

Chinese Hip-Hop: The Use of Diss, and the Representing of Youth Culture

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Abstract

This essay takes a Chinese music TV programme *Zhongguo You Xiha* (The Rap of China) to discuss the Hip-Hop music in China. It states that the rising of the Hip-Hop in China is actually a cross-cultural phenomenon. On the one side, Chinese Hip-Hop keeps the idea of expression as its core philosophy. The sustainable economic development and the open-door policy in China, to some extent, have created an expansion of personal freedom in socio-economic life, allowing Chinese artists to express their feelings, emotions, attitudes, and, to make their voices heard. On the other side of the coin, Chinese rapping or dancing acts as a multicultural phenomenon, mixed with both the Eastern (Japanese and Korean) and the Western (American) styles. It appears as a new form of musical expression, functioning as a pop culture rather than a political one. Furthermore, Chinese Hip-Hop has been particularly attracted to Chinese youth. In other words, Chinese young rappers have potentially adopted Hip-Hop as a youth culture to fulfill their personal interests and needs.

Keywords

Hip-Hop, Rapper, *The Rap of China*, Diss, Youth Culture

1. Introduction

Since the late 1990s, more and more Chinese youngsters have learnt about the Hip-Hop culture through TV and radio programmes, starting to listen and even to practice rap music at a local level. The diffusion of rap music in China is part of a far-reaching phenomenon of this practice originally taking place in the USA, though, as Tony Mitchell argues:

[I]t is becoming increasingly necessary to look outside the USA to countries such as France, England, Germany, Italy, and Japan, where strong local

currents of hip-hop indigenization have taken place. (Mitchell, 2001, p.3)
[1]

This paper focuses on a Chinese music programme *Zhongguo You Xiha* (The Rap of China), which started in June 2017. I ask, what are the differences between the American rap and the Chinese one? And, are there any aspects that I can call the Chinese rappers as “local” or “specific”?

To answer these questions, I will use an ethno-musicological approach, by observing and analysing the Chinese rappers on the programme. I will provide specific examples to examine my points of view in the following sections, starting with the two parts’ description of theoretical framework. The first part takes globalisation of culture as both homogeneity and heterogeneity, in which music can be created to share cultural difference, cultural competence and cultural hybridity. The second part discusses the possibility of the shifted relations between cultural homogeneity and cultural heterogeneity, by taking Hip-Hop as an example. The originality of the Hip-Hop in the US and the development of the Hip-Hop in China are quite different, though, the target of promotion Hip-Hop culture will never be changed. The next section takes *The Rap of China* to see what is the character of this music type performed in China, and where is the indigeneity shown in the programme? The last section is given to conclusion. Specifically, I concentrate my attention on how the translation of this musical genre from the USA to China modified it in the language, the subjects of the lyrics, the performance context and the musical characteristics.

2. Globalization, Cultural Imperialism and the Music

The received view about the globalization is one where the entire world has been imitating in the image of Western or American (Elteren, 2003: 171) [2]. The popularity of Big Macs, iPhones, Hollywood and Pops are signs, and are imputed by media, cinema and music, though, the development of the Internet has created a transnational space to connect netizens worldwide. This has recalled the notion of “cultural imperialism” (Golding and Parris, 1997) [3], which is firmly rooted in a political-economy perspective, considered as Western countries actively export cultural products or socio-cultural values on the developing world.

In fact, the globalization of culture has become a conceptual magnet attracting researches from a variety of interdisciplinary formations such as anthropology, media studies, sociology and arts. Although music is one of the engines of cultural globalization, the relationship between music and the globalization of culture is difficult to state.

On one hand, as one perspective on the globalization of culture views that music contributes to the homogenization of cultural differences across the planet (Barker, 2000) [4]. Taking MTV for example, it might be naive to argue that the West beats or defeats the East, this is partially because, the dynamic and resilient nature of oriental culture has been inserted in the music, their ability can be used

to negotiate with Western imports, to some extent.

On the other hand, globalization can also be seen as cultural hybridity or hybridization. The interface of globalization generates hybrid product of mixed cultural forms (Kraidy, 1999) [5]. This phenomenon in turn gives localization an adaptive or mixing process opposed to cultural imperialism (García-Canclini, 1995) [6]. Take the popularity of Chinese music in Chinese society as an example, the three main features can be those, mixing the elite form of opera with pops, adding foreign contexts to the original lyrics, and the mixture of several music elements in one song, all of which may integrate Chinese music into an impure genre.

3. Cross-Cultural Perspective, Cultural Translation and the Hip-Hop

It can be seen from the above argument, that globalization involves a constant mix of the global and the local. Indeed, global cultural forms have been re-worked as localized and indigenized (Appadurai, 1996) [7]. Take music or music-making for instance, genres such as Hip-Hop seem to globalize well. In other words, the power of globalization has made the Western sounds and dancing travel easier, and be learnt faster, thus, created diverse versions of the Hip-Hop.

When employing the notion of “cross culture” in this paper, I’d like to include “cultural imitation” but rather address “cultural translation”. The former, as mentioned in the previous section, partially relates to cultural flows through where artists are following a path that may lead to cultural homogeneity (González, 2016, p.63) [8]. In this way the term “global” has been accepted by a cultural receiving, and the culture itself in turn becomes part of the global (Fabiatti, Malghetti and Matera, 2002, p. 93) [9]. In this sense, the Hip-Hop may not be the culture of a whole new but often refers to multiracial generations who want to find their ways for expression and music-making.

However, does this “imitation” include any local effect? If we read the phenomenon of “the rap outside the USA”, take Japanese rapper YDizzy for example, with his focus on melodic rap, he has achieved wide attention. Another example is given to South Korean rap. One of the popular groups is Paloalto. Its music keeps melodic, pretty and simple styles, with a Korean language providing a perfect fit for Hip-Hop.

These examples remind me to think about the concept of “cultural translation”. The term “translation” here, as Ray Chow defines:

... is the process in which the “native” should let the foreign affect, or infect itself, and vice versa. (Chow, 1995, p.189) [10]

In this sense, cultural translation may produce meanings that remain invisible or unspeakable in the original. For instance, the rap culture is various including Jamaican culture, blues, and street speech for either spiritual or commercial purpose, aiming to encourage the youth to gather and express themselves.

Such an expression originally contains provocative attitude, with a group of

young people and their social reactions against things such as injustice, drugs and unemployment in the United States. Earlier rappers, to some extent, help learning of the civic and social rights.

However, such an aggressive attitude is less followed by the European artists, as Marie-Agnes Beau argues. Rappers deliver more positive message such as social responsibility, culture and peace.

[T]he *search for quality in the form, as well as in the content*, seems to be one of the main skill of European rap: there is no gangsta rap in Europe, and pure hard-core seems to become old fashioned and too far from a more nuanced reality. (Beau, 1999) [11]

Thus, the social characteristics of the Hip-Hop culture can be met on both national and international levels. Rappers from different countries have been given international attractions, due to their individual styles. The next two sections will provide a short introduction of the rap in the USA and China. But I want to highlight that whatever differences between the two regions, the Hip-Hop is probably one of the most dynamic music in art industry.

3.1. The History of the Rap in the US

Hip-Hop music is basically considered to have been pioneered in New York in earlier 1970s. Besides its breakdancing as a style specific to Hip-Hop culture, the rappers of African-Americans produced rhymes based on their personal experiences and stories and have shaped a distinctive black youth culture. Rap's history is briefly in relation to the African oral tradition, meaning that singers are speaking rather than singing the words to the songs. Take earlier rappers for instance, they voiced their frustrations of a society in which urban blacks were oppressed, powerless, and underrepresented (Flores, 2012) [12], as Becky Blanchard notes:

[I]n the United States, rappers created songs that, through performance and records, spread news of their daily lives, dreams, and discontents outside of their immediate neighbourhoods. (1999)¹

To some extent, earlier rappers in the United States were viewed as the voice of poor, urban African-American youth, whose lives were generally dismissed or misrepresented by the mainstream media. They are keepers of contemporary African-American working-class history and concerns.

Despite its power potential to address social issues, rap also has an impact on politics, and acted as a unifying voice for its audience. The official political rap could be heard in a song "The Message", starting to have more of a concept. Additionally, rap shares its roots with an ideology of rebellion². It has gradually de-

¹See Blanchard, B. (1999). The Social Significance of Hip-Hop Culture. Available from http://web.stanford.edu/class/e297c/poverty_prejudice/mediarace/socalsignificance.htm, accessed on [21/02/2018].

²See Kaelin, B. (1997). Political Rap: The Civil Rights Movement of the 1990's. Available from www.oocities.org/rjk153/polirap.html. Accessed on [22/02/2018].

veloped as a form of rebelling against the government in particular. Songs like “Don’t Believe the Hype” and “Rebel without a Pause” explored the rage and anger that African Americans had against the government and the constant inequality they faced every day of their lives.

Nowadays Hip-Hop music no longer solely represents the voice of black community as we all know, instead, it may represent all those who partake in or promote Hip-Hop culture whoever black or white, male or female, rich or poor, American or non-American.

3.2. The Rise of the Rap in China

Hip-Hop is known as *Xi Ha* in Chinese, and the rap takes the role as *Shuo Chang* (speak sing). For decades in China, Hip-Hop was nothing but embraced by a small group of fans. Jay Chou, however, a singer from Taiwan, led to his Chinese style rap in late 1990s. Jay’s success probably is due to his productive songs and refreshingly different from the usual pop music at that period. To some extent, Jay has influenced generations of Chinese youth, who are starting to think about how to make their claims about Chinese style music.

It was after 2000 that the Hip-Hop has gradually gained more ground in mainland China. Chinese Hip-Hop, I argue, raises the question of cultural synchronization. With synchronization I refer to the increased speed with which Chinese musicians linking up with their constitutive outside, meaning the direct impacts from the West, and Japan or Korea.

However, such “synchronization” is worthy of debating. First, it is no doubt that Chinese Hip-Hop starts in the level of manipulating a global shape such as music-making, local language, and battling styles. Second, if tagging “political rebellion” on the Hip-Hop, then to what extent can the Chinese one be possibly followed by its original label? Third, because of the differentiation of cultural roots in both America and China, it won’t be surprised that Hip-Hop, at some point, becomes one particular type of Chinese culture in contemporary society. If so, what is it? In the following section, I will take the 2017 music show *Zhongguo You Xiha* (The Rap of China) to answer the questions.

4. Characteristics of the Rap of China

The Rap of China appeared online in 2017. It was a reality show launched by iQiyi³ and was a first Hip-Hop musical competition in China, attracting 2.7 billion viewers in that summer. It was also one of the most expensive reality shows, with an investment of 200 million Yuan. Nearly 700 rappers auditioned before the show officially started.

In order to analyse the programme in detail, I use ethno-musicological observations including performance contexts, interactions between judges and contestants, and interviews behind the scene to show what aspects do the Chinese rappers share with the global modes, and what are the local features of them?

³See www.iqiyi.com. iQiyi is a video platform and was established in 2010.

4.1. Chinese Mandarin Must Be the Only Language for Performance

If we look at the implications of linguistic choices in popular music, then the question of language choice probably is a crucial part of musical experience. Berger and Carroll note:

[N]ative languages or regional dialects may be the iconic of the colonized people or marginalized groups that speak them; songs set in such languages may function as a powerful affirmation of identity for their singer or listeners. (2003, p.vix) [13]

Observing the linguistic choices made by rappers on the *Rap of China*, I find a truly restrictive reality. Languages other than Chinese are used by some rappers who, for some reasons, have been living or are currently living abroad. This is the case of Al Rocco, who wrote and sang in English. However, he was out of the game in the first round. The choice of using Chinese is explained by judges in various ways. For Zhang Zhenyue⁴ Chinese rap has the role of bringing young people and the language together. “His rap is all in English, but now we are in China”.

The case of Al Rocco implicates that Chinese in China places an emphasis above other categorical order of languages, and by its very existence. This implication argues that, in a social context as that of contemporary China, rapping in Chinese is a desired and conscious choice, a choice that is always highlighted.

Al Rocco described his linguistic choice as a natural event after the game: “I’m learning... and I’ve tried to sing a bit Chinese in my music, but it doesn’t fit the show... at the end of it, it’s not a real hip-hop”. Al Rocco’s words hint that *the Rap of China* released an act of resistance to the global-based rap.

4.2. Lyrics: For Diss or for Self-Expression?

For the purpose of self-expression in Hip-Hop, lyrics not only claim the viewpoint of the narrator, but also present the artist’s attitude, individualism, and critique (Costello and Wallace, 2009 [14]; Fabbri, 1982 [15]). In this sense, the analysis of the content of the lyrics can be an ideal method to find out the complex relationship between mainstream Hip-Hop and its specificities. In the *Rap of China*, the competition shows a frequent “diss” as well. Ma Siwei, a member of Higher Brother (from Chendu) and Gai (from Chongqing) are both from Sichuan province in China. During their battles, they used homophonic ways to diss each other. For instance, Ma wrote a song *Gai Ai* (You Deserve It), using Chendu dialect to imply his satirical attitude towards Gai’s music, and Gai sang a *Zhan Ma Dao* (The Knife to Kill the Horse) to fight back, by using his Chongqing dialect.

Besides a dialectic diss, in Gai’s “*Only Listen to My Songs*”, he also attacked those who he considered as fake rappers by singing the following:

⁴Zhang Zhenyue, a Taiwanese popular singer. He is one of the judges of *the Rap of China* programme.

*I won't let myself to listen to them
 Be quiet but do something to satisfy my ears
 It seems that everybody can be a rapper
 Too many fakers
 I just listen to my songs, only listen to my songs
 And my songs are perfect.*

There are numerous types of lyrics in *the Rap of China* that, like Gai and Ma Siwei, present a theme as similar as “self-expression” in the programme, no matter expressing with dialects or expressing with lyric styles.

Other types of the lyric such as “story-telling,” the traditions and the music of being, take Xiao Qinglong and Hui Zi, their co-worked “*Time*” was questioned about its melody sounding like an ordinary pop music, and lacked of the function of the diss by netizens. In the interview afterwards, Hui Zi said:

Hip-Hop musicians are never treated as artists. People always think we don't do music-making. Pop stars, rockers go to reality show and their music has gained lots of attention. But when we used some of their elements to make our music, we are dissed as not creative, or not very hip-hop (Wang, 2017)⁵

As these examples show, the lyrics appeared in *the Rap of China*, they may alternate with the typical thematic stereotypes of the rap. By this I mean, rhymes may not have a huge differentiation to compare with the West, while the use of diss mostly showed a battling attitude among the contestants. In other words, Chinese rappers are neither aggressive nor rebellious in the same orientation; therefore, netizens and musicians define *the Rap of China* as a pure entertainment programme.

4.3. Freestyle: The Fandom of Kris Wu

Kris Wu, 27, is one of the most popular stars across all Chinese youth. His glittering career is reflected in his pretty boyband member, box-office hits, chart-topping EPs and ambassador deals with luxury global brands. The popularity of Kris Wu lies not only in the implications of him as a youth idol, and he is keen to be known as an all-round Asian star with a specific edge in Hip-Hop music.

Despite Wu's strong following in China, he is set to win global fans with his music and influence. Being one of the judges in *the Rap of China*, Wu had just one type of question for the contestants: “You got a freestyle?” “Please give me a freestyle”. And, “Still no freestyle?” Therefore, many audiences questioned his credentials for judging a Hip-Hop programme.

However, “Can you freestyle?” quickly became a buzzword outside the *Rap of China*, taking off at supersonic speed, with searches for the term skyrocketing

⁵See Wang, Gaifan (21/07/2017). Surprise: There Is Such a Heavy Diss Chain in *the Rap of China*. Available from pe of www.51555.net/artile/22409. Accessed on [07/03/2018].

immediately following the show's debut. Netizens began to follow Kris Wu and used "free style" widely on social media such as WeChat and Sina Weibo. Though Wu's Hip-Hop status was challenged, it didn't stop fans from following Kris's every move, from his distinctive fashion wardrobe to his hairstyle. Wu's unexpected yet smooth transition from teen pop idol to Chinese Hip-Hop advocate owes its success to the 2017 reality show. It is to this fandom I argue that *the Rap of China* and the music performed by Chinese young rappers have an intention for Chinese young audiences.

5. Conclusions

According to Tony Mitchell, the diverse global musical and social dynamics have developed in establishing their other roots, involving modalities of indigenization and syncretism of a US musical and cultural idiom (2001, p. 33). Hip-Hop, like many other imported cultures, is slowing by bumping and grinding its way through China, propagated by a keen interest in localizing this uniquely American art form. Even though Chinese Hip-Hop cannot be completely considered as a group of street people who are likely to promote self-expression through dance, they indeed, allowed their voices to be heard via music and fashion wear on the stage.

The Rap of China leads me to reflect on how Chinese rappers related to the concepts such as aggressive, the value of language, regional pride and the sense of belonging. However, the translation of these concepts from their assumed origins signifies a moment in which they are "modified" by the Chinese contexts. On *the Rap of China*, every rapper, it seems, came in with pride in their work, by declaring that their only aim is to win. The "diss" phenomena, I argue, may consider as similar as "ego", expressing contestants' own ideas and aggressive attitude, but it is given an idea that such expression in the show is mostly for fun, fame and public attention, and is hard to reach to political rebellion.

Additionally, Chinese and local dialects used as privileged languages imply that rap, or Chinese rappers are accustomed to staying in a localized cultural group in general; though this may lead to their far-reaching a transnational Hip-Hop community, the need to connote it locally, having emphasized the local history, traditions and cultural roots is in particular.

Furthermore, as I argued in the above section, fandom is the site for young people (Grossberg, 1992) [16] in China. In other words, judges and those rising rappers have, to some extent, succeeded in satisfying the desires of young audiences. Through their passion following Kris Wu, their expressions and comments on rappers, their support or diss on the programme, young fans turned out to be a powerful social force accelerating the popularity of *the Rap of China*.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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