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"Global Goals, Local Actions: Looking Back and Moving Forward 2021"

What is Real: Authenticity and Localization in Chinese Rap Music

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Abstract

This study explores the changes in “keeping it real”, the spiritual connotation of hip-hop culture during the localization of Chinese rap music. Data were collected through the following two qualitative research methods. Firstly, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 rappers and producers in Changsha, Chengdu, and Chongqing cities. Secondly, ten livehouse performances were attended and observed. The main research findings suggest that the interpretation of the connotation of “real” is closely related to a specific living context and that reflection on the understanding of “keeping it real” cannot be proceeded from a single or essentialist perspective. In the process of localization of rap music in China, the transformation in the connotation of “real” is the result of not only the hybridization of Chinese and western cultures, but also the power discourse struggle under the interference of commercial capital.

Keywords: Chinese rap music; authenticity; localization

Introduction

In the late 20th century and early 21st century, the hip-hop cultural trend spread to Europe, Asia, and other parts of the world, including mainland China with the tide of globalization and the burgeoning growth of online media. However, after hip-hop music was introduced to China in the 1980s, it has always remained in a state of underground development without supervision, with little chance of making it onto domestic mainstream media platforms. It wasn't until 2017 that large domestic online platforms launched



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competitive reality shows featuring rap music and street dance and dedicated themselves to creating China's own hip-hop culture that hip-hop culture, which had been lurking underground for more than two decades, was brought to the public's attention. This is also the first time that hip-hop culture has been widely disseminated in major domestic mainstream media and social media platforms.

It is only since then that domestic scholars have begun to focus on the study of Chinese rap music. An overview of domestic scholars' research on Chinese rap music and hip-hop culture shows that they mainly focused on the variety show "The Rap of China", which tried to enhance the popularity of rap music in public. The topics also focused on the influence of commercial capital on rap music, the difference between "underground rap" and popular rap, localized evolution of rap music, and the impact of institutional culture on hip-hop music in China. However, the spiritual connotation of "keeping it real" in rap music and hip-hop culture has been largely ignored. Both researchers and hip-hop fans seem to tacitly approve the understanding of the meaning of "authenticity" in European and American hip-hop without exploring whether the connotations apply to the domestic setting, let alone scrutinizing the changes in the meaning of "authenticity". The exploration of authenticity or "keeping it real" is an integral part of the analysis of global hip-hop culture (Forman, 2013, p. 65).

Indeed, the exploration of the authenticity of the hip-hop culture, or rather the ideology of "keeping it real", plays a critical role in understanding how hip-hop music, as a global culture, integrates and interacts with each local culture. Western scholars have interpreted "keeping it real" in different ways. American scholar Perry (2004) argued that "keeping it real" has many different meanings, ranging from "celebrating the social effects of urban decay and poverty" to "paranoid vigilance in protecting one's dignity" and from "a validating device for reacting to the removal of rap music from the organic relationships of the community that created it" to "an explicit ideological stance against selling one's soul to the demons of capitalism or assimilation." Morgan (2005: 211) noted that "hip-hop's mantra of 'keeping it real' represents a quest for an ever-changing blend and interface of art, politics, performance, and personal responsibility that reflect all aspects of the youth experience."

While Perry interpreted the changing meaning of the spirit of "authenticity" in hip-hop in the context of American culture, Morgan argued that the meaning of "authenticity" is not static, but rather a consensus on a matter or attitude in different contexts in different places. Then, what are the new changes in the meaning of the word "authenticity" in the development of Chinese hip-hop music?



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Objective

This study attempts to explain the changes in the meaning of the hip-hop spirit of “keeping it real” in the process of localizing Chinese hip-hop music

Research Scope

1. 20 hip-hop music lovers from the three inland cities of China were randomly interviewed in this research, including local rappers and music producers. The second method of the study is the personal participation in and observing the livehouse hip-hop music performances or contests in three cities.

The three selected cities are typical and representative. Enjoying a certain level of openness, inclusiveness, and compatibility, they have the window for accepting the external culture of the west, and the conservatism of an inland city that harbors a rich local culture of distinctive Chinese features. They are located in the same central and southwestern region, and their history has given them similar cultural attributes. Also, they are all key cultural and entertainment cities with the breeding ground for nourishing hip-hop culture. Therefore, they have been chosen as the research areas.

2. Research time: Half a year from June to December 2020

Methodology

1. This research adopted a qualitative approach combining semi-open interviews with the observation method. Interviewees were 20 underground rappers and producers from three cities. The research objective is to understand the mantra of “keeping it real” through interviewing them and further ask in what aspects the “authenticity” of Chinese local hip-hop music is reflected.

In addition to the profile of interviewees, the researcher has prepared two categories of questions:

1. In what aspects is the “authenticity” of Chinese hip-hop music reflected?
2. What is the impact exerted by commerce, media, and domestic ideology on the transformation of the connotations of “authenticity”?

The second research method is the participant observation method. The participant observation method is the most direct and convenient way to study rap music in China. It can provide a more contemporary snapshot of the Chinese hip-hop performance scene. Participant observation was mainly conducted on the liveliest livehouses in the three cities regarded as the best places to be exposed to local hip-hop culture. The researcher spent half a year attending hip-hop performances, freestyle performances, singers’ art



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concerts, and music festivals. All these field visits have enabled the author to have the opportunity to experience hip-hop culture in China and figure out the difference between underground hip-hop performances and on-screen hip-hop with pop elements. The difference in the connotations of “authenticity” is also reflected in the different performance scenarios and the performers’ perceptions of their own identities.

Findings/Results

1. What is the “authenticity” in the mind of rappers?

Most interviewees believe that “authenticity” is closely linked to “localization”. Interviewees have all expressed that the first rule of “keeping it real” is not to blindly copy the American hip-hop culture and it’s all about telling your own stories in the local language.

“Chinese hip-hop would certainly not follow the pattern of black hip-hop music. Black Americans in the ghetto see guns and drugs every day, which is “real” in their eyes. The Chinese young people of this era are singing songs concerning another “real”. We encounter some troubles and trifles in life. As far as I am concerned, the spirit of hip-hop is to express some of the things I’ve experienced, some of the emotions, and some of the moods with words and music.” (Interviewee Lull, 2020/10/23)

“Well, we should have our own way of rapping, we don’t want to sound like Americans. I like to try different arrangements myself and add some elements of Chinese folk music, and I think that’s what makes us different from American hip-hop music.” (Interviewee J-ass, 2020/12/01)

Hip-hop music forces us to face up to some conflicting discourses of authenticity and localism. Some insist that black American hip-hop is the only authentic style and that other forms of hip-hop are non-authentic deviations, while others believe that being authentic means sticking to “one’s own” cultural and linguistic traditions.

Producer and rapper Kc explained: “We don’t want to promote anything unethical. It’s a principle I set for myself. For me, if I find out that smoking and drinking are morally wrong, then I won’t put them in my songs.” (2020/12/14)

Mr. Bass, an independent musician, made a similar point: “If I suddenly start rapping about cocaine or rock and roll bling, it’s not real. The rap has to be about something that I’ve experienced. What I mean is we don’t rap about violence. We’re talking about China-related issues.” (2020/12/23)

Through the above statements, it can be seen that rap ethnic discrimination in mainland China does make any sense (until now, the ethnic appeal of rock culture discussed



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by Banovic (2003) has not existed for hip-hop) and neither is there any problem with drug use. Gangsta Rap, which is associated with violence in urban ghettos, is apparently absent from Chinese hip-hop culture, just as gender discrimination and materialism are far less obvious in western hip-hop culture. As a result, Chinese hip-hop music selects more mundane topics closer to the streets rather than street life. Imitating and expressing defiance is not necessarily authentic. Instead, expressing the life and emotions around us is real.

On top of that, the rappers expressed that being “real” is about remaining true to who they are.

“Basically, I will try to align my music with my life. For a long time, my life has followed the direction of my music because I try to keep it as real as possible. I want my music to accurately represent the world I live in.” (Interviewee Qian, 2020/11/17)

“In this era, the “real” that I believe in is self. Although my mom and dad don’t support my music work, as an adult, I think we should have our own opinions and attitudes and not be randomly swayed or pretend to do the right thing.” (Interviewee Lull, 2020/12/01)

This viewpoint resonates emotionally with most young people. To many in the hip-hop community, this is an integral part of shaping one’s real self. Most members of the hip-hop community believe that “authenticity” means staying true to oneself, emphasizing individualistic values, trying to avoid following popular trends, and being extremely defensive about crowd mentality.

2. Underground rap music vs. popular rap music: the progression of underground hip-hop subculture

Before the variety show “The Rap of China” brought the hip-hop culture into the public vision in 2017, hip-hop music was mainly performed and transmitted within the scope of “underground”. There is no official explanation for the term “underground”. As far as the author of the paper is concerned, it is a niche and is idiosyncratic and distinctive in personality and has not yet been integrated into the mainstream culture. “Underground” hip-hop is contrary to “pop” and “mainstream” music and refers to a niche, non-mainstream subculture that is not well known and recognized by the general public.

“The Rap of China” enabled a group of rappers to surface from underground, allowing hip-hop music to take one step into the circle of pop music. However, along with this came the debate over whether the spirit of “authenticity” of underground hip-hop music had been lost. Since hip-hop music entered mainland China, hip-hop musicians have been following hip-hop music’s spirit of “keeping it real”. Even if hip-hop rappers could



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hardly make much money and earn any reputation, “authentically being themselves” provided the spiritual pillar to quite a few independent musicians. Perhaps because some rappers gained a lot of exposure and fame after participating in variety shows, this has prompted the musicians still struggling in the underground music community. At the very beginning of the broadcasting of “The Rap of China”, the hip-hop circle launched a struggle to maintain the purity of underground hip-hop that has lasted till now. The focus of this struggle is whether the hip-hop music coerced by both commercialization and domestic ideology can maintain its “authenticity”.

Quite a few interviewees believe that only underground hip-hop is the “real” hip-hop. They openly claim that they will not watch the performances of so-called “idol rappers” created by entertainment companies, disdaining them as commercially-controlled “fakers who can only read from a script written in advance” (interviewee Lucky, 2020/11/27).

“The current hip-hop music is not the hip-hop music back then (referring to the 1990s). Hip-hop now is pop hip-hop, and it’s more about pleasing the listeners... most young Chinese people are just looking for superficial culture, and very few people are really studying the hip-hop spirit.” (Interviewee Bass, 2020/12/23)

Some interviewees held the opposite view.

“Hip-hop music is not like rock music, an old school (Note: conservative school) that is hush-hush about the commercial operation and feels embarrassed to talk about earning money as one of the traditional old schools of music. It has a clear attitude right from the start and you can find such lyrics as wanting money, nice cars, and women.” Lull was not worried that capital will not turn hip-hop music into something beyond recognition. “Such music can be mature enough to play commercial games with capital and the introduction of more capital and commercial operation will steer such music toward more positive and sounder development.” (2020/10/23)

The interviewees’ words have revealed their inner conflicts and contradictions. On the one hand, they disdain the rap of pop singers, believing that they are poorly skilled and go against the rap spirit of “keeping it real”. On the other hand, as they are in financial straits, they are struggling to get out of this pandemonium to earn more money through staging commercial performances and participating in reality shows to lead a better life and rise to eminence.

On top of that, the loss of discourse rights in the process of moving from a commercialized hip-hop subculture to the mainstream culture has left hip-hop musicians in a state of ambivalence.

On the one hand, they complain about the loss of their “freedom of expression”



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and their inability to express their “real selves” to their heart’s content.

“The popularization of hip-hop music has given us more opportunities to stage performance, which is also sometimes irritating. Several songs of mine have been put offline from NetEase Cloud (Note: a domestic music broadcasting platform in China) on the ground that the lyrics contain sensitive words and inappropriate content, which is truly confusing for me. Some words that seem common for me are not allowed to appear in lyrics. Therefore, I have to replace all the potentially sensitive words, thus changing the whole song beyond recognition. I don’t know if the audience can still understand what I want to express in the songs.” (Interviewee Qian, 2020/11/17)

On the other hand, some are sober enough to realize that this is a necessary compromise made by hip-hop music to move closer to the mainstream culture.

“When you want your songs to be heard by more people, you have to learn to stop being hard-edged and putting away the underground hostility to accept being constrained by restrictions and fetters as well as the monitoring of mainstream values.” (Interviewee Yu, 2020/11/19)

Interviewees expressed their anxiety about the commercialization and mainstreaming of hip-hop music. There is indeed a line of demarcation between “underground hip-hop” and “above-ground hip-hop,” a line that rappers are eager to cross to enjoy the fame and fortune that commercialization brings, while spurning the fact that commercialization has deprived them of the right to speak freely, thus inflicting a shock on their concept of “keeping it real”. Paradoxically, they not only scorn but also yearn for it. However, they all seem to have ignored one question: Who has created the concept that underground music is the “authentic” hip-hop music?

Conclusion and Discussion

This paper draws the following conclusions from the research on the local transformation of the connotations of “authenticity” in Chinese hip-hop music:

1. There are no irreconcilable conflicts between “authenticity” and “localism” and the reconciler is the hybrid cultural perspective of fusion. The notion of hybridity reminds us that when we try to understand the connotations of hip-hop’s “keeping it real”, we need to refer to the local context because rap and hip-hop music has been re-inscribed with local cultural connotations, thus boosting the localized transformation in its significance. Since hip-hop music entered mainland China in the 1990s, it has evolved till now. Its key cultural elements including race, rebellion, and class have been stripped away from the genre as a result of its hybridity with the local culture. On the one hand, the spread of hip-hop music



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culture requires us to adhere to certain principles, which implies authenticity. On the other hand, the process of localization makes this expression dependent on the local context, language, and culture as well as the understanding of authenticity. Only by considering the role of hip-hop music in participating in local cultural life can we truly understand the significance of its “authenticity”.

2. For the hip-hop community as “insiders,” “keeping it real” is about telling what is happening around you and pouring out your inner thoughts. From the birth of black hip-hop in the Bronx ghetto to the worldwide popularity of hip-hop culture, money, women, drugs, pleasure, class, and other scenes that took place in the American historical and cultural scenes in the 1970s have gradually become symbolic expressions and materials of hip-hop culture because of the changing times. These symbols have a strong symbolic meaning, representing the pursuit and desire of the poor class to get out of poverty, success, materialism, and a straightforward description of life. But at the same time, we should also realize that these symbols are only a part of hip-hop music culture. Such “authenticity” should not just be superficial and remain in its literal sense. It can neither represent the whole expression and deep-rooted deconstruction of hip-hop music. Nor can it be copied to other countries, untouched. The “resistance” embodied by rappers through music is more of a “confrontation” for survival, life, prejudice, and concept. The “authenticity” of “keeping it real” also means facing oneself and changes candidly and clinging to one’s own personal concept.

3. In both the United States and China, the clash between hip-hop and mainstream culture is a historical necessity. For China, this collision is even more complicated. Hip-hop culture is completely borrowed from a foreign country. It is hard to say that there is a similar “street culture” in China. It seems that it does not have any breeding ground for growth, let alone inflict a shock on the mainstream culture. However, amid the game between hip-hop and mainstream culture, some savvy businessmen have seen the business opportunities. The conflict between the two is triggered by the understanding of “authenticity”.

The conflict first occurred between underground hip-hop musicians called “aborigines” and pop musicians supported by large corporations. For example, in “The Rap of China”, underground hip-hop musicians represented by GAI believe that the music of idol singers is “fake”, their lyrics are crafted by others, and the content of their songs does not represent their real self. This contradiction also runs through the whole program and becomes a dramatic conflict.

There is an implied value judgment: Rappers believe that only underground hip-hop is real. This sounds somewhat plausible if we relate it to hip-hop’s street origins. But



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the question avoided here is: what does “real” mean? If “real” means that the lyrics can truly reflect one’s own life, then perhaps the slightly pretentious lyrics sung by pop singers can exactly reflect their slightly pretentious life as a result of being packaged. If they sing about street life, that would be “unreal”. If “real” means musically “pure,” that would be like “the pot calling the kettle black” considering that we are all Chinese starting out by imitating foreign music. If “real” refers to the courage to disclose the dark side of life, the dark side is only part of life at best. By creating a conflict between the “underground school” and “idol school”, the variety show has virtually generated knowledge about “being real”. Therefore, claiming to be “real” is nothing but an exclusive discourse hegemony, which does not contain any meaning, but is only valid in the struggle with others.

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