1. Introduction

In recent years, cultural production and labour have been the subject of considerable research (see, among others, Terranova 2004; Banks 2010; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010; Kennedy 2010). Internet workers, like workers in the cultural industries, carry out meaningful activities such as programming and coding, designing and promoting, and also some unskilled administrative work. Internet workers form an increasingly significant proportion of workers in China. The number of Chinese internet workers had increased to 12.3 million by the end of 2009 (Liaoning Research Institute of Industry and Information Sciences 2013). In the field of creative labour or cultural production, considerable attention has been paid to internet workers (Gill 2002; Kennedy 2012). However, relatively little research has addressed the working life of these workers, and little research adopts a Marxist approach towards this group of workers, such as their social class location and their working processes.

This chapter thus attempts to fill this gap by adopting a neo-Marxist approach to explore the labour problem in Chinese internet industries. It begins by clarifying the class analysis approach towards this group of workers – a neo-Marxist approach that locates the internet workers in the lower middle-class position, and explores the specific exploitation model in the Chinese context. This chapter then concludes that the Chinese model of exploitation is the mechanism that results in internet workers’ poor working conditions.
2. The class analysis approach

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

Wright (2009) aims to move beyond the traditional Marxist approach to class analysis by developing a detailed typology of class locations. He identifies certain key aspects that constitute the new class structure of his model: the mechanism of exploitation and domination in the traditional Marxist approach; the mechanisms that sustain the privileges of advantaged classes in the Weberian approach; and the individuals’ class locations in the stratification approach. He argues that a completely elaborated class analysis needs to combine the “macro-model of conflict and transformation with the macro-micro, multi-level model of class processes and individual lives” (p. 111; see Figure 5.1). Put in another way, Wright argues that individuals’ lives depend not only on the micro-model of attributes and material life conditions, but also on the macro-model of social conflicts and transformations where their lives take place.

Wright’s work (2009) then suggests a necessity to analyse class locations by locating individuals’ lived experiences, such as “class background”, in the context of social conflicts and transformations. It is no longer the problem of individuals who fill these positions; rather, it is important to recognize the mechanisms shaping the privilege of certain class positions. As Wright points out, the middle-class problem is