Keep It “Skr”

The Incorporation of Hip-Hop Subculture through Chinese Talent Shows and the Online Battle for Authenticity

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Despite entering mainland China in the 1980s and achieving early mainstream success in the West, hip-hop remained a relatively underground subculture over the past few decades, experiencing bursts of popularity that were quickly overwhelmed by mainstream media or suppressed by government intervention. However, this changed in 2017 with the appearance of an internet-based talent show called The Rap of China (中国有嘻哈), which became one of the most popular programs of the year and introduced hip-hop culture to a massive general audience. This paper takes a media anthropology approach to analyze the rapid development of Chinese hip-hop since 2017, applying Dick Hebdige’s subculture theory as a framework for understanding hip-hop’s evolution. This study draws from various examples of hip-hop representation in Chinese online entertainment platforms as well as its incorporation within dominant culture in both the commodity and ideological forms to critique the fundamental “authenticity” of mainstream, state-regulated Chinese hip-hop. Despite that, using Stuart Hall’s theories on encoding/decoding and Michel de Certeau’s theories on consumer production, this paper ultimately concludes that consumer participants in Chinese hip-hop can implement large-scale, online oppositional decoding methods to construct authentic meaning outside of mainstream media, even if they had no prior understanding of hip-hop culture.

Introduction

There is a dilemma present within many subcultures in that their inherent opposition to the mainstream is always contradicted by their own growth. In particular, hip-hop culture has always been explicitly rooted in the principles of authenticity and resistance to authority while also becoming a global commercial phenomenon far removed from its origins in urban America. Originally imported from the West, hip-hop in China had gradually developed into its own robust subculture over the course of a few decades through underground channels and individual bursts of mainstream exposure, but it had yet to face the challenge of a major mainstream transition. However, with society’s
entry into the internet and mass media era, the dynamics of subcultural evolution have dramatically changed, and online cultural content is now capable of being shared on the scale of millions practically instantly. With this new media landscape as its backdrop, Chinese hip-hop culture as a whole finally experienced mainstream exposure during the summer of 2017 with the premiere of an internet-based talent show called *The Rap of China* (中国有嘻哈).

Produced by online video platform iQiyi, *The Rap of China* quickly became a national phenomenon, attracting over 2.7 billion views over the course of its three-month inaugural season. Similar to other competition shows, *The Rap of China* follows a round-by-round elimination format, starting with an “open” audition and putting contestants through a series of challenges, such as head-to-head rap battles, team performances, and audience voting. The show primarily focuses on live performance, including various on-screen visuals that complement each rappers’ delivery, as well as interspersed scenes of day-to-day activity intended to provide character development for contestants and judges. Because of its heavy focus on imagery, the show presents not only the sonic components of hip-hop, but also the style of hip-hop culture to a broader audience.

Despite the show’s massive success, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) issued a set of regulations just months after the conclusion of the show’s first season “banning” hip-hop from mass media. They stated that television “should not feature actors with tattoos (or depict) hip hop culture, sub-culture and immoral culture,” resulting in the censorship of various successful contestants and leading many to believe that the show would be cancelled moving forward. Some media reports have speculated that this “ban” was initiated because of the overwhelming mainstream success of a particular Western cultural form, representing a threat to state ideology. Since then, the Chinese government has remained relatively quiet on the subject of hip-hop in mass media, and a second season of *The Rap of China*, under a new Chinese name (中国新说唱 or New Rap of China instead of 中国有嘻哈 or China has Hip-Hop), aired during the summer of 2018 with similar levels of public attention.

Accordingly, hip-hop has continued to take the mainland by storm, whether it be through live concerts and music festivals, street fashion, streaming, internet discourse, or even a new iQiyi hip-hop production on street dance, *Hot Blood Dance Crew* (热血街舞团).

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2 The word “open” is in quotation marks since there are reports of rappers being directly invited to participate on the show.
3 Liu, “Hatin’ on hip hop: China’s rap scene frustrated by crackdown.”
4 Ibid.
At this point, it is undeniable that hip-hop culture has entered the Chinese mainstream. However, this raises the question of how hip-hop was able to make that transition and what role online media platforms, such as iQiyi, have played in a transnational youth subculture’s integration into Chinese dominant culture. More importantly, the mass media marketization of Chinese hip-hop calls into question its authenticity as a distinct cultural artistic product, as it often appears that current Chinese presentations of hip-hop are simply commodified reproductions.

Situating its discussion within the contemporary online era, this paper starts by using Dick Hebdige’s research on youth subcultures in Britain as a framework for understanding the ways in which internet-based talent shows have facilitated the evolution of Chinese subculture. In doing so, it presents various examples of hip-hop representation in Chinese online entertainment as well as hip-hop’s incorporation within dominant culture in both the commodity and ideological forms, making note of China’s particularly stringent state and industry regulation. This leads into the paper’s central dilemma, which is Chinese hip-hop’s authenticity and faithfulness to subcultural first principles amidst dramatic commercialization. Applying Stuart Hall’s theories on the production and dissemination of messages and Michel de Certeau’s theories on consumer production, the paper argues that while Chinese mass media’s own depiction of hip-hop falls into the category of inauthentic cultural reproduction, consumer participants in Chinese hip-hop have been able to implement large-scale, online oppositional decoding methods to construct authentic meaning outside of mainstream media, even if they had no prior understanding of hip-hop culture. That is, the evolution of Chinese hip-hop even through inauthentic means can expose a new, critical audience to many of the culture’s authentic principles, preserving its subcultural origins within the collective consciousness.

**The Evolution of Hip-Hop through Chinese Mass Media**

Using *The Rap of China* and *Hot Blood Dance Crew* as its primary case studies, this section analyzes the role of internet-based talent shows in developing Chinese hip-hop from subculture to mainstream spectacle, taking Hebdige’s study of youth subcultures as a key framework for understanding such mechanisms. Focusing on shows as sources of style as well as their facilitation of commodity and ideological recuperation, the paper demonstrates the key mechanisms by which hip-hop culture has entered dominant culture, making special note of the collaboration between state and entertainment industry within the Chinese context.

**Hebdige’s Subculture Framework**

Within the contemporary Chinese media landscape, visual entertainment on internet platforms allows for the rapid consumption of hip-hop cultural signs (music, performance, dress, etc.). In that regard, one of the most powerful sources is currently video streaming platform iQiyi with over 400 million monthly active users (MAUs) as of late
2018.\textsuperscript{7} As mentioned previously, iQiyi’s most notable engagement with hip-hop is \textit{The Rap of China}, a symbol of hip-hop’s success in general. iQiyi itself even issued a press release following the conclusion of the first season stating that the show helped it “go mainstream in China.”\textsuperscript{8} Despite the state media regulator’s soft ban on hip-hop culture, a second season of \textit{The Rap of China} and the debut of street dance competition show \textit{Hot Blood Dance Crew} continue to further the subculture’s development in dominant culture.

While such market analysis can help us understand the media actors involved in hip-hop’s development, a cultural studies framework can better inform a critique of the mechanisms by which hip-hop culture is transformed. Written in 1979 about British youth subcultures, like skinheads and punks, Hebdige’s landmark work \textit{Subculture: The Meaning of Style} provides an analysis of transition that remains relevant to the contemporary Chinese context. As detailed in later sections, the principles of hip-hop are rooted in an antiauthoritarian resistance, much like that of Britain’s postwar youth. More importantly, this paper finds the most value not in Hebdige’s classification of subculture, complicated by the unique cultural history of China, but in his analysis of mass media, wherein he provides two key conceptual frameworks to understand the role of media in facilitating mainstream transition. Since these media mechanisms are generally useful to consider, this study applies the two concepts to the development of Chinese hip-hop through online talent shows.

\textbf{Shows as Sources of Hip-Hop Style}

The first concept is that of the sources of style. Hebdige writes that, because of the way that mass media like press, television, and film provide such a strong basis for image-making and class-construction, “much of what finds itself encoded in subculture has already been subject to a certain amount of prior handling by the media.”\textsuperscript{9} That is, outside of simply constituting the mainstream media that signifies when a subculture has begun to break into dominant culture, components of media help circulate the meanings and practices that constitute the social fabric of a subculture itself. Alluding to Hall, Hebdige also suggests that, in perceiving these mediated images of themselves, members of a youth culture engage in a discursive process of agreement and contestation with “dominant definitions of who and what they are” in which “there is a substantial amount of shared ideological ground.”\textsuperscript{10} This indicates that the media boundary between subculture and mainstream is quite nebulous.

Having watched the entirety of both seasons of \textit{The Rap of China} and several episodes of \textit{Hot Blood Dance Crew}, it is clear that iQiyi’s highly successful hip-hop programming


\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 86.
acts as a major source of style for a national audience of hip-hop consumers. These shows bring together artists from various backgrounds onto a single set, presenting narratives of competition and dialogue between characters as well as generating images of class that define identity within the subculture. One narrative strongly presented in the first season of The Rap of China is the tension between underground rappers, who generally gain recognition through local rap battle scenes, and “idol” rappers, who are signed to entertainment agencies at a young age and developed as “trainees.” For example, one idol rapper, J.zen (朱星杰), is shown being booed by several underground contestants during one of his first performances, reflecting the disdain many such rappers have for trainees, who they believe have lived a privileged and inauthentic hip-hop lifestyle. As the season progresses, the show’s judges eventually eliminate each of the idol contestants, leaving only rappers developed within China’s own underground community. Thus, the ideological discourse surrounding underground versus mainstream talent is reflected in a major media platform itself, which re-encodes it into the subculture and, ironically, pushes the principles of the hip-hop subculture further into the mainstream. Audiences, even often as new participants within the discourse, pick up on these cues. In a street interview, one fan who stated that she had only started listening to hip-hop music after watching The Rap of China also noted that because of the show, “the underground scene has slowly gained public acceptance.”

Media Incorporation of Chinese Hip-Hop

The second concept Hebdige applies to mass media regards his theory on the actual process of incorporating subcultures into popular discourse, wherein he argues that “it is the subculture’s stylistic innovations which first attract the media’s attention,” but subsequent “deviant behavior or the identification of a distinctive uniform (or more typically a combination of the two) can provide the catalyst for a moral panic.” With Chinese hip-hop, media fascination with the subculture’s stylistic innovation has been exemplified by the inclusion of hip-hop artists in variety shows that do not specifically focus on hip-hop, in which case a hip-hop performance represents an anomaly and actually benefits the contestant. For example, The Rap of China’s season one co-champion, GAI, was invited to participate on Singer, one of China’s most popular reality shows, shortly after his victory.

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13 Hebdige, 93.
selected to compete. However, despite GAI’s initial appeal to audiences of the show, the SAPPRFT hip-hop media ban, issued later that month, resulted in his immediate removal from the show. In fact, the moral panic described by Hebdige can be seen occurring cyclically through crackdowns like a 2015 Ministry of Culture blacklist of songs with vulgar lyrics as well as this most recent hip-hop ban, which explicitly criticizes the moral deviancy of hip-hop and prohibits uniform-like signifiers, such as tattoos.

However, as Hebdige notes, it is through a constant cycle that subcultures are “incorporated as a diverting spectacle,” a process which takes two forms: the conversion of subcultural signs (dress, music, etc.) into mass-produced objects (i.e. the commodity form); the ‘labelling’ and re-definition of deviant behavior by dominant groups – the police the media, the judiciary (i.e. the ideological form).

Since much of hip-hop style is already communicated through commodities obtained through commercial industries, such image and performance-focused talent shows inherently present subcultural looks and sounds to be further popularized and profited upon. Beyond commodification on screen, iQiyi has boasted that it turned The Rap of China’s slogan ‘Rising! Chinese Hip-Hop’ or ‘R!CH’ into a trademark and developed more than 200 lines of merchandise including clothes, accessories, earphones, cell phone cases, and VR goggles. Hip-hop has turned into a mass-produced commodity.

At the same time, such media has participated in the ideological incorporation of hip-hop subculture through the redefinition of meaning, a necessity given the Chinese state’s heavy involvement in media affairs. Under his system of “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” President Xi Jinping strongly emphasizes the regulation of culture industries through the “promotion of Chinese culture […] as a foundation for soft cultural power, socialist culture and Chinese identity.” Furthermore, Xi’s 2014 landmark speech at the Beijing Forum on Literature and Art directly states that “many art forms arise from overseas, such as hip-hop, breakdance, etc., but [China] should only adopt them if the masses approve of them, while also endowing them with healthy, progressive content.” As Appadurai argues, while states inevitably give way to the forces of globalization, there are certain intrusions “that the state cannot tolerate as threats to its own control over

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16 Fan, “Rapper GAI Abruptly Removed from Reality Show Following Reported New Hip-Hop Ban.”
18 Hebdige, 94.
19 iQiyi, “iQIYI Talent Show Contributes to Hip-hop’s Phenomenal Rise in China.”
ideas of nationhood and ‘people-hood.’”

The process of incorporation in China is thus incredibly dependent upon collaboration between state and culture industry, which is the only condition that would have allowed for a second season of *The Rap of China* or the debut of *Hot Blood Dance Crew* to occur. Whereas in the first season, the self-proclaimed aim of the show was to “transform hip-hop from a Chinese subculture to a mainstream genre,” a noticeable shift occurred in the messaging of the second season following the state’s new media regulations. The most obvious change is that of the Chinese name itself, from “China has Hip-Hop” to “New Rap of China,” suggesting a push to rebrand the culture as distinctly Chinese and hide its transnational origins. Additionally, during a press conference prior to the start of filming for the second season, the show’s production team stated that *The Rap of China’s* new mission was to “justify rap music among young people — it can be young, uplifting and full of positive energy.” Notably, the term “positive energy” echoes President Xi’s speech at the Beijing Forum on Literature and Art in which he advocated for art to support the Communist Party’s “core socialist values” and to spread “positive energy.”

Aside from his comments echoing Xi’s speech, *The Rap of China’s* head producer, Chen Wei, clarified in an interview that “hip-hop was never actually banned in China” but rather that media outlets were informed not to “distribute any rap or hip-hop content that has bad influence on the youth via mass media because it may produce negative results.”

Indeed, the second season of the show takes on a conspicuously nationalistic air and a particular emphasis on positive messaging without any noticeable change in the commodity representation of hip-hop style. For example, the five judges perform a hip-hop cypher as the first musical act of the first episode, a spectacle that includes an instrumental segment using traditional Chinese percussion instruments, imagery of red flags and other red set design (Figure 1), a hook from Kris Wu that repeats the line “I’m from China so I represent this land,” and positive encouragement for youth to use hip-hop as a platform for their dreams. Despite the change in messaging, the judges’ physical styles are exactly the same as in the first season. Just as Hebdige posits, the recuperation process of the second season of *The Rap of China* necessitated both a continuation of subcultural commodification as well as labelling by dominant groups, articulating “some of the preferred meanings and interpretations, those favored by and

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24 Fan, “‘Rap of China’ Primer: All You Need to Know As the Hit Hip-Hop Show Returns.”
26 VICE News, “China (Mostly) Loves Hip-Hop Thanks To This ‘American Idol’ Style Show (HBO).”
transmitted through the authorized channels of mass communication.”

Similarly, *Hot Blood Dance Crew* also reflects the commodity and ideological forms of recuperation, although its approach to ideological conformity is much simpler than that of *The Rap of China*. The focus on hip-hop dance instead of rap eliminates the potentially subversive messaging of hip-hop lyrics, posing less of a redefinition of meaning and more of a normalization in which, as Hebdige would describe, “difference is simply denied (‘Otherness is reduced to sameness’).” Meanwhile, cultural signifiers are still heavily present within the imagery of the show, primarily demonstrated through dress.

Yet in its role of incorporating hip-hop into the mainstream, mass media depictions still present a fundamental problem for the subculture. As Hebdige points out, the dominant culture tends to replace “a subculture engendered by history, a product of real historical contradictions, with a handful of brilliant nonconformists.” That is, the success of contestants in shows like *The Rap of China* or *Hot Blood Dance Crew*, does not necessarily mean that society is primed for the entirety of the subculture, leaving open the possibility that the culture could simply become recast and removed from its authentic origins. Indeed, commercial success itself can be contradictory to the base principles of a subculture. Thus, the changes Chinese hip-hop is currently undergoing pose a massive danger to the true essence of the culture, calling for a deeper critique of the nature of its transition.

**The Online Struggle for Authenticity**

This section addresses authenticity in Chinese hip-hop as an area of heavy contestation between controllers of mass media and existing members of the subculture. After summarizing the historical development of Chinese hip-hop and the origins of hip-hop’s principles, this paper explains how the commodification and redefinition of hip-hop signifiers in shows like *The Rap of China* and *Hot Blood Dance Crew* runs contrary to those cultural origins. However, taking into consideration viral online movements spearheaded by members of the hip-hop community old and new that push against dominant representations of hip-hop, it becomes clear that many have derived oppositional readings and generated authentic hip-hop resistance to mainstream commodification and ideological appropriation.

**First Principles of Hip-Hop**

When considering hip-hop authenticity in the Chinese context, it is essential to look at Chinese hip-hop’s origins. Given that the study of global hip-hop history and culture is

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28 Hebdige, 86.
30 Hebdige, 97.
31 Hebdige, 99.
an expanding and still contested area of academia, this paper is primarily concerned with identifying key principles which undergird all four original elements of hip-hop: MCing (rap), DJing (production), breaking (dance), and graffiti (graphic art), each of which are heavily mediated through the imagery of China’s hip-hop talent shows. Unlike their Western counterparts, which started in underground scenes, these elements were first introduced to the Chinese mainland in the form of dance through American television shows and films. They quickly grew in popularity among young people and expanded to encompass rap music with the development of dakou culture. De Kloet describes dakou as an adoption of Western popular culture through illegal, cut CDs smuggled to China from the West. From there, the growth of China’s own underground rap battle scenes, street dance culture, and general hip-hop style throughout the 1990s and 2000s paved the way for individual industry success stories like Taiwan’s MC Hotdog and Beijing rap group Yin Ts’ang (隐藏). Even pop stars like Wang Leehom (王力宏) and Jay Chou (周杰伦) incorporated aspects of rap and hip-hop into their music, growing its mainstream popularity. With the development of the internet, hip-hop – particularly in rap form – spread quickly through online communities and forums specifically dedicated to discourse and media on the culture. It is this interconnected underground and virtual network of hip-hop that serves as the backdrop to today’s internet-based talent shows.

Similar to many subcultures, the most important principle in hip-hop, across all elements, is authenticity through the notion of the “real.” In the context of American hip-hop, Neal writes that “mantras like ‘keepin’ it real’ (resonant through the 1990s) and the more contemporary ‘I’m just trying to do me,’ have expressed the ambivalence of black hip-hop artists and audiences with the commercial success and widespread visibility afforded the genre.” While perceptions of “realness” have often taken root in a focus on authentic personal identity, this view has been complicated by scholars like Ronald Judy, who conceives of authenticity within a collective black identity that has adapted “to the force of commodification.... Authenticity is hype, a hypercommodified affect


36 Xiao, 205.

37 Xiao, 198, 212.


39 Xiao, 217.

40 Murray Forman (Ed.) and Mark Anthony Neal (Ed.), *That’s the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader,* (New York, Routledge, 2011), 64.
whose circulation has made hip-hop global.” On the topic of rap in particular, Dyson writes that it is “a form of profound musical, cultural, and social creativity… [projecting] a style of self into the world that generates forms of cultural resistance.” Thus, hip-hop is fundamentally a transnational, counterhegemonic force that, like many subcultures, explicitly resists capital influences and misrepresentations of the self while simultaneously indulging in its own commodification.

**Mass Media as Inauthentic Commodification**

The greatest contradiction of hip-hop’s sudden popularity in China lies in the competing principles surrounding its promotion and commodification through online entertainment, implicating its authenticity as a distinct cultural product. Indeed, the incorporation process thus far in shows like *The Rap of China* and *Hot Blood Dance Crew* seems to make great sacrifices in originality for the sake of mainstream appeal. For example, *The Rap of China* appears to have plagiarized the popular Korean rap competition program *Show Me the Money*, which features uncannily similar production formats, styles, graphics, and sets (Figure 2). Ironically, of its five celebrity judges (one was added in the second season), only one of them, MC HotDog, is widely considered to be a reputable hip-hop artist, reflecting the focus on the commercial over the culture. This contradiction is compounded in both *The Rap of China* and *Hot Blood Dance Crew* by the fact that the shows do not hold a completely open audition process, inviting already well-established artists and micro-celebrities to participate in the show based on their existing popularity. These examples suggest that because of the industry’s overwhelming focus on mainstream appeal, such a show inherently, as Adorno and Horkheimer would argue, “rejects anything untried as a risk,” even at the expense of the originality of content.

The state’s enforcement of safe and positive messaging also leads the show astray of any type of cultural resistance endemic to hip-hop. A quick look at the lyrical content in the second season of *The Rap of China* confirms this. As noted earlier, unity and patriotism became recurring themes in the second season, and beyond the words of the producers and judges, contestants themselves were also clearly influenced or even

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41 Ibid., 66.
42 Ibid., 75.
44 Yin, “Hip-Hop Lovers Say China’s First Rap Talent Show Is Out of Tune.”
encouraged to perform with such themes in mind. In one particularly cringe-worthy performance partway through the season, contestants Al Rocco and LIL-EM (那吾克热) rap a high-energy song called “Rep That Culture” focused on the unification of all Chinese people and representing Chinese rap, with lyrics such as “We all made in China,” “Actually you and I aren’t different,” and “It’s all about you and all about me.”\(^47\) Ironically, Al Rocco was actually a contestant in the first season of *The Rap of China* who, after being eliminated, publicly criticized the show as not having real hip-hop culture. Thus, his return and dramatic shift in messaging imply a significant influence due to outside factors. It is likely that both the draw of commercial success and the strictness of government regulations pulled him in and led him to conform to the producers’ will.

In addition, such talent shows are ostentatiously sponsored by corporations like McDonald’s and Vivo who are not only given logo and product placement throughout each episode, but also allocated air time for commercial rap and dance videos performed by contestants themselves (Figures 3 and 4) under contractual obligation.\(^48\) Thus, the mainstream presentation of Chinese hip-hop thus far seems to corrupt the culture at large given hip-hop’s roots in resistance against such influences as well as in genuine presentations of the self. In fact, in a press release on the success of its integrated advertising in *Hot Blood Dance Crew*, iQiyi stated that one of its core brand principles is that “[a]dvertising is content, and content is advertising.”\(^49\) The show also won an Asian Academy Creative Award for “Best Branded Programme or Series” at the end of 2018.\(^50\) In this way, iQiyi’s approach to hip-hop reflects a degree of commercialization that results in what Sandel might describe as the “degradation of certain attitudes, practices, and goods,” a corruption inherent to the marketization of society.\(^51\) In the process of incorporation through mass media, all of hip-hop’s signifiers and uniforms have thus become tied to commercial and state interests in an inherently disingenuous manner that delegitimizes the entire cultural representation. That is, the signals and images presented to consumer audiences are very much not authentic to original hip-hop culture.

**Oppositional Decoding in Social Media**

However, there is a distinction and tension between hip-hop culture as presented through the commodified lens of reality shows and hip-hop culture as embodied by consumer

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\(^{47}\) *The Rap of China*. Season 2, Episode 5. Directed by Che Che. Produced by Chen Wei. iQiyi. August 11, 2018, 1:06:35-1:09:00.


\(^{49}\) iQiyi, “iQIYI’s ‘Hot-Blood Dance Crew’ Smashes Industry Records for Total Advertising Revenue.”


participants. This separation arises partly through the oppositional decoding process described by Hall and de Certeau, wherein media consumers take a dominant or preferred meaning encoded by the producer during the recuperation process (in this case the producers of a talent show who incorporate commercialized dress or “positive energy”) and generate their own counterhegemonic interpretation of the media. Indeed, as Hall notes with regards to encoding and decoding, “the former can attempt to ‘prefer’ but cannot prescribe or guarantee the latter, which has its own conditions of existence.” Furthermore, de Certeau’s work contributes the notion that, even in an all-encompassing regime wherein the Chinese state and industry of dominant culture seem to be working in collaboration, mass media itself cannot command the entire culture, as a public message alone does not tell us how people receive messages in private.

Perhaps the strongest example of this lies in the appropriated use of hip-hop lingo in *The Rap of China*, which has quickly caught the attention of the broader hip-hop community and become recast and weaponized against mainstream media, reflecting an authentic collective resistance to dominant culture. During the first season of the show, terms like “freestyle,” “diss,” and “battle” quickly became viral buzzwords on social media, although a quick internet search reveals that they’ve become so only through their controversial use. The earliest example is “freestyle,” which judge Kris Wu frequently used during auditions to ask contestants, “Do you have freestyle?” (“你有freestyle吗?”). Freestyling, which is the improvisation of dance moves or rap lyrics, serves as a demonstration of one’s mastery of the skill and has its roots in authentic hip-hop culture. However, the fact that Kris Wu, a pop star who many do not consider a rapper, questioned so many “real” rappers on the subject of freestyling, rubbed many netizens the wrong way, resulting in a viral onslaught of memes mocking Kris Wu and questioning his legitimacy. Recalling the earlier discussion of the tension between underground battle rappers and mainstream idol rappers within the show itself, it is also possible to see where such principles of authenticity could be decoded.

A similar phenomenon occurred during the show’s second season when Wu coined the slang term “skr,” which originated from American hip-hop culture and is frequently used as an ad-lib in rap music, as the season’s popular buzzword and used it to describe anything that he found “cool” or “real.” As was the case with “do you have freestyle?”, “skr” quickly became an internet joke due to the Wu’s perceived illegitimacy, propelled by a Weibo post from a large online community, Hupu Pedestrian Street (虎扑的步行街).

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54 iQiyi, “iQIYI Talent Show Contributes to Hip-hop’s Phenomenal Rise in China.”
that satirized a recording of Kris Wu rapping and called it quite “skr.”\footnote{CGTN, “Skr: Slang term used by Kris Wu leads to online war of words,” \textit{CGTN}, August 4, 2018, https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d674e30596a4d79457a6333566d54/share_p.html.} This resulted in a war of words between Hupu and Wu, culminating in a diss track released by Wu entitled “Skr” and a Hupu counter diss that gathered over 120,000 likes and 70,000 shares.\footnote{Ibid.}

Indeed, the concept of a “diss” has also been widely used as a weapon against the show, such as when Al Rocco was eliminated in the first season for his poor Chinese. Shortly after his departure, he released a diss track titled “The Rap of China Diss” (中国X嘻哈, where the X crossed out the character for “has” in the Chinese show title “China has Hip-Hop”). This song was targeted at the show and the judge who kicked him off, Chang Chen-yue (张震岳). In the track, Al Rocco calls out Chang, rapping “You singing motherfucker man you made me lose it / Now tell me what you did for hip-hop you didn’t do shit /… And I bet that you sold your soul to the China devil,”\footnote{Al Rocco, “AL ROCCO : 中国X嘻哈 (The Rap Of China DISS) - Chinese Hip Hop Shanghai Rap,” \textit{ZHONG.TV}, June 19, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZrFedLxBVM, 01:01-01:19.} echoing the internet community’s mockery of the judges’ qualifications and their ties to the mainstream industry. Another publicly released diss track on ZHONG.TV, one of the primary curators of Chinese hip-hop content, argues that most rap in China has always been underground, not mainstream and homogenized like in the show, hence “fuck 中国有嘻哈 [The Rap of China].”\footnote{“ #UPGANG# ASIAN SM #中国有嘻哈DISS# RAP OF CHINA DISS,” \textit{ZHONG.TV}, June 19, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wVvZRp4Hjz8.} Countless fans have posted their own critiques as well; for example, one Weibo user sided with Al Rocco in calling Chang’s judging “really awkward from beginning to end.”\footnote{Yin, “Hip-Hop Lovers Say China’s First Rap Talent Show Is Out of Tune.”} In fact, Weibo posts with the hashtag #rapofchina-diss were read over 10 million times before the first season ended (with each of those likely generating hundreds or even thousands of additional impressions), and certain diss tracks even gained more traction online than songs that were actually performed on the show.\footnote{Ye, “Hip hop in China bounces back as new show gives next-gen rappers mainstream appeal, despite censorship.”} Thus, members of the Chinese hip-hop community not only decoded \textit{The Rap of China} in oppositional ways that reflected hip-hop’s anti-establishment core, but also pushed their counterhegemonic message through a viral online audience that had never truly been exposed to the original principles of hip-hop before.

In that sense, the evolution of hip-hop through online talent shows represents a constant battle between inherently inauthentic mass media producers and the “real,” critical, and oppositional hip-hop subculture. Although not every commodified signal within a show is explicitly called out, with some programs also being subject to greater critique than others (\textit{The Rap of China} has proven much more controversial than \textit{Hot Blood Dance Crew}), hip-hop artists and consumer participants have been quick to challenge dominant narratives at viral scales, demonstrating a legitimate resistance against the mainstream rooted in authentic cultural principles. This alternative frame of reference appears to stem from global and localized understandings of hip-hop culture originating from
decades of subcultural development outside of the control of the Chinese state and culture industry that are simply given a new platform due to the massive success of shows seeking to capitalize on hip-hop. Thus, the growth of hip-hop subculture in any form tends to expose its principles of “realness” and opposition to the commercial mainstream to larger online audiences despite the commodifying and ideologically compromising influence of reality television thus far, collectively preserving hip-hop’s subcultural form.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to trace the incorporation of hip-hop into Chinese dominant culture while simultaneously making a case for its authenticity. The paper argues that the wave of successful online hip-hop entertainment has incorporated the subculture in both commodity and ideological forms in line with Hebdige’s theories on youth subculture and also that Chinese state and culture industry necessarily collaborate in this domination. This is fundamentally appropriative and inauthentic. However, applying theories on the production of meaning, the paper demonstrates that mass media appropriation alone does not corrupt the entire subculture, as oppositional internet movements, largely through social media, against such depictions have allowed for principles of hip-hop to develop within massive online communities that include participants who are new to hip-hop. In this way, viral internet-based talent shows have enabled members of the subculture to drive authentic growth of Chinese hip-hop culture despite the mainstream’s commodification and ideological appropriation. Thus, there should be faith in the future of hip-hop in China – as long as the culture’s masses are able continue voicing their opposition.

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Appendix

Figure 1. Still frame from the opening cypher of the second season of *The Rap of China.* Note the judge's hairstyle, which emulates braids/dreadlocks from black culture.

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63 The Rap of China, Season 2, Episode 1, Directed by Che Che, Produced by Chen Wei, iQiyi, July 14, 2018
Figure 2. Side-by-side comparison of stills from *The Rap of China* and *Show Me the Money*.64

Figure 3. Still frame from *The Rap of China* featuring a rap by contestant Imp (小鬼) about the various sponsors of the show.\(^6\)

![Still frame from *The Rap of China*](image1)

Figure 4. Still frame from *Hot Blood Dance Crew* featuring contestant Su Lianya (苏恋雅) performing a vogue dance to promote Vivo smartphones.\(^6\)

![Still frame from *Hot Blood Dance Crew*](image2)

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\(^6\) *The Rap of China*, Season 1, Episode 2, Directed by Che Che, Produced by Chen Wei, *iqiyi*, July 1, 2017

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