

Rappers as Knights-Errant: Classic Allusions in the Mainstreaming of Chinese Rap

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Rappers as Knights Errant: Classic allusions in the mainstreaming of Chinese rap

Through our analysis of the performances, and corpus of lyrics produced on the Reality TV show *The Rap of China*, we investigate how discrete Chinese inflections refract globally resonant hip-hop themes such as representations of masculinity and loyalty. We identify how rappers use classical Chinese cultural templates, invoking the knights errant who populate the physical and ideational realm of *Jianghu* that underpins China's long tradition of folk tales, martial arts literature and film. The article explores how Chinese rappers invoke such templates to navigate the twin demands of authenticity and the political imperative of positive energy.

Keywords: hip-hop; rap; authenticity; localization; Jianghu; China

What happens when a subculture crosses over into politically circumscribed mainstream culture? How do artists strive for authenticity and make a meaningful cultural contribution when their music is decried as being at odds with local norms and tastes? These questions are prompted by the recent popularization of rap music in China via the hit Reality TV talent show *The Rap of China* (Zhongguo you xiha 中国有嘻哈). Funded and produced by the Chinese video platform *iQiyi* (爱奇艺), this repackaging of the South Korean taste-maker and talent incubator *Show Me The Money* (Hare and Baker 9), represented significant exposure for a genre that had existed for many years as an urban subculture with little mainstream impact. In commercial terms the show was a success, and it is now into its third season. However, it is the inaugural season that represents the more revealing case study on creative strategies in the Chinese context, because at the time there was little guidance on what was permissible. Since the state's censorship regime encourages circumspection by sketching deliberately vague guidelines enforced post-hoc (Stockmann 81), everything about the show's inaugural season was a "calculated risk" (Flew et al. 99). After the first season the state responded with clear guidance on acceptable content and numerous changes in production were made; the word "rap" was removed from the Chinese show title, performers were forced to cover up their tattoos, and adopted lyrics more actively supportive of the state. In short, much of the experimentation and boundary-testing that was possible during the first season has been replaced with familiar modes of circumscription that prevail across the Chinese entertainment industry (Ho; Wang).

Presentation of the show's first season revolved around two recurring motifs: "peace and love", and "keeping it real," frequently articulated (in English) by the

show's contestants, and producers. These constructions positioned rap as possessing the "positive energy" (*zhengnengliang* 正能量) demanded by the state (Yang and Tang 14),ⁱ while retaining the notion of authenticity central to hip-hop's self-narrative (Kruse). These constructions marked the boundaries that the show's producers and contestant rappers were required to negotiate. A further requirement, encapsulated by the literal meaning of the show's title ("China has rap"), was to demonstrate that rap music has a place in Chinese-produced popular culture. Contestants did so by employing components of global hip-hop vernacular as "localizable resources" (Varis and Wang 75), much like their counterparts in Tokyo, Nairobi or Paris (Condry; Peck; Hammou). To produce meaning in the Chinese cultural context they adopted locally resonant discursive scripts and codes, illustrating the localization of a global cultural form with distinctly Chinese modulations. The most significant of these was the employment of an enduring theme in classical Chinese culture: the honourable knight errant (*youxia* 游侠) living by a code of righteousness and fraternity as he (and notably, she) struggles to navigate *Jianghu* (江湖), a lawless physical or ideational realm outside mainstream society. Immortalised in Sima Qian's (司马迁; d. 86 BCE) foundational history (*Shi Ji* 史记) of China during the Warring States (475-221 BCE) and Qin Dynasty (221-206 BCE) periods, *Jianghu* is central to the Tang Dynasty short story, the Qing Dynasty novel, the modern tradition of martial arts novels (*wuxia xiaoshuo* 武侠小说), and contemporary Triad and Kung Fu films. *Jianghu* is a resonant and flexible cultural frame, a vehicle for themes like struggle, solidarity and honour, and a metaphor for the Chinese "underground" hip hop community.

The purpose of this article is to investigate how the corpus of lyrics performed on Season 1 of *The Rap of China* reflect globally resonant hip-hop themes of masculinity, fraternity, and loyalty as depicted in the self-narrated struggles of knights errant navigating *Jianghu*. The study also explores the contextually specific process of Chinese rappers attending to the twin demands of authenticity (“keeping it real”) and politically correct positivity (“peace and love”). We begin with a discussion of the political context in which the entertainment industry operates, before discussing the emergence of hip-hop in China. We then address the issue of authenticity and discuss the provenance and importance of *Jianghu* as a cultural frame, before setting out the empirical study and subsequent discussion. We conclude with some thoughts on the difficulties rappers face in navigating conflicting expectations, with particular reference to the recent use of rap music to promote Chinese state nationalism.

Imposing (and resisting) “positivity”

All cultural products in China, high and low-brow, are subject to overlapping formal and informal controls and norms (Sullivan and Kehoe). The Chinese entertainment industry is structured by multi-layered institutions of control and the state is the ultimate arbiter of permissible cultural production. Despite initiating commercialization of the media, the state continues to monitor and censor the sector, and conceives cultural outputs as ideological and pedagogical vehicles for promoting “core socialist values” (*Shehuizhuyi hexin jiazhi guan* 社会主义核心价值观) and its aspirations for a patriotic and regime-acceptant population (Jeffreys). Tensions between this ideological/pedagogical remit and popular tastes have recurred throughout the reform era (Zhao), with entertainment periodically denounced as decadent, vacuous, and engendering “spiritual pollution” (*jingshen wuran* 精神污染). Absent during the Mao

era, pop music returned to China early in the 1980s, primarily through performers from Hong Kong and Taiwan (*Gangtai* 港台) like Teresa Teng (*Deng Lijun* 邓丽君) (Gold). With its sentimentality, individualism and conspicuous absence of ideology, pop music was derided for its baseness and lack of educational value. However, as the Chinese media and entertainment industries commercialized Mandopop quickly became a popular mainstream cultural product characterized by the reproduction of a narrow range of formulae, song construction, storytelling and aesthetics.

As the Chinese entertainment industry has grown, so has a dense regulatory network incorporating the Central Publicity Department (formerly Central Propaganda Department), Ministry of Culture, State Administration of Radio and Television, Cyberspace Administration of China and other state and Party organs. These organizations help the state carry out its mission to safeguard the moral health of the nation, stepping in periodically to curb the excesses of entertainment programming, to protect the country's youth from exposure to content in poor taste and ward against threats to national cultural security. As creators of "spiritual goods" (*jingshen chanpin* 精神产品) artists and performers are held to strict standards (Sullivan and Kehoe). Due to this political context, Reality TV, a genre predicated on unusual or excessive behaviours, has failed to colonize programming schedules in China. Nevertheless, singing competitions resonate with Chinese audiences and have proven commercially successful. Numerous Chinese TV channels, including the national state broadcaster CCTV, have featured talent shows (*xuanxiu* 选秀) like *China's Got Talent* (*Zhongguo Darenxiu* 中国达人秀), and *Super Girl* (*Chaoji Nüsheng* 超级女声). The format's focus on the effort that "ordinary" contestants make to improve their skills resonates

with Chinese state narratives around self-improvement (Anagnost; Jacka). The message that cultivation of talent, perseverance and overcoming setbacks determine whether contestants “deserve” success, is consistent with broader narratives that displace responsibility for socio-economic wellbeing to individuals (Jeffreys). Chinese reality TV is an exemplar of the “positive energy” required of cultural products manifest in the “peace and love” motif of *The Rap of China*.

In his address to the Beijing Forum on Literature and Art (*Wenyi gongzuo zuotanhui* 文艺工作座谈会) in 2014, Communist Party General Secretary and China’s pre-eminent leader Xi Jinping enunciated the state’s longstanding views on the pernicious vulgarity of popular culture. Xi reiterated the necessary subordination of artistic to social values, and expressed the need for indigenous and patriotic art forms. He called on China’s cultural and creative organizations to contribute to the rejuvenation of Chinese culture by adhering to core socialist values and maximizing the “positive energy” of art. “Positive energy” entered the official political lexicon in 2012 and was soon adopted at the highest levels, where it implies attitudes or emotions “aligned with the ideological or value systems of the party-state or any discourses that promote such an alignment” (Yang and Tang 2). This political imperative dovetails with the commercial interests of the music industry, where concerns about risk and reproducibility have led to “safe” standardized forms like the KTV-friendly balladeers Andy Lau (*Liu Dehua* 刘德华), and Jacky Cheung (*Zhang Xueyou* 张学友), the cute-style (*keaixing* 可爱型) of Jolin Tsai (蔡依林) and Cyndi Wang (王心凌), and clean-cut boy bands like TF Boys (加油男孩). Research on Chinese youth suggests that young

people are content, in the main, to eschew potentially risky iconoclasm in favour of the apolitical “soft cool” of singers like Jay Chou (*Zhou Jielun* 周杰伦) (J. Wang).

Despite this, China has also had its share of boundary-pushing musical subcultures (*yawenhua* 亚文化). The Northwest Wind (*Xibeifeng* 西北风) style of rock music emerged in the 1980s as a “hard” mainland-Chinese response to the softness of Hong Kong and Taiwanese pop. It combined western rock instrumentals with northern Chinese folk melodies delivered in “a hoarse vocal timbre suggesting rustic virility and sincerity” (Huang 186). Alongside an explicit attempt to reclaim masculinity in its sound and lyrics (Baranovitch 114), Chinese rock music incorporated classical instruments and adapted traditional folk tales (J. Liu), distorting and challenging attached stereotypical meanings while using them as “authenticating styles” (De Kloet, “China with a Cut” 53). The prison song genre popular in the late 1980s produced by alienated private businesspeople (*getihu* 个体户), ex-convicts and other individuals excluded from society, adopted a despairing, dark and antagonistic “bluesy” style to express a non-conformist alternative to the mainstream. Like the *Xibeifeng* genre, prison songs also adopted folk melodies, but in contrast they were “slow, despairing and fearful, and often used vulgar language” (Ho 445). These forms of “common” music (*tongsu* 通俗) became important vehicles for expressing discontent and opposition in the run-up to the Democracy Spring mass movement that was violently suppressed in Tiananmen Square in 1989 (Lee). Thereafter, the state tightened its grip on both “consciously” and “unconsciously political” music (Lee 97). Chinese rap music and the broader hip-hop scene emerged in this post-Tiananmen context, where it continued as a marginal subculture for many years prior to *The Rap of China*.

The emergence of Chinese hip-hop

Spoken-word music has existed in China for centuries, in the form of “story-singing” (*shuochang* 说唱) to the beat of a wooden clapperⁱⁱ and “cross-talk” (*xiangsheng* 相声) featuring back-and-forth interactions sometimes reminiscent of an MC battle (Zhou). Western rap music entered China in the early 1990s with bars and clubs in Beijing and Shanghai convening hip-hop nights, and through *dakou* (打口), deadstock foreign tapes and CDs that came onto the informal market in Chinese cities (de Kloet, “Popular music and youth”). These early developments provided exposure to the genre and gave creative impetus to the local music scene (de Kloet, “China with a cut”). However, it was the work of Hong Kong collectives Softward (*Ruanying Tianshi* 软硬天师), and Lazy Mutha Fucka (*Da Lan Tang* 大懒堂), the Taiwanese MC Hotdog (*Yao Zhongren* 姚中仁) and other acts in the late 1990s that demonstrated the potential for rapping in Chinese languages. The first mainland Chinese hip-hop records appeared in the early 2000s, produced by the independent punk label (Scream Records, *Haojiao changpian* 嚎叫唱片) that launched the careers of the influential collectives CMCB (*Zhongguo shuochang xiongdidi* 中国说唱兄弟) and Yin T’sang (*Yincang* 隐藏), and MC Webber (*Wang Bo* 王波) (Amar). The spread of Iron Mic MC battles (*Gangtie maike* 钢铁麦克) (Chang) and Nike’s Hip Hoop campaign, both launched in 2001, contributed to rap’s status as a growing urban subculture. This emergent phase coincided with the relative tolerance of the Hu Jintao era (2002-12), manifest in the “oppositional, counterhegemonic voice against the Chinese educational system, high official culture

and mainstream discourse” that featured in the music of pioneers like MC Dawei (MC 大卫), MC Majun (MC 马俊), and In3 (*Yinsan’r* 阴三儿) (J. Liu, 266).

Chinese rap music began in Beijing and Shanghai, but in the last decade there has been a proliferation of rap music being produced in other regions, employing diverse Chinese languages other than Mandarin. While different provinces have long made a distinct contribution to Chinese music (Komlosy), Liu attributes the proliferation of “regional rap” to the affordances of the internet as a space for sharing music online (*wangluo gequ* 网络歌曲) and the popularization of local inflections stimulated by the success of Xue Cun’s (雪村) 2001 internet hit “Northeasterners Are All Living Lei Fengs” (*Dongbeiren doushi huo Lei Feng* 东北人都是活雷锋) (270). Very few Chinese rappers emerge from the state training academies that act as incubators for the performing arts and entertainment industry (Sullivan and Kehoe). Lacking the benefits of training and access, the internet was thus a crucial space for experimentation and dissemination. As hip-hop stylings began to colonize and then dominate pop music in the west (Bennett), so Chinese pop producers began to perceive value in adding rap verses to pop songs, a practice enthusiastically embraced by Cantopop stars like Eason Chan (*Chen Yixun* 陈奕迅), and Taiwanese Mandopop singer Jay Chou. While commercial rap (*shangwu xiha* 商务嘻哈) entered the cultural vernacular through unchallenging pop idols, the “real thing” did not attract mainstream attention outside occasional guest appearances by acts like Tianjin trio Gongfu (功夫) and Sichuan rapper Fat Shady (*Xie Di* 谢帝) on state media shows.

When *The Rap of China* launched in 2017, with the biggest financial investment in a Chinese Reality TV show, it thus represented a substantial step in the evolution of hip-hop in China and a significant opportunity for mainstream exposure. For students of popular culture in China the show represented a rare opportunity to examine how this subculture would navigate the distinct competing forces in mainstream culture. In underground hip-hop clubs and niche internet releases, rap's sphere of influence was limited, which enabled it to escape attention, control and sanction by the authorities. By contrast, like all shows in China's mainstream entertainment sphere, *The Rap of China* was required to balance political and commercial imperatives. For that reason, the show provoked controversy in the Chinese hip hop community. It revealed a significant cleavage between defenders of "the underground" (*dixia* 地下) and those willing to accept the political and commercial restraints imposed by *The Rap of China*. Several veteran rappers like MC Webber and Xiejin (谢晋) avoided participation, arguing that the show was an exercise in inauthenticity, commercialism, and the antithesis of "keeping it real." Other rappers objected to the incursion of censorship, which compelled rappers like L4wudou to delete "dirty" and "poor taste" lines in the track "Wudou Night Talk" (*Wudu Yehua* 雾都夜话). Some potential contestants refused or failed drug tests as a pre-condition for participation. Contestants complained about long and stressful recording schedules, the obligation to record *Iqiyi* commercials with scant remuneration, and the show's concentration on promoting tracks with commercial "hit potential" (*liu liang* 流量). Rappers like C-Block (大傻), Liucong (刘聪), Saber (梁维嘉), Liao Xiaonong (廖效浓) and Sio (西奥) curtailed their participation bemoaning the inauthenticity represented in the show and pledged themselves to "the underground."

The underground rap scene itself, the space for unfettered live performances and unfiltered storytelling, has come under increased scrutiny. For instance, numerous 8 Mile Underground (*Dixia ba yingli* 地下八英里) regional rap battles have been delayed or cancelled since 2018. The director of the organization that runs these competitions conceded in interview that “freestyle battles may not adhere to core socialist values [and] might have negative effects on Chinese youth” (Shu np). After an eight-month negotiation with the Ministry of Culture the competition dropped “underground” from its title. The contest over “the underground” represents a fundamental clash of understanding: the state view that it represents negative energy, anger and vulgarity, versus the view captured by a veteran hip-hop journalist that it refers to “the grassroots, the struggle, being real” (Shu np). In many global contexts the creation of discrete youth cultures centred around music, from rock-and-roll to hip-hop, has been treated as a threat to mainstream culture and for its potential corruption and anti-socialisation of youth (Bennett). This is a particular concern for the Chinese state, with its ambition to maintain ideological supremacy in the cultural sector and heightened sensitivities around anything with mobilizational or collective action potential (King et al. 327). Constrained by political, and commercial factors *The Rap of China* contestants were thus faced with multiple challenges to their “authenticity.”

Authenticity in hip-hop

Authenticity is a highly contested recurring theme among analysts and practitioners of rap music (Clay; Harrison). The discourse of authenticity is invoked across multiple semantic fields, including the social-psychological, racial, political-economic, gender-sexual and cultural (McLeod 139), connoting the relation between performer and composition (Rudinow) or signifying integrity to individual experiences (Low et al.).

Due to the hybridization, globalization and localization of rap music and hip-hop culture, the meaning of authenticity has become blurred and contextually complicated (Johnson; McLeod), both within African-American cultural understandings of hip-hop (Armstrong; Perry) and in global contexts where it has been transplanted (Alim et al; Cornyetz). Claims of inauthenticity have long been directed at Chinese hip-hop, particularly by Chinese state media. Illustrative is a *Global Times* editorial published at the conclusion of *The Rap of China*'s first season, which argued that as an expression of "black people's defiance" in the face of "poverty, racism and gang violence," rap music was culturally inappropriate in China (Ai np). Despite such "absences" in the Chinese experience, scholarly work identifies underlying "presences," including the attractions of the genre to "marginalized, alienated, and restless teenagers" and the ethos of "speak[ing] your piece" (C. Liu 264/5). Furthermore, the idea that there is a singular authenticity has largely unravelled (Kruse). Instead, the globalization of hip-hop represents "a linguistically, socially, and politically dynamic process which results in complex modes of indigenization, and syncretism," rather than the simple appropriation or mimicry of an African-American cultural form (Mitchell 14-15).

The resonance of Asian martial arts in the African-American hip-hop imaginary, from veneration of Bruce Lee in the late 1970s through Wu Tang Clan's *Shaolin* (少林) iconography to Kendrick Lamar's alter ego Kungfu Kenny, demonstrates that cross-cultural infusions are not unidirectional (Banjoko). Instead of a geographically and socio-culturally bounded form, hip-hop is better viewed as a "globally dispersed network of everyday cultural practices [that] are productively appropriated in very different local contexts" (Androutsopolous 11). In this way authenticity becomes a function of "local definitions of what matters" (Pennycook 103; Condry). Osumare uses the concept of "connective marginality" to explain the shared experience of cultural,

classist, racial or historical marginalization underpinning the global attraction of hip-hop as a repertoire of resistance. What gives treatments of these themes’ “authenticity” is that they are “infused with distinctive local knowledge, and the sensibilities of a specific place,” and rendered in local vernaculars they create a “collective local identity for urban youth” (J. Liu 266). As our analysis will show, contestants on *The Rap of China* employed numerous localizing strategies, from using local languages to referencing distinct local cultural markers and templates, the most notable of which was *Jianghu*.

Jianghu

Jianghu (literally “rivers, and lakes”) first appeared in the writing of the Warring States philosopher *Zhuangzi* (庄子; d. 286 BCE), author of one of the foundational texts of Taoism. The term was used to depict the realm outside politics and society, a place inhabited by exiled scholars and alienated officials turned philosophical wanderers or recluses. *Jianghu* often describes an allegorical or imagined space, but can also be concretized as “stretches of wilderness at the geographic and moral margins of settled society” (Hamm 17). *Jianghu* is the realm of knights errant (*Xia* 侠), who exist in a quasi-utopia where the *Xia* code of honourable conduct prevails. During the Han Dynasty (206 BCE - 220 AD) China’s founding historian Sima Qian wrote admiringly of the bravery and steadfastness of knights errant during the Warring States era in his *Biographies of Knights Errant* (*Youxia Liezhuan* 游侠列传). The meaning of *Jianghu* has evolved through long use in classical literature. From the Song Dynasty (960 – 1279 AD) it came to encompass an alternative society existing outside the law, a place where chivalrous adventurers and benevolent outlaws lived by a strict code of loyalty,

righteousness and vengeance. The Song Dynasty literary classic, *Water Margin* (*Shuihuzhuan* 水浒传, also translated as *Outlaws of the Marsh*), depicts a group of righteous men who exile themselves to *Jianghu* rather than serve corrupt officials. The image of the honourable outsider rejecting society's circumscriptions and fighting against injustice underpins the martial arts (*wuxia* 武侠) literary tradition,ⁱⁱⁱ from the forefather of modern *wuxia* fiction Pingjiang Buxiaosheng (Xiang Kairen 向恺然, d. 1953) to Jin Yong (金庸; Louis Cha, d. 2019) the canonical Hong Kong novelist. *Jianghu* and its knights errant continue to be depicted in contemporary film, fiction, comic books and TV shows of the historical *wuxia* and contemporary gangster genres (Chan).^{iv} They are also prominent in the Kung Fu movie variation on the *wuxia* tradition, including appropriations used to depict national struggle like Bruce Lee's *Fist of Fury* (1972) and Donnie Yen's *Ip Man* (2008).

Although *Jianghu* is a broadly accepted cultural framework, it is not inherently supportive of the state-ordained political status quo. In fact, it can be overtly subversive in its depiction of a “public sphere unconnected to the sovereign power of the state, a sphere that is historically related to the idea of *minjian* [民间, i.e. the people] as opposed to the concept of *Tianxia* [天下, i.e. the realm of state control]” (P. Liu 6).

Knights errant have long commanded popular support for administering punishment “outside the state monopolies of justice and supervision, serving the struggle against corruption and against the abuse of administrative power” (Altenburger 364). The knight errant serves his or her own righteous cause and cannot be depended on “to observe the principles of absolute obedience and loyalty to the organization on which

party power was based” (Jenner 23). *Water Margin* was banned during the Manchu Qing Dynasty because of its purported revolutionary appeal to subordinated ethnic Han readers. *Wuxia* literature was banned for decades by Nationalist and Communist regimes in the Republic/People’s Republic of China. The contemporary Chinese state continues to view with suspicion the codes of “the Outsider,” from triads and secret societies to the troubled youth portrayed in Wang Shuo’s (王朔) “hooligan literature” (*liumang wenxue* 流氓文学). Yet, knights errant, with their sense of righteousness, justice, reciprocity and vengeance (J. Liu “Chinese Knight Errant” 4) remain instantly recognizable and resonant for Chinese audiences.

The Rap of China

Season 1 of *The Rap of China* began in the summer of 2017 with an open audition to select 15 participating acts. Contestants were divided into three teams to be mentored by Taiwanese-American singer Will Pan (*Pan Weibo* 潘玮柏), Chinese-Canadian pop star Kris Wu (*Wu Yifan* 吴亦凡), and Taiwanese co-mentors MC Hotdog and rock singer A-Yue (*Zhang Zhenyue* 张震岳). Each episode contestants received tuition from their team captains and participated in individual and team challenges to demonstrate the diversity, sophistication and improvement in their skills. Continuation in the competition was decided by the votes of invited industry professionals. Common to the format, musical performances shared attention with depictions of contestants’ “personal journeys,” interactions between participants and the melodramatic unveiling of the judges’ decisions. Most contestants were male, although the breakout star was arguably the female rapper VAVA (*Mao Yanqi* 毛衍七), who rode the exposure of a final four

spot to a recording contract, the *Crazy Rich Asians* soundtrack and a modelling deal with American designer Alexander Wang. Regions with distinct hip-hop cultures, Sichuan/Chongqing and the Northeast, were well represented as was the diversity of regional languages (see Table 1 below).

The inaugural season of *The Rap of China* concluded with two co-champions; PG One (*Wang Hao* 王昊) and Gai (*Zhou Yan* 周延). Large fan communities coalesced on Chinese social media and their music quickly entered mainstream popular consciousness. By any commercial measure, the show and its star performers were a resounding success, with the promise of recording contracts and endorsement deals. However, despite highly commercialized media and internet sectors, cultural products in China are not judged by solely commercial (or artistic) criteria, and soon after the competition PG One's music was banned by the authorities. The purported glorification of sex and materialism in his lyrics condemned him to being labelled a “negative influence on Chinese youth.” The judgement passed on PG One prompted a careful examination of the entire hip-hop scene by the State Administration of Radio and Television (SART) and other state organs. SART subsequently issued a directive to the media to deny exposure to artists with tattoos (*wenshen yiren* 纹身艺人), representatives of hip-hop culture (*xiha wenhua* 嘻哈文化), sub-cultures (*ya wenhua* 亚文化), and the ironic nihilism inherent in “demotivational culture” (*sang wenhua* 丧文化) prevalent among many young people on the Chinese internet.

Rappers had suffered blacklisting and performance bans at the hands of the Ministry of Culture (MOC) before. In 2015, numerous artists were punished for

violating rules against “spreading content that was obscene, violent, criminal or harmful to social morality” (宣扬淫秽暴力教唆犯罪或者危害社会公德的内容). IN3 got in trouble for addressing inequality and corruption in the track “Beijing Evening News” (*Beijing Wanbao* 北京晚报). Lyrics like “some sleep in underground passages/ some use government money to pay for their banquets,” led to 17 of IN3’s songs being banned by the MOC in 2015, while group members were detained, and venues warned not to book them (Fullerton “China’s hip hop stars.”)

Following sanction by the state, and a berating from the Communist Youth League for glorifying womanizing and recreational drugs on his track “Christmas Eve” (*Shengdanye* 圣诞夜), PG One made a confessional statement to apologize for his problematic lyrics and other indiscretions like beefing with Gai and having a sexual relationship with a married actress. His initial public response encapsulated the contradictions of authenticity for Chinese rappers:

I was deeply influenced by black music in the early days of my exposure to hip-hop culture. It made me misunderstand mainstream values and I sincerely apologize for that. As I mature, I am more aware that I should have a stronger sense of social responsibility, advocate correct values and get involved in more social service activities. The hip-hop spirit should and will always, be about ‘peace and love.’

Co-winner Gai meanwhile continued to project an image more palatable to mainstream media, appearing on the CCTV show *I Want to Go to the Spring Gala* (*Wo yao shang Chunwan* 我要上春晚) and leading the studio audience in a rendition of “Long Live the Motherland” (*Zuguo wansui* 祖国万岁).

Methods and data

Over the 12-episodes broadcast in Season 1 contestants and invited special guests performed 143 tracks. We collected video recordings of all the performances and transcribed the lyrics for analysis as texts, identifying the thematic categories illustrated and discussed in the sections below. The first category captures generic stylings familiar to rap music in many contexts that channel materialism, bravado and commercialism, or reference American rap and urban culture. “Localization styles” identifies references to local markers, use of regional languages and culturally specific issues like the Chinese education system. These first two themes were present to some degree in most tracks, but in many cases they serve as a contextual layer rather than constituting the main focus of the song. “Solidarity” captures references to fraternity, brotherhood and the community of rappers. “Struggle” records how rappers report issues in their lives that they have worked to overcome. Both “struggle” and “solidarity” can be derived from or framed as part of the *Jianghu* imaginary. In “Classical cultural markers” we identify allusions to *Jianghu* through references to classical literature and other imagery.

Table 1: Contestants on *The Rap of China*

Rapper	Progress	Born	Sex	Province	Languages excl. Mandarin
GAI	Final	1988	m	Chongqing	Chongqing, English
PG One	Final	1994	m	Heilongjiang	Dongbei, English
After Journey	Final	1992	m	Xinjiang	Xinjiang, English
Jony J	4	1989	m	Fujian	Fujianese, English
VAVA	10	1995	f	Sichuan	Sichuanese, English
BrAnt.B	9	1997	m	Shaanxi	Shaanxi, English
Tizzy T	9	1993	m	Guangdong	Cantonese, English
BooM	9	1990	m	Xinjiang	Xinjiang, English
Bridge	8	1993	m	Chongqing	Chongqing, English
HipHopMan	7	1982	m	US	English
Splirit 鬼卞	7	1992	m	Chongqing	Chongqing, English
OBi & M03	6	1998	m	Fujian	Japanese, Fujianese
Sun Bayi	6	1990	m	Guizhou	Guizhou
BCW	5	1985	m	Taiwan	Taiwanese, English
Ty.	2	1989	m	Sichuan	Sichuanese
Benzo	2	1995	m	Zhejiang	Hangzhou, English
Hugh	1	1992	m	Shanghai	Wu, English
Sena	7	1994	f	Liaoning	Dongbei, English

Generic styles

The performances and lyrics of contestants and guests on *The Rap of China* contained many recognizable elements of the global hip hop vernacular. The hip hop aesthetic was manifest in the artists' baggy T-shirts, low hanging pants, baseball caps, old-school sportswear, chains, tattoos, and even the gun-toting mime. Most artists invoked familiar braggadocio and self-aggrandizement, the performative dissing of other MCs' skills, and frequent references to real and perceived critics. The paradox of wanting to "get paid" while railing against commercialism and criticising other rappers who "sell out" had particular meaning in the context of the inaugural season of the show, but is also familiar to other contexts. Many of the contestants paid homage to the US and American hip hop culture, invoking US cities, NBA teams and name-checking American rappers from Notorious BIG, Tupac Shakur, Snoop Dog and Dr Dre to contemporary artists like Gucci Mane, Kendrick Lamar and Migos. There were familiar hedonistic references to drinking, partying and sexual partners, but in a country with strict intolerance of drugs, the references to smoking involved common tobacco cigarettes. Materialism was manifest in references to luxury brands (Gucci and Louis Vuitton were the brands of choice), but no Chinese rapper had at the time reached the level to credibly reference private jets, mansions or sports cars.

Localization styles

Contestants demonstrated their pride in place, whether province, city or neighbourhood. They did so with frequent reference to local cultural markers like Sichuanese hotpot (*huoguo* 火锅) and other Chinese dishes, the common practice of fortune telling

(*suanming* 算命), drinking local liquors and the phenomenon of Chinese internet celebrities (*wanghong* 网红). Assertions of local identity were cemented using local languages alongside the national language of Mandarin. Bars sung in regional languages embody and make claims to locality, and invoke the sometimes-fraught politics of language and identity in the PRC (Ji). For instance, Guangdong rapper An Dahun's (安大魂) pun, "common speech [the literal meaning of Mandarin] is too common" (*Putonghua tai putong* 普通话太普通), is less of a joke in a province where mellifluous and expressive Cantonese is an integral part of local identity under threat from increasing use of Mandarin. Most rappers on *The Rap of China* inserted regional language terms into their tracks, albeit toning down their "trademark use of local expletives and slang" (J. Liu 275). Use of local languages is one component in distinct regional styles of rap music, like Sichuanese "C-Trap". Pioneers of the C-Trap genre like Gai and Higher Brothers (*Hai'er xiongdi* 海尔兄弟) may have initially found inspiration from Trap producers and artists in Atlanta, but their music is rendered locally meaningful through tales of high-handed officials, the criminal underworld (*heishehui* 黑社会), and contextually specific struggles such as the rigors of Chinese school life, migration, and inequality.

Solidarity

Consideration of the cleavage between an "authentic underground" and "manufactured mainstream" (Thornton) led to many expressions of solidarity and frequent paeans to the fraternity of rappers. Unlike the more ambiguous "friendship," fraternity has a clear

set of rules and obligations (Louie), resonates with China's Confucian cultural heritage, and invokes the brotherhoods and secret societies that flourished in the physical-world *Jianghu* of the Late Ming and Qing Dynasties. Nearly all contestants invoked escapades with their brothers, honour codes, reciprocal loyalty, and described the way solidarity emboldens and empowers them. They typically used the vernacular *gemen'r* (哥们儿) and especially *xiongdì* (兄弟), terms that literally mean brother but often refer to close friends, fellow gang members or a "band of brothers." Despite criticising the talents of other rappers, most contestants gave respect to their counterparts and the "old Iron Mic heroes" (Iron mic 的老英雄) who strived to build the culture.

Struggle

The themes of struggle, striving and enduring hardship (*chiku* 吃苦) recurred frequently. BooM (*Huang Xu* 黄旭), a rapper from *Xinjiang*, addressed the poverty of his childhood upbringing and delivered the judgement that "in this society where the strong eat the weak, there's no free dinner" (在这弱肉强食的社会, 没有免费的晚饭). VAVA recounted being brought up by a single mother after her father passed away. Related themes stressed self-improvement, perseverance and hard work; a noted feature of contemporary state discourse (Bakken). The aspiration for many rappers was expressed as attaining freedom through rapping, in terms of economic independence, but more often by finding and being true to oneself. An Dahun related her experience of busking to pursue her dream of independence. MC Davi (*Hong Lianhui* 洪连徽), a guest performer from Taiwan, summed up a common refrain: "I am the protagonist of my

time” (我当我自己时代的主角). Jony J captured another common sentiment, singing “when you worry there’s no way to go forward, the only thing to do is adopt a Devil may care attitude” (当你开始担心没法迈步, 只好摆出无所谓的态度). AKA.imp’s (*Wang Linkai* 王琳凯) suggested response to encountering control and repression was to raise a middle finger (被控制被统治被打压之后, 竖起中指通知通知). It is important to note that the control and repression referenced here is not the Chinese state or the Chinese Communist Party, mention of which were entirely absent from the corpus of lyrics. Instead, it refers to the rigors of China’s education system (in AKA.imp’s words, “the abusive exam-oriented education” 应试教育的弊端), overbearing parents, inflated family expectations and the competitive nature of society under Chinese market-socialism. Equally, however, there were numerous self-reflections on getting into trouble at school, making parents worried or proud, and paying back their support.

Classical Chinese inflections - Jianghu flow

For his lyrical allusions and incorporation of traditional bowed, plucked, wind and percussion instruments, Gai’s style has been described as “*Jianghu* flow” (江湖流). Gai rapping Tang Dynasty poetry in his native Neijiang (内江) dialect to a hip-hop beat with four-stringed pipa (琵琶) instrumentation is a distinctively Chinese inflection. It is not unprecedented; as noted above, some Chinese rock similarly adopted local motifs. And a “China Wind” aesthetic (*Zhongguofeng* 中国风) swept the pop industry in the

early 2000s, integrating Chinese instrumentation, melodies and poetic lyrics with western-style pop (Chow and De Kloet). In the track titled “Jianghu Flow,” produced in collaboration with Hunan rap collective C-Block (C-Block 組合), Gai’s lyrics fully embraced the status of brash leader of *Jianghu*. In the show’s finale, Gai’s performance of “One Hundred and Eight” (一百零八) was full of references to *Water Margin*. His other finale track, “Kong Cheng Ji” (空城计), means to put on a bold face to conceal one’s unpreparedness. It references the Imperial Chancellor of the Kingdom of Shu (221–263 AD) and military strategist Zhu Geliang (诸葛亮), who was immortalised in the Ming Dynasty literary classic *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (三国演义). In the chorus, Gai described his life in *Jianghu* as a struggle against manifold difficulties (e.g. holding out against 10,000 opponents 一夫当关, 万夫莫开). He referenced Tang Dynasty poet Li Bai’s (李白) *Trials of Shu Kingdom* (Shu daonan 蜀道难) and compared his confidence, intelligence, and ability to navigate this pernicious terrain to the wily Zhuge Liang. Gai states that he is “free from anxiety” (羽扇纶巾) (citing *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*), behaves like the immortals (仙风道骨) and became a hero when he entered *Jianghu*. The aesthetic is burnished in the verses with natural imagery taken from classical southern Chinese landscape painting (white clouds, green hills, “the upwards curl of smoke”).

In his finale song “Burn One’s Bridges” (*Pofu chenzhou* 破釜沉舟), PG One invoked the injustices he had suffered in *Jianghu* and the determination not to let

himself be debased by circumstances or adversaries. He wrestles with the contradiction of seeking material gain in a degraded commercial context where people routinely debase themselves. He confesses that in the process of commoditizing his music he has become a hypocrite and must bury this consciousness as long as he is involved in the music business. In the final verse redemption comes in the determination to conduct himself in a dignified way, and by implication to live according to the “code.” To help express this idea he quotes from a scene in *Let the Bullets Fly* (2010) (Rang zidan fei 让子弹飞) a *wuxia*-style film about Sichuanese bandits in the 1920s, implying that he won’t sell out in order to get paid (*zhanzhe ba qian zheng le* 站着把钱挣了).

Having identified and illustrated the major themes that were present in Season 1, we now discuss two themes that were not as salient as they have since become, namely the female knight errant and nationalism.

Female knights errant

The first season of *The Rap of China* featured just two women contestants. Establishing authenticity is complicated for Chinese women rappers, for whom associations with the vulgarity and lawlessness of “the underground” is incompatible with mainstream gendered cultural expectations. They have also had to struggle to gain respect from male counterparts within the hip hop community (Chew and Mo), which Vava addressed in her lyrics. Having ascertained the extent to which male rappers invoked *Jianghu*, we were surprised that neither female contestant did so, as it offers a potentially useful vehicle for framing female power. Since the Han Dynasty, female knights errant (*nüxia* 女侠), and female generals/warriors (*nüjiang* 女将) have featured in Chinese literature.

In folk tales they often appear as assassins acting on behalf of society, avengers of private wrongdoing, or as bandits and femme fatale. Women knights errant are not confined to domestic gender roles, escaping conventional and physical expectations in order to roam independently in *Jianghu*. There they often receive martial training or transcendent powers from their fathers or otherworldly monks, often returning to a domestic role upon completion of a mission to avenge the murder of a father or spouse, a sexual assault or broader social injustice (Altenburger).

Outside of Season 1 of *The Rap of China*, women rappers have tapped into the cultural resources of the *Jianghu* imaginary. While the second season of the show is not the focus of this article, it does feature an explicit example. Liu Boxin's (刘柏辛) track "Mulan" (木兰) invokes China's most famous female warrior. Derived from a popular folk tale from the Northern Wei Dynasty (386–534 AD), Mulan was a teenage girl who concealed her gender to join the army in her father's place. After a decade of bravery in the war against invaders she is recognized by the Emperor but, as a good filial daughter, declines imperial office to return home to her family. Liu identified as Mulan, singing in English that "Like Mulan/Going to war war war war/For my family/I do more more more more." Part of the utility of the female *xia*/warrior type for women rappers lies in the combination and ambiguity of gender roles. The tradition embraces both the feminine (symbolized by the chaste, filial, domestic woman) and the masculine (the physically imposing military man). And it legitimizes and celebrates a woman's equal participation in *Jianghu*.

Nationalism

One feature of rap music in many contexts globally is its anti-establishment stance. The latitude for adopting an oppositional posture in China is circumscribed by the formal regulatory environment and the supplementary role of the entertainment industry in enforcing it. Thus, it is not surprising that discussion of politics, much less politically sensitive issues (*mingan shijian* 敏感事件), was absent from *The Rap of China*. Season 1 participant Bridge (*Cheng Jianqiao* 程剑桥) commented that, “I never thought about anti-government lyrics: I love my country!” (Fullerton, “Reality TV show”). Similarly, Sun Bayi (孙八一), noted for referencing patriotic themes in his songs, argued that “I don’t like rapping about what I shouldn’t rap about anyway, especially things not in line with socialist values” (BBC). Outside *The Rap of China*, which in Season 1 contained muted references to the state or national pride,^v rappers have found success dealing in state-sanctioned political themes, particularly those consonant with Chinese nationalism. Chengdu-based rap collective CD Rev (*Tianfu shibian* 天府事变) have produced numerous songs and videos in collaboration with the Communist Youth League, addressing themes from Mao’s legacy to disputed territories in the South China Sea. Their English-language track “The Force of Red” employs gangsta rap stylings to rail against Taiwan independence. More recently, Chinese rappers have contributed their voice to the backlash in mainland China against pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, which are framed in Chinese media as criminally violent riots orchestrated by foreign agitators. Rappers have been active on social media, proclaiming their pride to be Chinese and posting memes to invalidate the protests. Vava declared on Instagram that “Hong Kong is part of China forever.” Her meme in support of a Chinese journalist assaulted by protesters was shared 300 million times on Chinese social media Weibo.

PG One posted on Weibo “support Hong Kong police, resist violent atrocities!!!”

Higher Brother’s image of the Chinese flag with the tag “Once again I’m proud I’m a Chinese” went viral. CD Rev’s “Hong Kong’s Fall” (*Xianggang zhi qiu* 香港之秋), a track that amalgamates Chinese state media frames of the protests, warns of “tanks gathering” in the neighbouring mainland Chinese city of Shenzhen to “eradicate the terrorists.” People’s Daily, CCTV, and the Communist Youth League all shared the video on social media. State-endorsed rap is symptomatic of the modernization and instrumentality of state political communications (Sheng 179), and shows that it is the content of the message more than the form (CD Rev’s music brims with aggressive profanity) that the state objects to.

Conclusion

Reconciling “positive energy” (i.e. artistic circumscriptions due to political imperatives), and “authenticity” variously defined is an issue that hangs over China’s diverse cultural sector. Chinese hip hop was once insulated by its niche status from the expectation of producing music with “social value,” but *The Rap of China* changed that by bringing rap into mainstream consciousness. Finding the content of rap music lacking in ideological and pedagogical value, the state immediately acted. The showcase for China’s rappers had demonstrated the genre’s popularity and commercial potential, but brought it to the attention of the state, where the prescription of “positive energy” trumps other variables by which cultural products are judged. Notwithstanding the consonance of many tracks with state discourses on self-improvement, perseverance, and striving upwards, the prospects for rap entering mainstream popular culture were limited by the nexus of state and commercial interests. Anticipating this outcome, some rappers responded by refusing to participate. Others, like co-winner Gai, who had

previously gained notoriety for music and videos replete with gangsta rap iconography, substantially modified his style when presented with an opportunity to seize lucrative crossover opportunities. The current vogue for the state to exploit the popularity of rap for political communication and propaganda purposes, represents a new scenario for China's rappers to negotiate.

In the current climate of increasingly circumscribed freedoms, the capacity for hip hop to act as a vehicle for expressing and sharing what it means to be a young person in China is limited. However, within this restrictive context, the allusive and culturally resonant *Jianghu* represents a creative space for rappers to frame their articulations of fraternity, struggle, masculinity and pursuit of personal independence. Adopting one of the most enduring constructs of Chinese cultural semiotics as a vehicle was a reasonable response to (initially widespread) scepticism about the possibility and appropriateness of rap in Chinese culture. Through centuries of artistic use *Jianghu* has been interpreted in myriad ways and can express anything from national struggle to a stage in one's life. It is a tried and tested allegorical template for expressing resistance to structures and circumstances that can't be addressed directly due to political circumscriptions. It has also been successfully employed by other genres seeking "authenticating strategies," like Chinese rock music where "chivalric aesthetics" derived from the *wuxia* tradition facilitated "an authenticity constructed around notions of being a real tough man who dares to express loudly his discontent with modern society" (de Kloet "China with a Cut," 56). In the context of a Chinese hip hop community divided by loyalty to "the underground" and the commercial opportunities presented by the mainstream, *Jianghu/xia* is central to framing self-narratives around righteousness (*yi* 义) and personal benefit (*li* 利).

Notes

ⁱ It also nodded to the centrality of “harmony” (*hexie* 和谐) in traditional thinking about creative products (Keane 52). Artists who do not produce “harmonious” outcomes frequently find themselves “harmonized” (*bei hexie* 被和谐), a common euphemism for censorship.

ⁱⁱ For the second season the Chinese show title for *The Rap of China* replaced the foreign loan word “rap” (*xiha*) with “story singing” (*shuochang*).

ⁱⁱⁱ Banjoko (2015) argues that it was the wuxia/jianghu tradition of the sinned-against underdog finding dignity in solitary struggles against “the Man” that resonated with African-Americans during the emergence of hip hop in American cities.

^{iv} See, for instance, Wong Kar-wai’s (王家卫) (1994) *Ashes of Time* (Dongxie, Xidu 东邪西毒) based on Jin Yong’s *The Legend of the Condor Heroes* (射雕英雄传)

^v Invited guest Kevin Shin(吴亦凡) for instance sang “you’re stupid enough to not perceive my power/perceive how China has helped you rise” (你傻到看不出我的实力/看不出中国在帮你崛起)

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