Blackness transmuted and sinified by way of rap music and hip-hop in the new China

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Abstract
I argue that rap music and hip-hop in contemporary China is evidence of the opening up of China’s real and symbolic borders, and that the adoption of hip-hop represents the elision and transmutability of its racial origins. This situation, where Chinese rappers and hip-hoppers explore the limitless potential of a Western and largely black genre, prevails in an environment intersecting with the desire to conform through self-censorship with the rigorous demands of the new Chinese nationalism. There is an ambivalence however as the Internet and access to technology enable rappers and their bloggers to freely engage in discussion around aesthetics and Chinese statism. The rapid growth of hip-hop (and reggae) in China moreover alludes to the increasing consumption of Western cultural forms regardless of racial associations and is a gesture which seems to deny the long history of black disavowal in China. On the other hand, the difference between the global hip-hop nation and the nationalism of the new China, which is negotiated on its own terms and in the face of ongoing authoritarianism, is the basis for a provocative argument, which complicates the dialogue of ethnic difference and cultural similitude. Based on fieldwork and virtual research undertaken among hip-hoppers and rappers in Shanghai and Beijing, this paper describes how the utterances and the rap music style and lyrical themes of crews such as Yin Ts’ang 010, and Dragon Tongue Squad, among others, articulate the processes identified above.

Keywords: rap; hip-hop; China; nationalism; blackness; yellowness.
Hip-hop initially advanced as a cultural movement integral to the black experience in the USA (Rose 1994), and one where globally connected performance practices began to emerge and dominate its articulation (Condry 2006 and Durand 2003). These days, hip-hop studies emanating from disparate parts of the world emphasise the attraction young people have towards the values and performance aspects of hip-hop so that their participation is not only informed by their social statuses but also by the possibility of excelling as performers and agents (Mitchell 1996 and Watkins 2004). In each location where it has taken root, ongoing studies of the movement have opened up new ways of exploring its multiple meanings and values, and although hip-hop appears fairly consistent in many locations by way of its performative aspects, there are distinct differences which render each presentation of the movement unique to its location. In this context, hip-hop in China ostensibly reflects the volatility and sameness of hip-hop everywhere else, but on the other hand, hip-hop in China is uniquely Chinese. The latter is manifested particularly through language, in a process where the language, following Potter (1995) and Alim (et al. 2009), is rendered spectacular and expressively performative. The other manifestation of the uniqueness of Chinese rap is the recurring utterance of their yellowness in terms of pigmentation and ethnicity. Hip-hoppers consider their perceived yellowness as an affirmation of ethnic pride, and this identification is evoked as a gesture which helps them recover from the damage caused by the brutal campaigns of European and Japanese military forces in previous centuries, and the embarrassing failure of state policies in previous decades. Their yellowness is moreover a means of inverting the negative stereotypes of Chinese people in much of the West (Huang 2010). One can argue that the presence of hip-hop is a sign of the opening up of China’s borders, and that the characteristics of Chinese hip-hop suggest either China’s entry into the Western reality of excessive consumption, or a local reality where the movement appeals because of its possibility for opposing what many insiders and Westerners consider an authoritarian state.

In attempting to understand hip-hop in China these elements may have some value, but given the length of this paper I focus on the background of hip-hop in China and will present more details in a future publication. For now, I shall argue that rap music and hip-hop in China are evidence of the opening up of China’s real and symbolic borders, and that the adoption of hip-hop represents the elision and transmutability of its racial origins. This situation, where Chinese rappers and hip-hoppers explore the limitless potential of a Western and originally black music genre, prevails in an environment indicating the rigorous demands of a renewed Chinese nationalism. After a long period of economic deprivation which continued until the 1980s, and the mobilization since the 1990s of a renewed Chineseness based on pride in yellowness and consumption, this form of nationalism celebrates China’s advance on many fronts. This paper focuses on the articulation of an originally black music culture in the context of China’s revised nationalism and the yellowness of hip-hop practitioners.
**Hip-hop, Blackness and China**

My initial experience of hip-hop, as a movement originating among black and disenfranchised youths in the West, had me question its appeal among Chinese youths. In China, there is a long and ongoing history of racial prejudice and my thought was that participation in the movement could signal an identification with the pleasures and political value of hip-hop. I had approached the research from a Western perspective, and given the experiences of the majority of Chinese youths, who feel left out of the dramatic changes taking place in Chinese culture and the economy, I presumed that Chinese hip-hoppers somehow identified with the black experience in the West. Their experience at this junction has to be viewed in the context of a people who had long been isolated from the West, and who had in previous centuries also experienced the effects of Western colonialism and severe oppression. In other words, if they were to identify with the anti-hegemonic struggle of black youths in the West, then it would be fitting that Chinese youths adopt some aspects of hip-hop in their everyday lives. On the other hand, the reality is that the growth of hip-hop in China is an indication of the increasing consumption of Western cultural forms regardless of racial associations, and in the case of hip-hop, the consumption of hip-hop forms seems to deny the long history of black disavowal in China. On closer study, however, I realized that the consumption of Western cultural forms challenges the possibility of transnational political solidarity, and that hip-hop is a sign of a Chinese modernity which unwittingly strengthens the global imaginary of hip-hop. The tension between the “universal hip-hop nation” and the nationalism of the new China thus presents itself as a provocative argument, which further complicates the dialogue of ethnic difference and cultural similitude.

**Hip-hop in context**

Among urbanized Chinese youths there is little patience with the state and the two seem to communicate past each other (Johnston 2010). Its jingoistic spirit notwithstanding, rap music is therefore potentially oppositional because popular culture in China has long been associated with an ideology in which the political interests of the Communist Party were emphasized. During the Maoist period (1949-1976), for instance, music in China was mostly limited to propaganda songs, but following Mao’s death in 1976, popular music became a driving force in the popular culture of China. After the austerity of the Cultural Revolution, the popular music scene in the 1980s was dominated by love songs, which were officially approved, and rock and heavy-metal bands which operated in the margins. Moreover, a music club culture emerged where Western musics such as punk and rock were enjoyed. These musics continue to flourishes because young people use clubs as a venue where they have fun with like-minded peers. Here there is another tension as for close to thirty years now, attempts to dictate the limits of popular culture are still made by the government, but its success is limited because the Internet has taken over as the primary forum through which music and news are shared and discussed with ever increasing enthusiasm (Tai 2006). Popular culture now is that which transpires...
through virtual networks, and underground music scenes, in addition to the formalized apparatuses of the state. A consequence of these developments is that while a “new” popular culture met some initial resistance in the 1980s and 1990s, it has completely replaced the “old” popular culture to become the dominant culture. This dominant culture is nearly on par with the capital driven entertainment industries of the West.

As far as music is concerned, hip-hop in China does not only represent change in the musical and cultural industries of society; it also follows on musical traditions unique to China. Hip-hop in China did not emerge in a vacuum but is believed to have antecedents in both traditional oral, poetic forms, and popular music from the West. Among these is *Xibeifeng* (Northwest song), as in the music of Cui Jian. This is the first indigenous, Western rock-influenced popular music style to emerge on the mainland since the beginning of the reform era in the 1980s. Another tradition is crosstalk, a verbal duel defined by its updated scripts and liberal use of contemporary slang. Another genre emerging in the 1980s is the prison song, a style initiated by Chi Zhiqiang, a famous actor who upon his release from jail set folk melodies from northeast China to lyrics that described his experience as an ex-convict. The important feature of these songs was the articulation of nonmainstream sentiments and worldviews. Another style of music is punk, which is regarded as a phase for cool, angry young people, who are disenchanted with the education system. These youths enjoy punk on the basis of its unconventionality, while at the same time it also appeals to youths who are able to afford the expenses of punk attire and punk paraphernalia (Baranovitch 2003, pp. 18-30).

**A brief history of rap in China**

Rap in China is believed to have made its debut after 1985 when the British group Wham had a concert in Beijing. Wham performed a rap song called “Wham rap! (Enjoy what you do?)” (1982), and a cassette of their recordings was widely copied and distributed in China. Dai Bing, in the 1980s, is considered the father of Chinese rap. He had been rapping since 1986 when he acquired R&B tunes from an African American friend. His career in rap music started in 1990, when he released his first English-language single, “Rap man”. Another rapper named Dou Wei made his debut in 1992. He was the lead singer for a popular hard-rock band called Black Leopard. On “It doesn’t matter” he reflects on the purposelessness that many young people felt (Kristof 1992).

True to the nature of the Chinese government’s goal to control every aspect of popular culture and social life, and following the growing appeal of Korean rap among Chinese youths, the state endeavoured to create a hip-hop entertainment industry in China. Hip-hop became the product of scientific planning, as agents of the state contributed to staging performances, and participants underwent tests rather than auditions. In 2000, state-run China Radio International collaborated with a South Korean music company to create a Chinese band that could exploit the success of Korean hip-hop in China. As found in most other aspects of the
entertainment industry in China, these performers were encouraged to copy. Other rap groups such as T.N.T., Tinkerbell and Annie performed songs that were a tribute to Beijing’s bid to host the 2008 Olympic Games (Rosenthal 2001). Thus rap’s first appearance in China affirmed rather than challenged the state’s authority.

The emergence of hip-hop in China, however, cannot only be attributed to state intervention. Rather, in keeping with my argument, newly arrived foreign sojourners from the American West, who realized the enormous potential for business in China, were instrumental in introducing hip-hop to an entertainment industry where the state did not have a presence. These sojourners took it upon themselves to introduce the fundamental values, skills, and performance techniques of hip-hop to a sector in society removed from the gaze of the state and its agents. Many of these foreigners organised themselves into crews and since the early 2000s the dominant hip-hop crew has been Yin Ts’ang (meaning “hidden”). This crew was established in Beijing in late 2000 and at the time the crew consisted of locals and foreigners. Yin Ts’ang dominated Beijing’s nightclub scene offering freestyle sessions, and they introduced break-dancing and turntabling lessons. In early 2001 they started writing songs but due to a lack of formal training in production techniques and a lack of qualified producers in Beijing the team had to learn how to create their own beats. In late 2003, Scream Records released their first CD called *Yin Ts’ang - For the people*, featuring the hit single “Welcome to Beijing” (Scream 2003). “Welcome to Beijing” was on the Top 20 charts for sixteen weeks. The song, an insider’s look at Beijing’s sights and sounds, has a catchy tune and combined Western and Chinese instruments. The song had a major impact on the underground music scene. It found its way into karaoke bars, the Internet and the playlist of a radio station in Beijing. Yin Ts’ang became the first official rap group to perform in Mandarin and English.

Yin Ts’ang faced numerous challenges, among which the question of self-censorship is reflective of the invasiveness of state policies. One of Yin Ts’ang’s members, Andreas Huang - aka Young Kin - says (Huang 2010) “Welcome to Beijing” had to be simple for it to receive radio play and media attention. Huang says that he saw the simplicity of the song as a stepping-stone towards success and approval. To avoid censorship problems they abandoned the idea of writing an album critical of the state. Most rap music in China of the early 2000s did not have a political agenda in any case because most rap fans did not understand the context of hip-hop culture and they could only emulate the posturing, style and attitude of popular hip-hop artists in the West. It was also difficult for Yin Ts’ang to be among the first hip-hoppers producing rap music because there was virtually no other rap in Mandarin which could be used as a template. The budget for the production of the album was restrictive and the crew did not want their album banned even before they had made an impression. No doubt, the release of the CD established Yin Ts’ang as leaders of the hip-hop movement in China.

By 2007, the hip-hop movement in China was considered enormous. And, as in other parts of the world, certain aspects of hip-hop culture have now made their way onto Chinese billboards and popular culture in general, as well as into Chinese theme songs and television advertising. Rap music is freely available on the Inter-
net through social networks and CDs are distributed for free or sold at nightclubs. There are regular breakdancing and emceeing competitions held in key provinces, and these culminate in national competitions held annually in either Shanghai or Beijing.

**Style is language**

As far as style is concerned, one of the key areas of interest is in the potential of the language to articulate creativity and innovation not only musically but also linguistically. One of the challenges faced by Chinese hip-hoppers is the language with its five tones. These tones will lead to confusion if used incorrectly and they are also a challenge to smooth rhythmic flows. The challenge is to have correct sound and tone rhyme. Yin Ts'ang member, Jeremy (Johnston 2010), says: “When we first started, people said, you can’t rap in Chinese, Chinese does not work for rap”. Jeremy has compiled what he considers a hip-hop dictionary, where he describes how the tones can be altered to produce various effects and in the process these words do not have to conform to the demands of conventional Mandarin. Using the words in this manner also prevents outsiders, including state officials, from understanding exactly what hip-hoppers are singing about.

**Conclusion**

Andreas Huang (2010) says Chinese rappers do not understand the allegorical meanings of ebonics in Western rap music. Moreover, many rappers do not identify with blackness. Rather, it is the sheer pleasure of breakdancing and emceeing which appeals to Chinese youths. One aspect they do have in common with the West is that they perform on the margins of a mainstream that threatens to dilute the impact of a music culture hip-hoppers identify as the “underground”. Competitions and performances are held on street corners at night, at derelict auditoria and nightclubs, offering Chinese youths the opportunity to explore their selfhoods through orality and their spectacular bodily involvement with one another. These performance spaces offer them release from the perceived authoritarianism of the state, and the social and economic challenges of a new China.

Moreover, the emergence of hip-hop in China strengthens the argument against essentialising blackness, or any other racial colour for that matter, and this subcultural movement and its performance render blackness an imaginary trope which no longer holds the significance it commanded in previous decades. In China, there appears to be conformity with the social conditions experienced by many marginalized youths around the world, regardless of colour, and its presence therefore calls to attention the free floating significance of blackness as a standard requirement for participation in hip-hop. Rap music in China calls into question the notion of rap music as a diasporic genre, and the music suggests the expiration of ethnic fixity. The radical nature of a genre initially associated with blackness has opened
up a space for the articulation of diverse musical and corporeal realities on distant shores.

**ENDNOTES**

1. This research was undertaken in 2010 and funded by the “University strategic research theme: China-West studies research grant”, at the University of Hong Kong. Data was obtained through interviews with hip-hoppers in Hong Kong, Beijing and Shanghai, observations of performances, and a review of appropriate literature in scholarly and online resources such as websites and blogs. I take this opportunity to thank the University of Hong Kong and the hip-hoppers.

2. I am aware that the issue of racial colour is potentially offensive but the notion of “yellowness” is subscribed to in many Chinese rap songs and in the utterances of informants. “Yellowness” has also been established for regular usage in scholarly literature, of which Andrew F. Jones’ (1992) book is an early example.

3. A case in point is the rock musician, Cui Jian, whose music is believed to have inspired the Tiananmen protests in 1990.

**REFERENCES**


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