

## การประกอบสร้างทางวัฒนธรรมและอัตลักษณ์เฉพาะตนในฮิปฮอปจีน

### Cultural Construction and Self-Identity in Chinese Hip-Hop

ฮั่นเหม่ ถิ่น\*<sup>1</sup> ชุตินา มณีวัฒนา<sup>2</sup>

Hanmei Tan\*<sup>1</sup> Chutima Maneewattana<sup>2</sup>

#### บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาพัฒนาการ และการประกอบสร้างทางวัฒนธรรมของดนตรีฮิปฮอปในประเทศจีน พบว่าอัตลักษณ์เฉพาะตนในวัฒนธรรมฮิปฮอปจีน ประกอบขึ้นจาก 3 ส่วน ได้แก่ 1) การผสมผสานระหว่างวัฒนธรรมฮิปฮอปและวัฒนธรรมดั้งเดิม 2) การผสมผสานระหว่างเพลงฮิปฮอปและอารมณ์ส่วนตัว และ 3) การให้ความสำคัญกับการกำหนดทิศทางการพัฒนา และการวางตำแหน่งของวัฒนธรรมฮิปฮอปให้ชัดเจน ทั้งหมดนี้ก่อให้เกิดความตระหนักรู้ถึงการประกอบสร้างทางวัฒนธรรม จนเป็นอัตลักษณ์เฉพาะตนของดนตรีฮิปฮอปจีนได้ นักดนตรีฮิปฮอปจีนได้ใช้องค์ประกอบต่างๆ ของวัฒนธรรมจีนแบบดั้งเดิม เช่น การใช้ภาษา การใช้ประเด็นทางภูมิภาค เพื่อปรับประยุกต์รูปแบบดนตรีฮิปฮอป ซึ่งมีลักษณะไม่เข้ากับความเป็นพื้นถิ่นของจีนเสียทีเดียว การเปลี่ยนแปลงนี้ทำให้เกิดความหมายแฝงที่ปรากฏขึ้นในดนตรีฮิปฮอปจีน และเป็นการช่วยส่งเสริมให้เกิดลักษณะเฉพาะของ “ฮิปฮอป” จีนแท้ที่ชัดเจนขึ้น การศึกษานี้จะมีส่วนช่วยทำให้ดนตรีฮิปฮอปมีลักษณะเฉพาะของท้องถิ่นและเป็นที่ยอมรับมากขึ้น อีกทั้งยังสร้างพลังความคิดเชิงบวกกับผู้ชมผ่านการเผยแพร่วัฒนธรรมฮิปฮอปอีกด้วย

**คำสำคัญ:** วัฒนธรรมฮิปฮอปของจีน / เพลงแร็ป / การประกอบสร้างทางวัฒนธรรม / อัตลักษณ์เฉพาะตน

\* Corresponding author, email: s62584947005@ssru.ac.th

<sup>1</sup> นักศึกษาปริญญาเอก สาขาวิชาศิลปะการแสดง คณะศิลปกรรมศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยราชภัฏสวนสุนันทา

<sup>1</sup> Doctoral of Philosophy in Performing Arts, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University

<sup>2</sup> อาจารย์ที่ปรึกษา ผู้ช่วยศาสตราจารย์ คณะศิลปกรรมศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยราชภัฏสวนสุนันทา

<sup>2</sup> Advisor, Assist. Prof., Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University

## Abstract

Based on the promotion and popularization of hip-hop culture in our country, this article discusses 1). The cultural development from the integration of hip-hop culture and traditional culture, 2). The combination of hip-hop music works and personal emotions and 3). The developmental direction and positioning of hip-hop culture, all of which can be summed up the realization of the construction of hip-hop culture and self-identity strategy. Chinese hip hop musicians use various elements of traditional culture, such as language or regional features, to change the parts of hip-hop music that are not compatible with the local Chinese cultural environment. Such transformation enriches the connotation of hip-hop music and helps to construct a real Chinese hip hop culture and identity. Through these three strategies, we hope to endow hip-hop music with local characteristics, strengthen the public's sense of identity towards hip-hop culture, and spread positive energy values through hip-hop culture.

**Keywords:** Chinese Hip-Hop Culture / Rap Music / Cultural Construction / Self-Identity

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## Introduction

Hip-hop culture is a minority culture in China's existing cultural system, with a certain degree of uniqueness. Early hip-hop culture did not have a wide audience, and people's understanding of hip-hop culture was relatively superficial. Many people refer to hip-hop music as hip-hop culture, but in fact the two are subordinate, and hip-hop music is a subset of hip-hop culture. In recent years, with a group of hip-hop show aired, let people to this "fresh" understanding of the forms of culture are more diversified. Such as "The Rap of China", while early propaganda effect is not very ideal,

in addition to some audiences who really love hip-hop, more are the "fans" of the star mentors invited by the program. However, it has achieved good results after broadcasting, making the original minority hip-hop culture gradually move to the public, and also attracting a large number of groups who want to have a deeper understanding of hip-hop culture. For the integration of hip-hop culture in China's cultural system, we must make efforts in cultural construction and self-identity, so that different cultural forms can achieve integration in essence, and expand the audience ranges of hip-hop culture.

### 1. The development of hip-hop music in China

Hip-hop culture originated in the United States at the period of time (1970s) when the United States was faced with serious racial problems. Under this social environment, hip-hop music emerged. Black people expressed their inner criticism on the potential inequality in the social environment through music, and also relieved their inner pressure through the performance. After the early black hip-hop culture, now it has covered every country in the world and become a very common youth culture. The focus of hip-hop music has also shifted from racial discrimination to a variety of socio-cultural dimensions.

As hip-hop culture in the global spread of its language and discourse style has become a model, which can represent the culture and society, and to carry forward and challenge the traditional and national identities, this is the common language artists from all over the world, they use a local and national language to show their rap, it as a kind of familiar but unique global brand, can be customized according to the situation in different areas in different countries<sup>3</sup>.

After hip-hop music was introduced into inland China in 1990s, it did not gain market favor at the beginning. Hip-hop music lurks "underground". Some hip-hop

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<sup>3</sup> Marcyliena Morgan, "The World Is Yours': The Globalization of Hip-Hop Language," *Social Identities Journal* 22, 2 (2016): 137.

musicians began to create some works that reflected China's regional culture and traditional culture. A number of local independent labels have been established over the years. Indie label refers to a relatively small company with low operating costs, which makes it easier to survive in a small music market such as hip-hop. As Indie label has a lower cost of survival than Major label (a large record company), it has more space to pursue independence and artistry in a certain field and produce works with strong personality. Chinese hip-hop musicians have set up their own labels and hip-hop groups in various provinces and regions, and have formed corresponding rap works and creative styles featuring local dialects. For example, the local label "Sup", founded in 2007 in Changsha city, where most of the hip-hop musicians create hip-hop music in Changsha dialects. Chongqing label Gosh, they use the southwest regional characteristics of the dialect into the Chinese singing. However, despite the relatively large-sized of the hip-hop labels, many other independent labels are struggling, and hip-hop artists are relying on their interests and beliefs to sustain themselves. The light investment of mainstream record companies, the small-scale operation of independent labels and the subcultural nature of hip-hop music make it impossible for hip-hop music to gain a larger audience market. Hip-hop has continued to grow at a tepid pace, with record labels making light investments and struggling underground labels.

Until 2017, the iQIYI (Domestic Network Video Playing Platform) network music variety show "The Rap of China" was launched, and hip-hop music presented an explosive transmission influence. With this music show, hip-hop music became the most popular music genre of the year. The program The Rap of China is one of the direct reasons why hip-hop music has continued to be popular in recent years. Relying on the open network communication environment, iQIYI provides the network music programs "China has the hip hop" and "China new" rap provides a good platform for the spread and acceptance of hip-hop music. During the spread of Chinese hip-hop music for more than 20 years, a large number of listeners have acquired a certain

degree of musical recognition for it. On the other hand, relying on a certain number of local independent labels, hip-hop music works are constantly changing, and some excellent rap works have been accumulated. With the popularity of networked music, there is no doubt that the hidden underground hip hop music opened the door to spread.

Hip-hop culture, as an exotic product, was once excluded from the mainstream and had been in a state of barbaric growth "underground" for a long time. With the broadcast of the variety shows "The Rap of China" and "The New Rap of China", hip-hop culture has attracted wide attention, and hip-hop culture is also facing a new turn of localization.

## 2. Cultural Construction of Hip-Hop Culture and Self-Identity in China

### 2.1 Integration of hip-hop culture and traditional Chinese culture

In essence, hip-hop music is a form of street culture. In the category of minority culture, it can also be used as independent music, which is generally called "Rap". Its audience is relatively limited, and it is mainly made up of young people. The so-called "rap", in fact, is a kind of emotional release, reflecting a strong emotional. Its words are mostly cathartic, of course, this is the hallmark feature of hip-hop culture<sup>4</sup>. Although this music form seems relatively simple, we can trace back to the early hip-hop music culture and experience the life and emotional state of black Americans in the social environment at that time. At this time, we can understand the importance and core significance of "rap" for self-expression. Since the advent of hip-hop, black Americans have been able to express themselves more authentically. However, hip-hop culture was gradually introduced to China after the 1980s, so the Chinese public do not know much about the origin and history of rap music.

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<sup>4</sup> Shimeng Bian, "Reasons for the Outgoing of Minority Culture from the Perspective of Innovation Diffusion-A Case Study of New Chinese Rap," *Journalist Cradle* 10, 1 (2020): 59-60.

With the popularity of hip-hop culture in the scope of people's vision, people began to understand this new cultural form, and various variety shows related to hip-hop, also become the door to open the "hip-hop culture", set off a rap boom in China, but also make more people begin to appreciate this small group of music culture. It is because minority culture is usually equivalent to non-mainstream culture, and hip-hop culture is introduced from abroad, it is an inevitable trend to integrate with China's local culture if it wants to be promoted and popularized in China<sup>5</sup>. Since people understanding of hip-hop culture gradually thorough, the related works of music and programs also increased, began to have some hip-hop music creators to national and regional culture as a foundation for the creation, in the people's common understanding "English rap", on the basis of present Chinese rap art and beauty, can also be expanding audience of rap in our country.

For example, the program "The rap of China" directly limited the word "China" as a key word, so the contestants and their works were mainly Chinese and Chinese. Thus it can be seen that the combination of local culture and hip-hop culture can enable the broad masses to understand this unique music form and endow rap with the characteristics of Chinese music and culture<sup>6</sup>.

With the local cultural fusion, Hip-hop music has formed a certain interactive relationship with the local culture, changing from the original English rap and lyrics with black slang to the local language. Some rap music creation started using dialect, show the charm of local culture and national culture, dialect rap, of course, is also in the hip-hop culture into China after gradually formed the characteristics of music forms, singer in composing and singing into the local dialect, can let the audience understand the culture of various areas, also show the life of the real, hip-hop culture and the cultural environment integration. In the social context of contemporary China,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 60.

<sup>6</sup> Shuo Liu, "Popular Logo Design Aesthetic Research in the Context of Hip-hop Culture," *Industrial and Engineering Design* 2, 4 (2020): 68-69.

rapping in Chinese is an ideal and conscious choice, one that is always emphasized. At present, more familiar rap music or groups are mainly based on objects with strong regional colors such as Sichuan and Changsha and the works created are also integrated with local dialects, which is a very beneficial means to publicize regional customs and culture<sup>7</sup>. For example, in the piece *I'm Not Going to Work Tomorrow*, Chengdu singer, Xie Di, used a lot of words with Sichuan and Chongqing characteristics such as “*Ba Shi*” (A Sichuan dialect that means “comfortable”) and “*Nao Ke*” (A Sichuan and Guizhou dialect that refers to someone with a low IQ), thus adding a sense of fun to the song and making it more resonant to listeners. Such songs into the dialect of the form of hip-hop music, intuitive reflection of China's hip-hop music in the style of diversification, but also make each region in the hip-hop music self-identity.

In addition to the application of dialect elements in hip-hop music, in order to highlight traditional culture, Chinese Musical Instruments such as pipa, zither and Chinese flute are also used in the creation, laying a solid foundation for the development of "Chinese rap". For example, Gai's song "*The Sea flies with laughter*" uses traditional Chinese instruments pipa and big drum. Pipa is used throughout the whole song, and the drums are very strong at the beginning of the music, setting off a heroic atmosphere. The timbre of the pipa gives a feeling of compactness. And that tight feel is perfectly matched by the equally rhythmic rap section. These traditional instruments are used in hip-hop music to achieve the fusion of different musical forms, so that the entire music piece emits a strong Chinese style characteristics. These traditional ancient Musical Instruments are used in hip-hop music, which can realize the integration of different musical forms and make the whole music work exude strong Chinese characteristics. In this way, the popularized and publicized hip-hop culture in China is not just a single transmission of the original form and culture,

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<sup>7</sup> Yuqi Gao, “Resistance and Inclusion of Youth Subculture from the Perspective of Network Variety-Taking Rap of China and New Rap of China as Examples,” *New Media Research* 6, 5 (2020): 66.

but a real combination with the local culture of China, which increases the uniqueness of hip-hop culture and also makes hip-hop music more charming.

For example, the rap song *"My New Clothing"* by Vava integrates the elements of Peking Opera in China's traditional culture and uses hip-hop music as the foundation to show the charm of Chinese essence. Although this combination form is very novel, the overall effect is very successful. The integration of hip-hop culture, fashion culture and traditional culture of the quintessence of Chinese culture also provides a channel for some young audiences to understand Peking Opera and love traditional culture<sup>8</sup>. The use of Chinese instruments and elements in Chinese hip-hop can help bridge the gap between Chinese hip-hop and non-hip-hop listeners, who feel that they have found something in Chinese hip-hop that resonates with their Chinese identity.

In the process of hip-hop music being introduced into China until today, its core nature of resistance and criticism has been effectively eliminated due to the influence of policies and cultural background, and a localized culture has been formed, which is developing in the direction of the mainstream of the masses<sup>9</sup>. The integration of words and music, and the use of traditional instruments or modes in Chinese hip-hop can be seen as a strategy for Chinese hip-hop to construct itself and gain local identity. Gaining an identity has helped hip-hop music thrive locally and eventually take root in Chinese culture.

## 2.2 Combining of Hip-Hop Music Works and Personal Feelings

A form of hip-hop music, colloquially speaking, is a performance performed by hip-hop musicians with the help of a certain musical melody by the rapid reciting

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<sup>8</sup> Ruo Gao, "A Cultural Interpretation of the Hip-Hop Rap of the Group Tianfu Incident," *Today's Mass Media* 28, 2 (2020): 57-58.

<sup>9</sup> Xin Jin and Hang Song, "The Dissolution of Resistance: The Popularization Process and Value Evolution of Hip-Hop Culture," *Southeast Communication* 18, 4 (2019): 72.

of the lyrics. Because the lyrics are often narrating some events or expressing feelings, the lyrics are very realistic. In fact, rap is a kind of emotional release, reflecting strong emotionality, and the words used are mainly explicit and straightforward. In fact, this is the iconic feature of hip-hop culture<sup>10</sup>. Rapping in hip-hop music is better suited to telling stories and expressing emotions than other genres. It expresses a variety of experiences and daily information. Rap is a way of speaking rather than singing, conveying a message to the audience and often touching on current events<sup>11</sup>.

Hip hop music creation, in which some personal feelings, make more full, rich content, the audience in appreciation of rap songs, also can feel the charm of this piece of work, and not just to understand the form of hip-hop music, really go deep into the heart, realized that the works contains emotions and stories, the creator and the emotional resonance of the audience. Although hip-hop is a form of music that people have not been in contact with for a long time, they can feel more music in a short period of time.

In addition, hip-hop culture gradually draws closer to mainstream music, and people begin to accept this form of music that pays more attention to the expression of inner feelings and ideas. So, in creating hip-hop music, the focus is not only to strengthen the integration with the local culture, but also to inject emotion into the work. For example, the rap music "*Letter from Heaven*" created by Huang Xu focuses on the memory of a good friend who passed away, and in the lyrics, it warns "*If there is an afterlife, please don't drink and drive*". The audiences can feel rich emotions from the song. Of course, there are also some original hip-hop musicians who always adhere to the concept of individual creation, making the form and style of China's hip-hop music market more diversified, and reaching resonance with the audience

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<sup>10</sup> Shimeng Bian, "Reasons for the Outgoing of Minority Culture from the Perspective of Innovation Diffusion-A Case Study of New Chinese Rap," *Journalist Cradle* 10 (2020): 60-62.

<sup>11</sup> Douglass Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics between the Modern and the Postmodern*, Zhou, X., translated (Beijing: Business Printing House, 2013), 142-143.

with their true feelings. Frustrated young people also often rely on domineering lyrics to vent their discontent and express their anger with exaggerated body language. They catharsis to complete the spiritual liberation, in order to escape the heavy pressure in real life, relieve the deep heart of all kinds of injustice. Hip-hop singer Xie Di, for example, created a song titled "*I'm not Going to Work Tomorrow* " under the circumstances of excessive work pressure, expressing the idea that office workers don't want to be bound by work and releasing their suppressed emotions caused by work freely: "*I'm not going to work tomorrow, so I can be as lazy as I want. I don't have to work tomorrow, so I don't have to pretend to be others' grandson to meet my customers.*"

Summed up in a quote from Bass (19/12/2020), a hip-hop musician interviewed by the author: "*Hip hop was one way out of the void I found myself in.*" In short, the fusion of Chinese hip hop music works and personal emotions is different from the "aggressive" emotions in American hip hop, and more related to "love" and personal emotions. This reflects the different lifestyles and cultural values of China and the United States. In China, hip-hop began in pop culture, not street culture, so the emotions in Chinese hip-hop are more "soft, gentle and peaceful, and more sentimental." This is consistent with the country's cultural background and the original tone of music and literature.

### 2.3 Defining the Developmental Direction and Position of Hip-Hop Culture in China

At present, China's hip-hop music culture is still in the stage of promotion. In this process, it needs to integrate with more mainstream music elements and traditional local culture. Some variety shows with hip-hop music as the theme also bring great impetus to the promotion of this music form, and also attract a large number of young listeners who want to get involved in hip-hop music. Young people express their attitudes towards things and spread hip-hop culture through the form

of rap. Chinese hip hop removed the key elements of hip-hop culture -- race, rebellion, and class -- from the American hip-hop music. It is very important to clarify the developmental direction and positioning of hip-hop culture, that is, to convey the correct musical attitude and values, so that people can appreciate the positive hip-hop culture, and show the artistic nature of local hip-hop music.

The main audience of hip-hop culture communication is the young group, while the promotion of rap music also adopts the voice of the young group, infiltrates the mainstream values and spreads positive energy. This reflects the unique "attitude" and "uniqueness" of hip-hop culture, which is not only innovative and different in music forms, but also more acceptable to the majority of young people in the form of influence. Spreading high-quality music and showing the essence of hip-hop culture with high-quality rap music, so that more people can understand and understand hip-hop. Although it is a music form imported from abroad, with the integration with Chinese local culture, it is gradually changing towards the direction of popularization and mainstreaming. People now, and understanding of hip-hop culture has not only stay on niche of emotions expressed early cultural level, the more is under some rap music, feel the unique local characteristics of hip-hop music works, make our country existing mainstream music are more diversified and continuous efforts for the realization of hip-hop culture localization.

## **Conclusion**

Chinese hip-hop music examines the cultural characteristics of resistance and individualism in western culture from a relatively reserved and conservative perspective peculiar to eastern culture. Through the unique symbols of oriental culture and the technical framework of hip-hop music, it presents the "new" hip-hop that is not equal to the local culture and western culture to the world's hip-hop lovers. Chinese hip-hop artists continue to use elements from traditional culture, such as language or regional characteristics, to change parts of hip-hop music that do not

fit in with China's local cultural environment. Such transformation has enriched the connotation of hip-hop music. With the gradual opening of China's hip-hop market, more and more young people begin to pay attention to hip-hop music. In the process of the popularization of hip-hop culture, the realization of cultural construction is very important, which is an important premise to strengthen the self-identity of hip-hop music.

Chinese hip-hop musicians should extract the expression way that can best represent their own characteristics, and then form interaction and integration with the connotation of mainstream culture to maintain the positive growth of hip-hop music. According to the author, the real hip hop culture is a healthy and uplifting subculture that conveys positive energy in a way that young people like. Hip-hop singers should give many young people who like hip-hop music the motivation to live, the courage to pursue their dreams, or become a way to relieve pressure after their tired life, which can convey the positive power to young people. Hip-hop culture is also capable of growth and can be shaped. In the process of its spread and development, the essence and the dregs can be taken away. This requires the efforts of all parties in the society, because cultural communication is not only the power of hip-hop culture itself, but the accumulation of the power of several generations in one or more times. It needs to gradually internalize and introspection to remove the dross in the process of communication speculation under the common scrutiny of the world.

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