This paper uses the lens of hip hop to examine contemporary Tibetan youth identity in China. Based on an analysis of the hip hop scenes in four Tibetan cities, as well as online virtual space, the study finds that the Tibetan hip hop scene is a site for Tibetan young people with diverse opinions and outlooks to negotiate their identities under the larger social structure in the People’s Republic of China. A large number of Tibetan hip hop artists use hip hop as a tool to redefine Tibetan identity for a mainstream Chinese audience. They do so by expressing pride for their cultural and religious traditions, challenging the stereotype of underdeveloped Tibetans, advocating for inter-ethnic equality, and revealing the flaws and injustices of certain government policies. This growing nationalism, however, can sometimes be counterproductive as ethnic identity becomes essentialized and commercialized. Debates surrounding the issue of language and ethnic identity point to the diversity of opinions on the relationship between Tibetan identity and the Tibetan language. The contestations surrounding identity within the Tibetan hip hop scene reflects the complex intersection of the various forces at play in Tibet today and the ever-shifting nature of “Tibetan-ness.”

The return of Tibetan students from schools in coastal China marks the start of Lhasa’s vibrant summer night life. During a rap concert one evening in August 2017, a group of college-aged Tibetan rappers sang *Made in China*, a well-known song by the Chengdu-based Han Chinese rap group Higher Brothers. “Yin and yang, feng shui, made in China. From Tai Chi to I Ching, made in China. The Great Wall, made in China… I welcome you to the nation that makes magic from 5,000 years of culture. Made in China will amaze you,” they rapped. The mostly Tibetan audience sang along, danced, and waved their hands in time with the beats.

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This paper uses the lens of hip hop to examine contemporary urban Tibetan youth identity in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Specifically, it explores how, through hip hop, young Tibetan artists perceive and negotiate their relationship to the Han-dominant society and how they facilitate discussions within the Tibetan youth community about the meaning of their identities given the growing national consciousness and diversity of the Tibetan experiences. The Tibetan hip hop scene offers producers and consumers of this genre a space to reflect on and make sense of their positions within a larger state-dominated Chinese society. On the one hand, Tibetan artists communicate their ethnic and cultural pride through hip hop as a response to the state’s representation of Tibetans. On the other hand, the essentialization of Tibetan identities, fueled by nationalism, sparks a discussion within the Tibetan youth community on the meaning of being Tibetan in Tibetan regions in the PRC today.

Fifty-eight years ago, in 1959, the fourteenth Dalai Lama fled to India and the Chinese Communist Party took over the administration of central Tibet. More than half a century has passed, and Tibetan identity continues to shift and transform in response to domestic and international forces. In her study on the rock music scene in the Tibetan exile community in Dharamsala, Keila Diehl argues that “the ways various song traditions are loved, debated, rejected, tolerated, or ignored…can be analyzed as embodiments or performances of the challenges and paradoxes of maintaining an ethnically-based community in diaspora.” Similarly, the Tibetan hip hop scene in China may seem confusing and paradoxical at first, but its dynamics precisely reflect the inherent contradictions and complexities of articulating what it means to be Tibetan in China today.

The data for this study was collected during fieldwork conducted in Shanghai, Xining, Rebgong, Gyalthang, and Lhasa from June to August 2017. A major component of this fieldwork involved semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with twenty Tibetan rappers, as well as artists specializing in other genres of music, producers, creative industry entrepreneurs, and audience members at hip hop performances. Another component of fieldwork was participant observation in bars, livehouses, studios, and restaurants where music and social events took place. In addition to onsite fieldwork, this study also draws on analyses of social media content, music videos, posters, and song lyrics. While Tibetan hip hop artists produce works in different languages, the scope of this paper is limited to Chinese and English language songs or Tibetan language songs with Chinese translation because the author cannot speak or read Tibetan.

Although a few young Tibetans started to experiment with rap more than ten years ago, it was not until recently that Tibetan hip hop began to enjoy large-scale popularity in China.
Tibet. The Rap of China, a 2017 national hip hop TV talent show, contributed to hip hop’s popularity in China, and during the past year, the number of aspiring rappers and hip hop lovers has grown quickly. “Tigga” has become a buzzword among many Tibetan hip hop enthusiasts. From “Lhatlanta” to “Gologfornia,” Tibetan rappers in Tibetan areas of China strive to put their cities or towns on the hip hop map of the world. Tibetan hip hop is growing into a subculture in which an increasing number of young Tibetans engage and from which they claim their identities. The Tibetan hip hop scene is growing and maturing, with patterns taking shape and stabilizing.

Music is a powerful and creative lens for studying identity and many scholars have written about the relationship between Tibetan identity and contemporary Tibetan music within China. The vast majority of this scholarship creates a dichotomy between the state and the Tibetan people and portrays the Tibetan music scene as a form of resistance towards the state. This study contributes to this body of work by highlighting how the Tibetan hip hop scene has become a space where Tibetan youth negotiate their identities in the face of heightening Tibetan nationalism.

The Origin of Hip Hop and Hip Hop’s Significance in the U.S.

In the 1960s, various policies and initiatives in the United States, such as the encouragement of middle-class suburbanization, urban renewal projects, highway construction, and the loss of manufacturing jobs, produced high concentrations of poverty in the South Bronx, New York. Hip hop arose from social activities such as graffiti and DJ-ing in which young African Americans and Puerto Ricans engaged. The social context of the South Bronx at the time was a key determinant of hip hop’s popularity. As sociologist Joseph Ewoodzie explains, South Bronx youth found hip hop meaningful because it was

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5 Some of the earliest Tibetans who started experimenting with hip hop and gained some level of local or regional recognition include Mr. Jin and his Jing Group (镜团体).
6 Tigga is appropriated from “nigga” to refer to Tibetan nigga.
7 “Lhatlanta” combines “Lhasa”, the capital of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, with “Atlanta”, the capital of the state of Georgia, which is known for its trap rap music scene. The term was first coined by Lhasa rapper Nature Motor (马自然达). “Gologfornia” combines “Golog”, a region in Amdo, Tibet, with “California”, the home of the West Coast hip hop scene.
based on their own aesthetic preference. The subjects of rap songs largely center on the ghetto experience which resulted from structural racism and long-term economic, social and political disempowerment. Rap originated as an art form that African American and Latino youth have utilized to give voice to their experience in the “systematic matrix of racial, spatial, and class discrimination that has defined black city life.” Central to hip hop is race politics in urban America. Over the past six decades, hip hop has become widely popular around the world; it has particularly been embraced by disadvantaged and marginalized members of various societies.

**Tibetan Hip Hop and Ethnic Identity Negotiation in China**

According to Tony Mitchell, a Cultural Studies scholar, as cited by social linguist Alastair Pennycook, “Hip hop and rap cannot be viewed simply as an expression of African-American culture; it has become...a tool for reworking local identity all over the world.” The spread of hip hop to Tibet should not be viewed as Americanization or global homogenization. Instead, how hip hop becomes localized and adapted says a lot about the dynamics in Tibet. What makes Tibetan hip hop Tibetan is not the language, the style, or the beats per se. As in the case of Japanese hip hop documented by anthropologist Ian Condry, Tibetan hip hop is Tibetan because it offers a space where Tibetan young people convene, either literally or metaphorically, to make sense of their position within the mainstream PRC society, amidst the forces of state-led economic development and the dominant discourse on ethnic relations. As Lhasa-based rapper Lobsang concluded, “We are all products of the era.” The forces of state policies and discourses, the Tibetan cultural and religious heritage, and capitalism collide in the Tibetan hip hop scene, producing complex and sometimes paradoxical re-imaginations of Tibetan ethnic identities. The Tibetan hip hop scene, therefore, offers a snapshot of China’s ethnicity politics. The Tibetan hip hop circle serves as a space for young Tibetans to reclaim their agency by redefining Tibetan identity in response to mainstream Chinese audiences’ stereotypes. Tibetan nationalist sentiments reflected in the hip hop and creative culture scene, however, can promote the essentialization of Tibetan identities, which can in turn stunt innovation and alienate Tibetans who may not fit the traditional perception of what being Tibetan entails. Thus, the Tibetan hip hop scene becomes an avenue for Tibetan youth from diverse backgrounds to deliberate over the essence of Tibetan youth identity.

Tibetan hip hop artists are influenced by a variety of sources: American hip hop artists like Tupac and Eminem, Han Chinese hip hop artists such as Higher Brothers and

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11 Ibid.


13 Lobsang, interview by author, August, 2017. All names used are pseudonyms.
Tibetan and Hong Kong pop artists such as Jay Chou and Beyond, as well as Tibetan rappers and singers like Dekyi Tsering and Shapaley. Besides these direct sources of influence, Tibetan hip hop artists, by virtue of growing up and living in Tibet or other places in China, have been subject to the state discourse of ethnicity in various forms.

Previous scholarship has highlighted how pop music, a grassroots art form, has been used by Tibetans and other ethnic minorities alike to subvert or add nuance to the state representation of their identities. The official principles guiding interethnic relationships in China are equality and autonomy, as implied by the Chinese Constitution and the Seventeen Point Agreement. In reality, however, paternalism and exoticism dominate the Chinese government's approach to ethnic minorities, and the Chinese state tends to promote a secular and ahistorical image of Tibetan culture. Primarily concerned with claiming authority over Tibet, the PRC "simply presents Tibetan performing arts, not mentioning tradition or history." In other words, because the Chinese government showcases Tibetan culture only to bolster its claim that China is a multiethnic country, united under the Chinese Communist Party, state-sanctioned or state-sponsored representations of ethnic minorities often disregard the complex dimensions of the culture, such as regional differences, religion, and history. For example, state performing art troupes perform Tibetan dances in the state style, which is modeled after ballet. Furthermore, the subjects of the dances and songs center around either ahistorical and apolitical folk traditions, such as celebrating the harvest, building houses, and tending herds or selected historical moments that are consistent with the Chinese government's narrative, such as the so-called emancipation of serfs in March 1959 and the construction of the Qinghai-Tibet railway in 2006. Examples include classic songs, including Xi Yi Ge (洗衣歌 or Clothes-Washing Song) commending the People's Liberation Army and the Chinese Communist Party, Beijing De Jin Shan Shang (北京的金山上 or On Top of Beijing's Golden Mountain) praising Mao and Chinese socialism, and Tian Lu (天路 or The Road to the Sky) eulogizing the Qinghai-Tibet railroad which was, in fact, an extremely controversial construction project.

Tibetan young people consider hip hop a space for responding to the state narrative of Tibetan identity partly because of its position outside of direct state control and its connection to liberal ideas, including “a general language of justice-based politics,”


For more details on the official PRC policies on interethnic relations, the portrayal of Tibetans in the state's performing arts realm, and the Chinese government's nation building effort through the performing arts, see TIN, Unity and Discord; Van Vleet, “The “Righteous Power” of Modern Tibetan Music Within the PRC”; Morcom, “History, Traditions, Identities, and Nationalism.”

Morcom, “Drawing and Redrawing the Musical Cultural Map of Tibet,” 395.
“freedom of expression,” and “community-building and service to the community.”

Through hip hop, Tibetan young people express pride in their cultural and religious heritage, break the stereotype of the backward ethnic minority, promote respect for the particularities of ethnic minorities, and communicate Tibetan nationalism.

Incorporating references to and expressing pride in Buddhism and Tibetan folklore in rap songs serve not only as indirect resistance towards the socialist capital market economy and the materialist mindset that comes with it, but also as a response to the state effort to secularize and make Tibetan culture ahistorical. Born in GL, a song by Amdo rapper KZ YAK, illustrates this rapper’s pride in Tibetan folklore and religion:

Though there are both bitterness and happiness in life
King Gesar’s people my Tigga do da dope shit
We are motherfucking young but don’t like bullshit
Because Buddha Dharma hip hop

Loving kindness spreads all over in the most direct way
Golden roofs and white stupas make up the freest architectures
(first verse written in English and second verse written in Tibetan)

King Gesar is the central character in The Epic of King Gesar, a mythical Tibetan king of heroic character. By referring to King Gesar, the rapper expresses his pride in the depth and richness of Tibetan culture. Furthermore, KZ YAK expresses his high regard for Buddhism by praising the Buddhist value of loving kindness and describing the beauty of religious sites. The artist’s translanguage use is particularly noteworthy. Rapping one part in English and incorporating hip hop-specific vocabularies such as “da da dope shit,” and curse words, such as “motherfucking” and “bullshit,” locate the artist within a global and modern culture. By performing his Tibetan identity as cosmopolitan and modern, the artist suggests that Buddhism and Tibetan traditional culture are progressive and fashionable, contrary to the government’s view that they are obsolete and inferior. Here, we should understand the artist’s use of English as an attempt to take on a global identity not only for its own sake but also for the sake of refashioning Tibetan identity within the power dynamics of the PRC.

In a song called Drokpa $wag, the rapper and songwriter Tenzin D the Dreamer characterizes religiosity as a key characteristic of a drokpa, or nomad, and conveys his pride for cherishing and celebrating Buddhist principles:

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19 Monasteries typically have golden roofs and a stupa is mound-like or hemispherical structure containing relics of the Buddha or accomplished Buddhist masters.
This is nomad swag
Golden teeth are implanted into our mouths, karma is kept in our hearts
Wealth is not given, my brother
So we need to keep working hard
......
There are only family, friends, the Buddha, the sky and the earth in my view
......
On high mountains and beside clear rivers, we respect samsara
(lyrics written in Tibetan)\textsuperscript{20}

When asked why this song was popular with Tibetan audiences, he asserted that it had “the smell of tsampa.”\textsuperscript{21} By that, he meant that his songs were relatable to Tibetans, especially those from nomadic backgrounds, because of his lyrics and his use of the nomadic dialect. In this song, the artist affirms the importance of Buddhist principles, such as karma and samsara, for his audience as well as himself.

By expressing cultural and religious pride through hip hop, a modern and foreign art form, Tibetan hip hop artists make it clear that not only do religious and cultural traditions matter in their own lives, but they are still highly relevant to modern society. A number of rappers shared their understandings of Buddhism in their lives. “Religion should not be equated with superstition, as the government often claims that it is. Rather, religion is about truth,” Lobsang said.\textsuperscript{22} By studying and taking pride in Tibetan Buddhism, these young Tibetans resist the underdeveloped status attributed to them and develop a “collective self-perception of morally superior agency.”\textsuperscript{23} Several rappers mentioned that they were proud of being born as Tibetans because of their religious inheritance.\textsuperscript{24} They emphasized the importance of cultural and religious traditions in modern life and expressed pride in their religiosity, precisely because Buddhism is no longer an integral part of mainstream Han Chinese society.

Another dimension of Tibetan identity that Tibetan hip hop artists promote is a sense of equality with members of other ethnic groups in China. Through hip hop, Tibetan rappers present a modern image of Tibet, challenging the prevalent Chinese view of Tibetans as backward. A large number of urban Tibetan young people have had the opportunity to travel to other parts of China, either for education, travel, or work. Encountering people from outside of Tibet helps them understand how they are perceived by others. Even for those Tibetans who have not had the opportunity to travel, through the Chinese media, government policies, and in public education, they have got to know the sense of the paternalism and exoticism that characterizes the mainstream Chinese perception of

\textsuperscript{21} Karma, interview by author, June, 2017. Tsampa is a Tibetan staple made from barley flour.
\textsuperscript{22} Lobsang, interview by author, August, 2017.
\textsuperscript{24} Interview with Tashi, Norbu, Jigme respectively.
them. Lobsang’s experience attending a national talent TV show when he was thirteen echoes this impression:

The directing team dyed my hair golden and asked me to wear a hat and a traditional Tibetan dress on the outside. The plan was to set up a contrast [between the traditional and the modern]. They instructed me to say some prayers before I started my act. And as soon as the music started playing, I was supposed to take off the Tibetan dress and the hat [to show the modern outfit underneath].

In the eyes of many Han Chinese, Tibet and Tibetans are synonymous with tradition and backwardness, as if modernity were a quality exclusive to Han Chinese. They assume that Chinese is to Tibetan, as modernity is to underdevelopment. Only by setting oneself apart from any Tibetanness and embracing the Han Chinese norm, as represented by the physical act of taking off the Tibetan dress and exposing the dyed hair and western dress, is a Tibetan deemed sufficiently modern and at the same level of Han Chinese.

A song written and performed by an Amdo duo for a national hip hop TV show points to the same issue:

When I was in my teens,  
The kids around me asked me “Hey, who are you?”  
Beijing’s sky is not as beautiful as the sky back home  
I want to eat tsampa and drink butter tea  
But here I can only find wine and wine glasses  
[People asked me] whether Tibetans showered only once in their lives  
Whether Tibetans had horse-riding and archery as part of the university entrance exam  
Whether your home place Qinghai was in Qingdao  
(lyrics written in Chinese)

Based on the real life experiences of the members of this hip hop duo, these lyrics exemplify what linguist Mary Louise Pratt terms as “arts of the contact zone.” Pratt defines contact zones as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power.” Norbu, one member of the duo, spent a lot of time in such contact zones, as he left home for middle school in central China and only returned home after college. Deeply aware of how ignorant the vast majority of Han Chinese are about Tibetan society, he wrote this song as a response. By “not answering directly the questions people have for [them], but rephrasing them into rhetorical questions for the audience,” Norbu and his partner appropriate

26 Qinghai is the name of the province that covers most areas of Amdo, while Qingdao is the name of a city in the northeastern province of Shandong. A lot of people mix Qinghai and Qingdao together because their names start with the same syllable. 2UNCLE and Xu Zhenzhen, “Stay,” accessed November 25, 2017, http://www.9ku.com/geci/863693.htm.
28 Ibid., 34.
and adapt pieces of the representational repertoire of mainland Han Chinese audiences to create self-representations and to raise questions about mainstream understandings of Tibetans.\textsuperscript{29} Furthermore, by constructing a “parodic, oppositional representation of [the Han Chinese’s] own speech,” as illustrated by making light of the ignorant and absurd questions many Han have towards Tibetans, these Tibetan hip hop artists mirror back to the audience an image of Tibetans often unrecognized by the mainstream Han community. This is intended to reverse the paradigm of Han paternalism and exoticism.\textsuperscript{30} Exhibiting features of autoethnography, critique, and parody, this piece is an example of how a marginalized group seeks to intervene in the dominant modes of perception.

Equality with different ethnic groups goes hand in hand with a sense of Tibetan modernity, since modernity is often viewed as a prerequisite for equality. By engaging in hip hop, a global art form, Tibetan hip hop artists demonstrate that Tibetans are also participating in and influencing the course of modernity. In an interview in August 2017 in Lhasa, Dorjee, a Lhasa rapper who has experience interacting with a lot of rappers from all over China, stated:

\begin{quote}
I do hip hop because I want to change the stereotypes that people have about Tibet and Tibetans. I want to tell people from outside [Tibet] that Tibet has an underground too, not just snow mountains, grasslands, and drolmas (the term for girls or young women in Tibetan). I hope that when I introduce myself as from Tibet, people [around me] won't be surprised and will treat me as equal to everyone else.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

Snow mountains, grasslands and drolmas are some stereotypical elements that Chinese mainstream audience members often associate with Tibet; These stereotypes are partly perpetuated by the Chinese-facing Tibetan commercial pop music. While these images do represent some aspects of Tibet, the picture of Tibet they depict has the danger of patronizing Tibetans as simple and naïve. As a response, Tibetan hip hop artists emphasize modernity, pride for their ethnic particularity, and equality with other ethnicities. They claim that not only are Tibetans modern, but the specificities of Tibetan culture should be respected and maintained, rather than discarded in order for Tibetans to be assimilated into mainstream Chinese society.

The third strategy Tibetan hip hop artists use to respond to the state representation of Tibetans is denouncing social injustice, which is linked with ethnonationalism. This trend is in line with the emergence of what political scientist Ben Hillman characterizes as “a pan-ethnic awakening among Tibetans in China” after the 2008 protests.\textsuperscript{32} By embracing modernity through a modern musical aesthetic, Tibetan hip hop artists

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{29} Norbu, interview by author, June, 2017.  \\
\textsuperscript{30} Pratt, \textit{Arts of the Contact Zone}, 35.  \\
\textsuperscript{31} Dorjee, interview by author, August, 2017.  \\
\end{flushleft}
implicitly critique the authority structures driving the ethnic dynamics in China. The lament over ethnicity-related social injustice and the expression of ethnonationalism are based on pride for Tibetan cultural and religious traditions. Some Tibetan hip hop artists strive to go beyond merely eliciting these feelings in their audience, by transforming pride into a sense of responsibility and action. The song, *My Tigga*, by a duo from Amdo illustrates this sentiment:

My Tigga, My Tigga
Now you need to look at my Tigga
Coral and amber on the neck
[My Tigga are] warriors from the plateau who came down
The Tibetan knives on our waist have new blood
There is so much misunderstanding towards us, you’re all wrong
Too many killings of the physical bodies and souls, [with what’s left is] all bone
I have yaks under me, wolves behind me, eagles on my shoulders and sheep all over the mountain
[Our] ancestors come from the Yarlung Tsangpo River
[We are] nomads with wounds on our bodies
Ghosts and monsters go away, I am a descendent of King Gesar
No matter if you are nigga, chigga, or tigga, there should not be discrimination, yep my tigga
You ask me who I am, why I swipe away my tears in my eyes

....
Tigga, maybe you understand me [or] maybe you are just passing by
Maybe you never cared about me

....
Thanks to my mother and father
I will follow your steps
My Tigga, please wipe your tears away
My Tigga, the sky’s getting dark but [we] shouldn’t sleep
The disappeared Tibetan prince, the dead kings and warriors.
* (lyrics written in Chinese)33

The first aspect of this song features a primordialist approach to Tibetan national identity, the second aspect laments the loss and pain the Tibetan people have gone through, and the third is a call to move forward. From coral, amber, and Tibetan knives, to yaks, the Yarlung Tsangpo River, and King Gesar, the artists refer to aspects of a common Tibetan identity ranging from clothing, accessories, lifestyle, mythical origin, and folklore. In doing so, they create a sense of primordial Tibetan identity, which is distinct from a Han Chinese identity. These artists point out the existence of “so much misunderstanding,” “too many killings of the physical bodies and souls,” and “discrimination” in the current social context. During an interview in Xining in June 2017, Norbu, one member of the duo, explained that misunderstanding stems from stereotypes that many Han Chinese

people have about Tibetans, which are in turn caused by the lack of contact and interaction. One result of the misunderstanding is the “killings of the physical bodies and souls,” namely, self-immolations and other tragic acts. Another product of misunderstanding is discrimination. According to Norbu, he juxtaposed nigga, chigga and tigga in these lyrics, because: “Many Han Chinese face racial discrimination abroad. Therefore, in China, they shouldn’t discriminate against us Tibetans. We should be kind to each other.” In the last verse, the artists call on Tibetans to overcome grief and sorrow and follow in the footsteps of previous generations by passing down their Tibetan heritage. Full of imagery and coded language, the song reveals the pain many Tibetans feel, but also their resilience and sense of nationalism.

Growing nationalist sentiment, together with the rise of a consumer economy, itself a product of state-driven economic development, has paradoxically led to the essentialization of Tibetan identity. Anthropologist Gerald Roche finds that the theme of Tibetan nationalism is ubiquitous in Tibetan pop, and that in Tibetan pop songs, “a single Tibetan language…is portrayed as the essence, soul, or life-force of the Tibetan geobody.” The perceived strong tie between the Tibetan language, Tibetan nationality, and the Tibetan landscape is found in both pop and rap songs. Rapping or singing in Tibetan is seen as a gesture of nationalism, regardless of the song’s content. An Amdo rapper Pema commented on the recent success of *Fly*, a song by ANU, across the Tibetan plateau: “If they had not sung this song in Tibetan, it wouldn’t have gone viral because there are already so many similar types of songs in Chinese and English.” The perception that choosing to sing in Tibetan displays one’s ethnic pride goes hand in hand with the view that those who sing and rap in Chinese are using the oppressor’s language. A presumably Tibetan audience member made the following comment about a music video of two Tibetan artists’ Chinese-language song: “If this were a Tibetan rap song, the MV would definitely have gone viral and there would have been many positive comments from Tibetan compatriots. [However,] it’s a pity that this song is in Chinese, since there are so many Chinese-language rap songs by Han Chinese that are better than yours, and therefore this song of yours is not unique.” Some Tibetans seem to base success and recognition on how much Tibetanness one exhibits, rather than simply the qualities of the works themselves.

The essentialization of Tibetan identities has manifested itself not only in language use, but also in dress. In recent years, contemporary Tibetan-style clothing and accessories have become popular in Tibet. These products usually incorporate Tibetan elements such as Tibetan patterns, traditional designs, colors, or the Tibetan script into their design.

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34 Norbu, interview by author, June, 2017.
35 Ibid.
Apart from clothing, caps, bags, and other accessories are sold. While much of this merchandise is popular among Tibetan young people, the lack of creativity and the simply profit-oriented goal may be harmful to the Tibetan community itself. “Anything that is coined as ‘Tibetan’ is very profitable now,” said an Amdo rapper, “In a lot of the cases, they (the designers or the fashion companies) just print the English word ‘Tibet’ onto a shirt and market it as Tibetan. What’s worse, they sell the products at a high price, which does not match the quality.” This rapper maintains that only if the design and style of a product are Tibetan, should it be considered authentically Tibetan.

A few young Tibetan hip hop artists claimed that some Tibetans’ narrow-minded ethnic pride has led to an essentialization of Tibetan identity. Several young Tibetan hip hop artists disapprove of this narrow-minded view on ethnicity, and advocate for broader expressions of ethnic pride. Some of them translate ethnic pride into having the ability to excel in cultures different from their own. Most Tibetan rappers acknowledged the fact that there were many more Chinese speakers than Tibetan speakers in the audience. To them, singing and rapping in Chinese is a practical act that allows Tibetan artists to capture a larger share of the market and should not be viewed as an act of ethnic betrayal. Norbu explained that:

> Around 80% of the people in China understand Chinese. Why should we [Tibetans] consume our own culture [by singing only in Tibetan] instead of letting others help us promote our work [to a wider audience]? What is the point of earning our own people’s money? Doing so is no different from asking one’s own mum for money.

In this instance, Chinese language use by Tibetan hip hop artists is transactional. The source of ethnic pride, according to this understanding, stems from the ability to master language skills that belong to others (Han Chinese), and potentially profit from them, but it does not necessarily involve a mission to transform the way Han Chinese and Tibetans understand each other.

Other hip hop artists believe that ethnic pride should reflect positively on the Tibetan nation instead of conforming to static, reified perceptions about being Tibetan. Norbu said: “Someone who wants to do something for the Tibetan people doesn’t do it by wearing Tibetan dress every day, but by actually doing things for the cause.” Lhasa-based rapper Lobsang’s opinion resonated with Norbu’s: “I hope that Tibetan audiences will increasingly celebrate Tibetan artists’ achievements regardless of the style of their work and the languages in which they sing.” According to this understanding, rapping in Chinese helps break apart the exoticized stereotypes of Tibetans, as it allows

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39 See Figures 1-4 in the Appendix for examples.
40 Thondup, interview by author, June, 2017.
41 Interview with Norbu, Lobsang, and Thondup, respectively.
42 Norbu, interview by author, June, 2017.
43 Ibid.
44 Lobsang, interview by author, August, 2017.
these Tibetan hip hop artists to avoid “[appealing] through localization” and “[being] condemned to the ‘world music’ scene” rather than the mainstream popular music scene.\textsuperscript{45} In the words of Dorjee:

> What is unique about Tibetan hip hop is that we have the Tibetan language. However, we (Tibetan artists) shouldn’t be ethnicized. No one can represent a whole region [or nation] but only oneself. Singing Tibetan is only a way to show one’s state of life [instead of a way to label one’s ethnic identity].\textsuperscript{46}

Almost paradoxically, de-ethnicizing themselves by rapping in Chinese frees Tibetan hip hop artists from others’ stereotypical views of them, and thus affirms Tibetans’ equality with other members of the PRC. Unlike the first view, this more open-minded take on Tibetan ethnic pride is based on merit and excellence in all fields, not just how well one fits the Tibetan label, which is liberating for Tibetans themselves.

Other young artists contended that a real sense of ethnic pride involved an open-mindedness towards cultures different from one’s own. Dorjee, who raps well in both Chinese and Tibetan, stated that the relationship between rapping in Chinese and Tibetan is not a contradictory one. He claimed:

> As a Tibetan, rapping in my mother tongue is a responsibility. However, I didn’t choose to be born Tibetan. The Buddha decided it. Therefore, I should have the freedom to determine how I want to live. The world is so big, one shouldn’t limit oneself to just one spot.\textsuperscript{47}

In other words, the sense of responsibility that he feels as a Tibetan is not undermined by the freedom to explore things beyond his own cultural sphere. In the words of Norbu: “The greatness of any nation lies in its tolerance and openness [towards differences].”\textsuperscript{48} Having respect towards other nations implies that one’s pride for one’s nation is based on pure joy and not on arrogance. Though this view of Tibetan identity is not shared by everyone, it has been gaining resonance for more and more young Tibetans, as they balance embracing their common Tibetan identity on the one hand and staying true to their diverse individual lived experiences pertaining to geography, language, education, and religion on the other.

**Conclusion**

Tibetan hip hop artists resist the dominant Chinese state’s representation of Tibetans by using hip hop to redefine what it means to be Tibetan. In response to the Chinese state’s tendency to present Tibetan culture as unsophisticated, exotic, secular, and ahistorical, Tibetan hip hop artists communicate pride for their cultural and religious traditions,

\textsuperscript{45} Pennycook, “Teaching with the Flow,” 35. 
\textsuperscript{46} Dorjee, interview by author, August, 2017.  
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid. 
\textsuperscript{48} Norbu, interview by author, June, 2017.
challenge the stereotype of underdeveloped Tibetans, promote diversity and particularity, and reveal the flaws and injustices of certain government policies in Tibet. As this study demonstrates, heightened Tibetan nationalist sentiment also has led to a tendency for some Tibetans to essentialize their identity. The Tibetan hip hop scene provides a space for young Tibetans to address this issue and create a more inclusive Tibetan identity.

“Why did you sing *Made in China* instead of *Made in Tibet*?” After the concert that evening, someone asked this to a member of the rap group. The rapper grinned, shook his head, and responded: “We don’t have such a song yet. We are working on it.” What messages will this forthcoming *Made in Tibet* tell? What language(s) will it be in? Will it feature Han Chinese rappers in addition to Tibetan hip hop artists? Who will be the target audience? The answers to these questions are hard to predict. Far from being immune to the outside world, hip hop on the roof of the world absorbs and responds to the diverse social forces that collide on the Tibetan plateau. Tibetan hip hop artists creatively work with and against these different social forces and produce their own ever-shifting “Tibetan” works of art.

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Appendix

Figure 1. A cap with the print “Pretty Tibetan”\textsuperscript{49}

Figure 2. T-shirts with the prints “Samsara”\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{49} Taobao, accessed November 25, 2017, https://item.taobao.com/item.htm?spm=a1z10.5-c.w4002-15766495915.13.2cac8a2brCpelp\&id=546350873965.

\textsuperscript{50} Taobao, accessed November 25, 2017, https://item.taobao.com/item.htm?spm=a1z10.5-c.w4002-15766495915.34.4a987ae95Vibo0\&id=535444166875.
Figure 3. ANU’s Tibetan style top.\textsuperscript{51}

Figure 4. ANU’s Tibetan mastiff print top.\textsuperscript{52}


\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
References

**Discography**


Bibliography


