy shop owned by his parents as an outdoor painter. Yang also works as a sand painting teacher on weekends. The overall monthly income of 2800 Yuan drives him to become a DiDi driver in the evening. Hong and Yang have a self-contradictory identification with the group of slash youth. “We’re slash family!” Hong said with a sigh,

I’m kidding. Slash youth is a title for those elites, not for people like us. Although we’re doing the same thing, their jobs are “higher”- like entrepreneurs and start-up business owners . . . they have diplomas, working in big cities or like you, abroad, and they know everything new. We have nothing, just being hustle for life, for money, and for my son . . . it’s not that we choose a slash life, but slash chooses us.

Likely, what prompted Bing, a 30-year-old nurse/mobile game streamer/online shop owner, to venture onto slash careers was the socially conditioned inclinations toward material necessities. She described her feeling as “haunted” by the acute imperative to earn more money. Graduated from a higher vocational school, Bing started her career as a nurse at a local public hospital. Without a degree from university, she was not able to get a formal contract. Consequently, her income was very low (1200 Yuan per month). “I don’t have any other professional skills . . . When I decided to start slash careers, I was attracted by stories of ordinary people becoming cyberstars at Bilibili, Douyu, or TikTok China. I thought that if I could combine what I was interested in and what could provide me with income, it would be great. Then I became a game streamer of Honor of Kings. But I didn’t make much money from it,” said Bing, “I should probably spend more time on figuring out how to get a full contract at the hospital instead.”

Rather than the message of autonomy and creativity conveyed by media on slash youth, Hong and Yang describe themselves as “unentitled.” For them, autonomy is reserved for the owner of money and social status. Recognizing slash as a creative employment form, this form, however, did not directly change their life chances. “It’s just formality; those who are destined to succeed win, and those lose in other fields lose here,” said Hong.

Conclusion

These narratives representing differentiated slash categories and experiences lead to some broad conclusions. First, slash youth reflects an uneasy tension between flexibilization-as-innovation with opportunities to create on the basis of new technologies and platforms and flexibilization-as-precaritization with the logic of state absenteeism. Second, the slash individuality involves both initiation and compliance, which incorporates both activity and passivity. Third, while in one sense, slash is imposed by a national and global schema of labor non-standardization and generalized informality, in another, it draws on the ethos of flexibility to formulate young people’s aspiration and creativity. Thus, it is both desired and undesired, intended and unintended. Finally, and
more significantly, while it is argued that insecurity and precarity are the key features of flexibility (Fevre, 2007), this research has found that individuals with access to better past and present material conditions, exhibit higher level of reflexivity which gets translated into relatively coherent and successful slash identities, with high adaptability and flexibility in employment. Moreover, individuals with higher level of education and more extensive social resources tend to be more resilient in a precarious life. The differentiated experiences of slash youth are largely situated in and dependent on their class origins, which further substantiates the thesis of stratified individualization.

**Funding**

The author(s) received financial support for the research from China Scholarship Council (CSC).

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**Notes**

1. Sun and Wu (2017).
2. The State Council Information Office (SCIO) P.R.C (2016).
3. Labor Act P.R.C (1994).
4. Zhu (2001).
5. SCIO (2004).
6. Lou (2016).
7. ChinaDaily (2017).
8. The State Council (2018).
9. Huang (2018).
10. Ren (2019).
11. Informants’ names in this article are made up in order to protect their privacy.

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