What Is Real? What Is Fake?

Transitional Chinese Hip-Hop Culture and the War of Authenticity

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Introduction

This is a project about me and my struggle to understand what it means to be true to myself, written under the guise of a “Harvard undergraduate thesis.” It is a story rooted in my experience with hip-hop as a Chinese American, a narrative that started when I first fell in love with rap music as a young child, blossomed when I “rediscovered” hip-hop as an intellectual passion in college, and reached new levels of maturation when I realized, partly through the process of working on this thesis, that I occupy not just one, but several cultural spaces within hip-hop: American, Chinese-American, Chinese… It is a testament to a journey that has made me who I am today: the son of immigrants, raised without a father figure, who had little to believe in growing up yet through constant trial and error found home in the mantra of a culture that never belonged to me to begin with – a mantra that told me to “keep it real” and be myself.

It is impossible to describe what hip-hop means to me. How does one elucidate the liberation a child feels as he sits alone on the bus, mouthing the lyrics to his favorite rap song, face steadily locking itself into a glare that still finds itself naturally worn years later? How does one describe resilience amidst the toil of anxiety and depression, of days lying in bed with nothing besides the steady pound of bass to keep oneself company? How does one describe the beauty of motion in dance, the exhilaration of penning one’s first bar, the joy of sweat and grime in street ball? How does one describe the sensation of collective effervescence? How does one describe friendship? To me, hip-hop has been all of
these things and so much more. Its infinite complexities make this thesis very
difficult for me to write, because I know that I can never do it justice.

I start this essay on such a personal note because I have realized that trying
to explain my project without explaining its significance to me would be
unfaithful to the project of hip-hop altogether. No – I’m going to keep it real with
you. I will explain the relevance of my inquiry to the existing body of literature
shortly. I will explain my contributions to the study of contemporary China and
the groundbreaking nature of my ethnography. However, readers must first
understand that this project is a ridiculously selfish one, not simply because I am
positioned within the culture I am studying, but because I have chosen to
undertake this academic mission to better understand myself.

In order to do so, I have sought to focus on contemporary Chinese hip-hop
culture as a unique lens through which I analyze the concept of authenticity, or as
I call it in this specific context, real-ness. I’ve selected Chinese hip-hop as the site
of my inquiry because of its particular position in space and time. In space, not
only because of its aforementioned personal significance, but also because the
interactions between Chinese society and the Western cultural form of hip-hop
have generated countless tensions that raise the stakes for the authenticity debate.
In time, because over the past few years, Chinese hip-hop has been undergoing
perhaps the most dramatic mainstream transition in the history of Chinese pop
culture, exasperating existential contradictions that arise whenever a subculture
makes that jump. This “transitional” period has almost perfectly overlapped with
my own fascination with hip-hop in China, which began in early 2017 when a
music video by a Chengdu rap group called the Higher Brothers started to make the rounds online in the United States. That viral song was, literally, “Made in China.”¹ That same year, a reality competition show called The Rap of China (Zhongguo you xiha 中国有嘻哈, later renamed to Zhongguo xin shuochang 中国新说唱) debuted while I was working in the mainland, taking the country by storm and exposing hundreds of millions of Chinese viewers to the culture of hip-hop – it serves as the main catalyst for the subculture’s rapid transition in China and the lower bound of my study’s timeline. I witnessed this phenomenon firsthand, and the impact of the show plays a prominent role throughout this essay.

And because I am not even a rapper, producer, or musician yet still consider myself part of hip-hop, I have decided that I am going to expand from the overwhelming majority of academic discourse on hip-hop culture and include the perspectives of not only hip-hop artists, but also hip-hop consumers – fans, as they are called in the commercial context. Indeed, this is a core group (and by far the largest group) within the transitional form of hip-hop that is frequently left out of ethnographic studies. Yet even then, because of the complexity of every single individual’s experience with hip-hop and because of the limitations of this very thesis, I can never hope to come close to properly representing Chinese hip-hop in its entirety. Instead, I have settled on a single question that captures the present

¹ See Higher Brothers x Famous Dex - Made In China (Prod. Richie Souf), accessed March 18, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rILKm-DC06A.
conflict within the culture and represents the topic I myself am interested in: What is real?

My exploration of this question through the lens of Chinese hip-hop builds upon an extremely scarce body of Western published literature on the culture. From a critical history standpoint, Ying Xiao and Jeroen de Kloet have provided the most comprehensive overviews of the culture’s development, yet their accounts focus primarily on its origin story – the import of American culture, the steady growth of the underground, and the beginnings of commercialization.² Their descriptions of hip-hop from the 1980s through the 2000s engage with what many now refer to as the “old school” of Chinese hip-hop – it is already considered history by rappers and fans today, and it is entirely unrecognizable in relation to today’s mainstream media context. From the mid to late 2000s, Fulbright Scholar Angela Steele also compiled an impressive archive of ethnographic material centered around the tail end of this golden age of Chinese hip-hop, most of which is still available online.³ In the post-2010s, pre-Rap of China era, scholars like Jin Liu, Xuan Wang, and Eirik Blåsternes have also made valuable contributions: Liu presents Chinese dialect rap as an alternative space for youth to assert an oppositional, counterhegemonic voice against the Chinese education system, high official culture, and mainstream discourse;⁴ Wang

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con ducts a sociolinguistic analysis of Chinese rap songs that blend Chinese dialects, standard Mandarin, and English, constructing “orders of authenticity” with regards to their engagement with multiple cultural contexts; Blåsternes analyzes how urban middle-class youth in Beijing develop unique individual and collective identities through the self-expression of hip-hop music, providing one of the most comprehensive ethnographies of the culture I have seen from the past decade. Yet in many ways, these projects are now also outdated, not simply because they took place before the upheaval created by The Rap of China, but also because they occurred before 2015, a year during which President Xi Jinping first started a widespread crackdown on hip-hop itself. Indeed, although government censorship is often discussed in previous works, the Chinese state’s ideological interest in hip-hop was not so much integrated into the fabric of the hip-hop industry until recent years, and this industry itself had not even begun to mature into its current form prior to 2017.

Thus, my study is positioned within a very contemporary mass media hip-hop context and is the first English-language ethnography of Chinese hip-hop in the post-Rap of China era. Defined by talent shows, online streaming, and social media, this era demands a type of inquiry that does not look like most traditional histories or ethnographies, hence my own self-identification as a media anthropologist. Some scholars and pundits have engaged deeply with this

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framework. In 2018, Nathanel Amar, a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Hong Kong, published an overview of censorship in Chinese hip-hop that included a thorough discussion of the *Rap of China* phenomenon and its impacts.\(^7\) Rita (Shuhong) Fan, a journalist for China-focused media platform RADII, has been consistently documenting Chinese hip-hop news in English since 2017.\(^8\) Despite her distance from the world of academia, I would argue that she is perhaps the most well-versed contemporary Chinese hip-hop historian in the world. Lana Larkin, who spent significant time working and traveling with the Higher Brothers, also dedicated her anthropology master’s career to studying the media around Chinese rappers.\(^9\) All three of these incredible individuals are actually relatively close colleagues of mine, which I elaborate upon in my discussion of my methodology.

But most importantly, what separates my project from those of people before me is the emphasis I place on uncovering a distinct yet generalizable notion of authenticity and real-ness within the confines of Chinese hip-hop itself. My ethnography is a philosophical inquiry into the meaning of selfhood for Chinese youth, whereby the culture of hip-hop serves primarily as a mode of understanding. In that sense, while I am documenting and describing a culture, I am also holding a conversation with individual Chinese people – and with myself – about meanings and values on the metaphysical level. That is why my inclusion

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of fans and what I later refer to as the “fan circle” is so important. I have no interest in providing an additional platform for public hip-hop figures to espouse their views. I have no interest in following the steps of countless American researchers before me who, out of what I suspect to be a fetishization of Chinese “coolness,” have entered the mainland to chase after artists and celebrities. Instead, I am providing readers with a never-before-told story of China and its people in relation to themselves. Not in relation to the West. Not in relation to American culture. But in relation to their own lives and their own anxieties, hopes, and dreams.

In choosing *Chinese* hip-hop as the focus of my question, however, I know that a great number of Western readers will immediately be interested in the question of cultural appropriation. It is a question that I too was interested in during the initial stages of my research: “Is Chinese hip-hop authentic?” rather than “What is authenticity in Chinese hip-hop?” However, through the course of my experiences in China and as a Chinese American in hip-hop myself, I have become so tired of this question, and I do not want to defend my own passions anymore. Thus, in order to properly focus on Chinese hip-hop as a distinct cultural form, I will first discard of this part of the authenticity debate altogether. I will demonstrate what it means to be *real in American* hip-hop and how global hip-hop has complicated that notion, and then I will demonstrate why the same considerations of authenticity become wholly transformed in China. In doing so, I hope that readers can understand why I have chosen to approach my project in the
way that I am, and I hope that they can respect my positionality in the cultural discourse.

Global Hip-Hop and the Authenticity Debate

Contemporary hip-hop is frequently thought of as solely a music genre, especially since rappers have begun to top music charts and dominate mainstream industries in the United States and abroad, but the reality is that hip-hop represents a much broader sociocultural movement encompassing various forms of self-expression and identity. I focus on rap music in this thesis because of its prominence in Chinese hip-hop as well as in my own life, but historically, hip-hop has commonly been broken down into the four main elements of MCing, the vocal rhyming style now associated most strongly with the culture; DJing, the mixing of audio using record players and DJ mixers; breaking and street dance; and graffiti art. Other elements, such as street fashion and beatboxing, are also included in discussions of hip-hop culture, with a fifth element oftentimes considered to be knowledge, described by Travis L. Gosa as a type of street consciousness and “knowledge of self” that refers to the “Afro-diasporic mix of spiritual and political consciousness designed to empower members of oppressed groups.” Indeed, with its roots in the inner city neighborhoods of South Bronx,

New York, hip-hop has always been founded in Blackness and the experiences of African American communities. With regards to rap in particular, Michael Eric Dyson writes:

Rap is a form of profound musical, cultural, and social creativity. It expresses the desire of young black people to reclaim their history, reactivate forms of black radicalism, and contest the powers of despair and economic depression that presently besiege the black community. Besides being the most powerful form of black musical expression today, rap projects a style of self into the world that generates forms of cultural resistance and transforms the ugly terrain of ghetto existence into a searing portrait of life as it must be lived by millions of voiceless people.\(^{13}\)

Given its history, no one can deny the power that hip-hop carries within the Black community.

And as is the case in any culture, hip-hop comes with its own set of guiding principles. The most important one is the notion of the *real*, usually placed in opposition to the *fake*. Mark Anthony Neal writes that “mantras like ‘keepin’ it real’… have expressed the ambivalence of black hip-hop artists and audiences with the commercial success and widespread visibility afforded the genre.”\(^{14}\) This is one common conception of *real*-ness amidst market transition that focuses on maintaining one’s authentic personal identity. There are, of course, other interpretations. For instance, Neal also describes how the historic

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mid-1990s bicoastal war of words between rappers was shaped by the concept of *real-ness*:

At the core of the East Coast versus West Coast conflict was a fundamental belief that the experiences of those on one coast marked them as more authentic—more gangsta, more ghetto, more hardcore—than those on the other. In other words, one 'hood was deemed more authentically hip-hop, and by extension, more authentically black, than the other.\(^{15}\)

Yet while hip-hop has always been rooted in Blackness, and frequently even in opposition to its own commercialization, its steady growth has brought it far from its cultural origins. Initially deemed by the American public to be a passing fad and, as Dyson describes, an “ephemeral black cultural form,”\(^{16}\) hip-hop and its ideological themes have now permeated Western popular culture and even gone through several phases of its own stylistic innovation. Alan Light highlights this recurrent contradiction when he writes that hip-hop has always been a pop form “seeking to make people dance and laugh and think, to make them listen and feel, and to sell records by doing so” yet also “about giving voice to a black community otherwise underrepresented, if not silent, in the mass media.”\(^{17}\) Hip-hop’s growing popularity has always been in tension, to some degree, with its own principles.

However, there is, of course, no such thing as absolute essentialism in hip-hop. In a 2018 essay recommended to me, entitled “Notes on Trap,” about the

\(^{15}\) Neal and Forman, 65.

\(^{16}\) Dyson, “The Culture of Hip-Hop,” 68.

more recently trendy strain of hip-hop music, Jesse McCarthy delivers a beautiful winding, unstructured critical study of trap, calling it “an attitude toward luxury,” “the only music that sounds like what living in contemporary America feels like… the soundtrack of the dissocialized subject that neoliberalism made,” and a semblance of hip-hop that “retains the construction of a song around bars and hooks, but the old-school chime and rhyme, the bounce and jazziness of Nineties production, is gone.”18 Yet even these changes do not imply that trap is no longer hip-hop – as de Kloet explains, to speak of musical scenes within the development of a subculture “classifies without separating a dominant culture from the music culture… it directs the attention more towards the perceived specificities and aesthetics of the music.”19 That is, the evolution of a culture never erases the significance of its history or its principles. As Ronald A.T. Judy argues, then, the essentialist view of Black life in America has conceived of an understanding of authenticity as “adaptation to the force of commodification… Authenticity is hype, a hypercommodified affect whose circulation has made hip-hop global.”20

For the sake of my inquiry, this notion of global hip-hop is extremely important, because it places transnational forms of hip-hop in separation from their American parent. As Xiao writes, and as many scholars have pointed out, hip-hop “is no longer considered merely ‘black noise’ bracketed within African American histories and musical traditions”:

The widespread global hip-hop movement is galvanized not only by an accelerated cultural and linguistic exchange in which vigorous forms of

20 Neal and Forman, _That’s the Joint! : The Hip-Hop Studies Reader_, 66.
appropriation and hybridization occur between the West and the East, and the North and the South, but it also points to the many ambiguities and contradictions in the discourses of globalization, nationalization, and indigenization.\textsuperscript{21}

In this context, new and different understandings of real-ness have arisen. With regards to Chinese hip-hop in particular, cultural appropriation and imitation have always been common critiques of the culture’s legitimacy. As Liu points out, even de Kloet’s earlier works on Chinese hip-hop viewed it as an impure and highly inauthentic form of hip-hop that “subverts ‘any longing for cultural essentialism and nationalism’” and “pollutes the imagined and constructed ‘origin’ of hip-hop.”\textsuperscript{22} This view, however, is deeply Western-centric and biased. De Kloet’s more recent scholarship has acknowledged the reality that the “ease with which rap travels around the globe and is appropriated by a wide range of ethnicities – including Caucasian – suggests that the link between hip-hop and ethnicity is weak.”\textsuperscript{23} Ian Condry, one of the preeminent Western scholars on Japanese hip-hop, speaks extensively about the “double bind that tends to shadow all foreign emcees” – that rappers are expected to respect the African American roots of hip-hop music yet also produce something uniquely authentic and original, which can then be leveraged against them as contamination.\textsuperscript{24}

Instead of falling into the trap of viewing Chinese hip-hop through an orientalist gaze, one must first recognize that, to some degree, it \textit{is} imitation. Countless Chinese rappers and fans I spoke to – some who were even more

\textsuperscript{23} de Kloet, \textit{China with a Cut - Globalisation, Urban Youth and Popular Music}, 70.
knowledgeable of American hip-hop history than I was – acknowledged this fact yet disregarded its implications for their own participation.²⁵ The reality in China is that, outside of a general understanding of African American culture and history, Blackness itself is almost invisible. Most people have met at most a handful of Black expatriates, and even then, the cultural exchange, without even delving into hip-hop, is likely to be cursory. Blackness in Chinese hip-hop then, as Xiao writes, “becomes a spectacle and a fetish, which is closely bound to and reaffirms the construction of selfhood.”²⁶ This is especially true in today’s context given the prevalence of media like The Rap of China. And while it might be unfortunate that Chinese participants cannot engage with hip-hop in the same way that Black youth in America do, can we really blame them for doing hip-hop in the only way they know how? If we are to view culture through an essentialist lens, would not countless Chinese cultural products then become unacceptable in Western settings? Wouldn’t innovations within American hip-hop itself be considered inauthentic? Rather, I think we need to understand that marketization and globalization have rendered most culture as commodity. Cultural appropriation is the norm rather than the exception. And because of the pervasiveness of differences in transcultural perception, I argue that the authenticity debate centered around race and ethnicity is irrelevant to how any individual Chinese youth constructs their own sense of self. If my project were

²⁵ One particularly notable instance of this occurred as I was hanging out in Xi’an with a young man around my age who joked that he was Black and proceeded to use the controversial “n-word” several times. When I tried explaining why that behavior wouldn’t be acceptable in the United States, he clarified that he thought “Black people were cool” and that “everyone doing rap in China is imitating Black people… it’s all blended now.” July 6, 2019.
about the global circulation of racial power, then this discussion would be
different. However, as I have mentioned earlier, this project is about me and the
experiences of Chinese people. So again, I ask: What is real?

The Methodology of Hanging Out

My approach is complicated. Its methods are mixed, combining digital and
physical fieldwork and experiences spanning not only the period in which I have
been conducting research for this thesis, but also parts of my life that occurred
before I ever realized that I could pursue hip-hop as an academic study. For
example, recall that I mentioned that my first encounter with Chinese hip-hop
occurred in 2017 with the viral Higher Brothers track “Made in China.” It was
released under a record label by the name of 88rising, which has gained a sort of
cult following among Asian youth around the world. In early 2018, I invited
88rising and the Higher Brothers to speak at Harvard, which is how I also became
friends with Lana Larkin, one of the Chinese hip-hop scholars I mentioned earlier.
I ended up working for 88rising from the spring of 2018 through the summer of
2019, first in their New York headquarters, then remotely at school, and then in
their Shanghai office as I conducted my thesis fieldwork. During that time, I even
produced a music video for the Higher Brothers.27

Recall, also, that I witnessed the phenomenon of the first season of The
Rap of China firsthand in 2017. I was a fan of the show before anything else, a
story that I explain further in Chapter 2. Because of my fascination with this

27 See Higher Brothers & BlocBoy JB - Let It Go (Official Music Video) (Prod. Falcons), accessed
March 18, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wzqUb5iORAE.
media spectacle, many of my early research papers in 2018 focused purely on the cultural significance of the show, drawing upon media analysis and digital ethnography of the first two seasons. Much of this work was published in the Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs in 2019, and because of The Rap of China’s significance, I have chosen to include parts of that research in this essay while contributing additional digital and physical material from the past year.

The bulk of my understanding of Chinese hip-hop, however, comes from a half-year stay in China during the spring and summer of 2019 throughout which I was formally conducting my thesis fieldwork. Soon after I arrived in Shanghai, where I spent most of my time, I got in contact with RADII and began working as a contributor for them, starting my own photo and interview column on Chinese club cultures. This is how I became colleagues with Rita Fan and Nathanel Amar, both of whom also contribute to the platform. During my time in China, I did not have a clearly delineated “research mode” and “living mode” – hip-hop was my work (via 88rising and RADII), my study (via Harvard), and my play. Even when I wasn’t conducting “formal” fieldwork, I was working on brand campaigns for rappers, chatting about the latest hip-hop news in the office, capturing photo and video while on tour with the Higher Brothers, going out to clubs and bars with coworkers, and hanging out with friends in the unfamiliar streets of new cities. When I was conducting “formal” fieldwork, I was leveraging

my networks to reach out to specific individuals of interest while also immersing myself in local hip-hop scenes by attending shows, festivals, and other social events to meet new hip-hop participants. Given the relevance of entertainment and social media to my thesis, I also stayed connected to the online community of hip-hop via a variety of social media platforms like Sina Weibo (Xinlang weibo 新浪微博, also known simply as Weibo) and WeChat (Weixin 微信), primarily to stay on top of the latest Chinese hip-hop discourse.

Overall, I made site visits to Beijing, Chengdu, Kunming, Shenzhen, Hong Kong, and Xi'an in addition to my time in Shanghai. I attended three major hip-hop music festivals – the MTA Music Festival (MTA 天漠音乐节) in Zhangjiakou, the LHC Summer Hip-Hop Music Festival (乐华城音乐节) in Xi’an, and the AYO! Music Festival (AYO! 音乐节) in Shanghai – and about a dozen hip-hop shows, usually switching between the backstage and the audience at these events as I collected my material. I conducted approximately ninety recorded interviews, mostly in-person and semi-structured,\(^\text{30}\) with individuals across the country, about a third of which consisted of hip-hop fans and casual practitioners; a third industry employees and executives across events, media, and music; and a third career rappers and artists across the spectrum of fame. While I omit a full list of my informants for privacy’s sake and because it was not always within social boundaries to ask for personal information, it can be assumed that

\(^{30}\) A list of sample questions is included in Appendix A, although these were rarely followed as conversations progressed. The list also does not include the key questions of “What is real?” and “What is fake?”, as the simpler questions on the list oftentimes served as more of an icebreaker to get my informants more comfortable talking.
most of the fans and artists I spoke with fell under the 18 to 24-year-old age group – what is referred to in China as *jiuwu hou* (95 后), or post ’95. In general, these youth are the people pioneering contemporary Chinese hip-hop, serving as its primary producers and consumers. Members of the industry, of course, tended to be older.

Speaking to participants was an entire ordeal in itself, especially given my complicated position in the culture. I am at once a fan, a casual practitioner (mostly through dance), a media and music employee, a photojournalist, and a scholar. While some of my credentials proved to be enormously advantageous when navigating the world of Chinese hip-hop, lending me both legitimacy and credibility, I also found that any mention of 88rising or Harvard would immediately change the tone of a conversation. Thus, I refrained from mentioning that background as much as possible when meeting new participants, especially fans. Furthermore, an issue I find very little mention of in work by Western scholars is the significance of one’s own appearance and language in any ethnographic study of China. In my experience, any weakness in one’s command of the local language or the use of a translator, any incongruity of dress or mannerism, or even simply the presence of a non-Chinese face can be a huge hindrance to any researcher in the field. Even though I appear Chinese, consider myself relatively proficient as a native speaker, and am well-adapted to the style of hip-hop, I am certain that many cultural missteps of mine cost me invaluable trust with informants. One of the easiest ways I revealed my unfamiliarity with the environment was through my limited grasp of slang – for that reason, I have
included in Appendix B a short glossary of useful terms that are commonly used in Chinese hip-hop as well as throughout my essay.

Over the course of my time in China, I became deeply connected to a number of the participants I interviewed, many of whom I now consider close friends. It is a shame that I cannot include all of their voices in this thesis. Thus, I write this essay feeling an enormous sense of responsibility knowing that they have entrusted me to represent them. I hope that I can do them proud.

Structured My Inquiry

I am arguing for the relevance of Chinese hip-hop as a unique framework of understanding authenticity, applicable not only to the subcultural context, but also to the general identity of youth in Chinese society. I do so not only to lift up the experiences of my friends and colleagues in China, but also to deconstruct the Western orientalist gaze frequently turned against my homeland. Indeed, as I have tried to express throughout this introduction, my project is extremely personal, and so the structure of this inquiry reflects the order in which I have come to understand real-ness myself.

Chapter 1, entitled “What Is Real? What Is Authentic?” is likely to be confusing for many readers – I make practically no mention of Chinese hip-hop in this first chapter. Instead, I seek to answer the question “What is real?” from a purely theoretical standpoint, engaging with scholarship on authenticity in media theory, existential philosophy, and cultural studies in order to formulate a framework of interpretation that serves me throughout the rest of the essay. My
choice to approach the first part of my project in this way is guided by the fact that contemporary Chinese hip-hop is shaped by a multitude of conflicting factors: the rapid mainstream transition of the culture, the increased influence of state and media, and the belief that every participant should stay true to themselves. It is a hotbed of conflict that requires one to understand the nuances of communication and subculture theory as well as the philosophical underpinnings of selfhood. Thus, I believe this is the only way that readers can properly grasp the significance of my research question and the unique implications of my argument. By providing readers with a diverse set of definitions of the concept of authenticity itself, I am then able to engage more deeply with a comparative analysis of the distinct ways in which Chinese hip-hop reconstructs that notion. In drawing attention to the tensions present within these definitions, I also introduce the language of war as a way to describe the existential crisis faced by Chinese hip-hop on both the frontlines, in its conflict with dominant society, and internally, between its own participants. This provides the structure for Chapters 2 and 3.

Chapter 2, “‘Keeping It Real’ with the State and Industry,” is centered around the power struggle surrounding Chinese hip-hop’s existence in greater Chinese society. I introduce the significance of The Rap of China in transforming the status of hip-hop from subculture to mainstream commodity, implicating all levels of the culture. Drawing upon theories of media and subculture from Chapter 1, I make clear a complex power dynamic between four primary players in this conflict: the state, the industry, the artist, and the fan. Within this conflict, I
conduct an ethnographic analysis of the post-\textit{Rap of China} hip-hop market, demonstrating the different ways in which rappers and fans cooperate with and oppose the influence of state and industry interests. In doing so, I draw a line between dominant strategies and subversive tactics – acts of guerrilla warfare in Chinese hip-hop committed for the sake of survival. However, this line is oftentimes crossed when individuals on either side might have interests that align with the other. Throughout my arguments in this chapter, I do not seek to directly answer the question “What is \textit{real}?”, choosing instead to take the actions of individuals and institutions at face value. That is, this chapter first reveals the subjectivity and contradiction present within the different ways that participants in Chinese hip-hop operate. This lays the groundwork for Chapter 3, in which I hope to reconcile these differences through a unifying framework of \textit{real}-ness.

Chapter 3, “‘Keeping It Real’ within the Culture,” presents Chinese hip-hop as an existentialist philosophy. It is the chapter that draws most heavily from the views of participants themselves, delving into the intracultural negotiations that occur as a result of different opinions and conceptions of \textit{real}-ness. I compare the mantra of “keeping it real” to the notion of \textit{concern} present within many philosophical views of selfhood, suggesting that the principle of \textit{real}-ness fundamentally necessitates a project of understanding what it means to be \textit{real} in itself. As a result, I establish a three-part framework of development in Chinese hip-hop to finally answer the question “What is \textit{real}?” within the context of a dominant power dynamic that exists in the culture. Each act of development represents a step along the path a participant takes from their point of first entry.
within the culture through their realization of what I call “sagely” real-ness. At each step, any individual can be considered wholly real, but my purpose in constructing such a framework is to elucidate the sense of progression that one feels as they engage with the culture of Chinese hip-hop over time. Thus, there is an ideal of transcendence that is born out of the culture, lending it a profound significance in the lives of Chinese youth. Ultimately, this is the revelation that I want my readers to understand.
Chapter 1: What Is Real? What Is Authentic?

There is nothing more important in hip-hop than “keeping it real.” While the principle itself appears to be quite simple, asking the question of what real actually means can raise much deeper social, political, and cultural dilemmas that are entirely open to contradictory interpretations. Indeed, the key question I asked my informants – and explore in this thesis – is “What is real?” (shenme shi zhende 什么是真的) and then, conversely, “What is fake?” (shenme shi jia de 什么是假的). During my interactions with various participants in Chinese hip-hop culture, the abstract definition of real was often glossed over, with many conversations jumping immediately to examples of real or fake behavior rather than a more explicit semantical discussion. Other times, the meaning of the word was simply brushed off as irrelevant to any considerations of actual importance. However, given the existential tensions present in transitional Chinese hip-hop, the goal of my research has always been to interrogate the history and semiotics of real in order to properly position the subculture as a site of contestation over the role of real-ness in society. From such a foundation, I can refer to my informants’ responses, Chinese media, and other observations, in whatever form they may take, as points of reference for the ethnographic and concrete ways that “keeping it real” operates in Chinese hip-hop.

That fundamental question of “What is real?” has actually been quite prevalent throughout intellectual history, although usually, the concept is expressed in terms of the academic language of “authenticity.” Accordingly, this chapter analyzes authenticity from the angles of media theory, existential
philosophy, as well as cultural studies in formulating the framework that suits my
inquiry best.\footnote{I should note that due to their overwhelming influence on the academic tradition, I have chosen
to focus on Western theorists in media and cultural studies for my framework. However, a more
complete approach to this project would necessarily include greater mention of Chinese
innovations in these fields.} I first examine authenticity as a facet of our perception and
interaction: What do we deem authentic media and communication? I then look at
authenticity in both Chinese and Western existential thought: What is the
authentic self? Finally, I explore authenticity as a virtue in our ways of living:
What is the principle of authenticity in (sub)culture? In approaching these
questions in this order, I attempt to mirror the process by which I initially
conceived of authenticity myself – first, by interpreting the world around me;
second, by learning how to be from those interpretations; and third, by expressing
myself back to the world. With this set of definitions at my disposal, I can
effectively establish the grounds on which I evaluate transitional Chinese hip-hop
as a unique, transnational cultural product, one that integrates existing meanings
and frameworks to generate its own notion of the real.

\textit{Authenticity in Media and Communication}

Any time we are presented with the representation of something else, the
question of authenticity comes into play. \textit{Is this an authentic Monet? Is that
person’s story authentic? Is this authentic Chinese cuisine?} In many of these
situations, what we are asking is something along the lines of “Is this genuine?”
or “Is this truthful?” Authenticity then, as it is usually perceived, is an indicator of
something’s closeness to the original object and of its fundamental honesty. This
is the pretense upon which Walter Benjamin stated that the “presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.” Under this widely accepted view, imitations of art are seen as inauthentic due to their lack of originality and authorial integrity. A story told with embellished or misconstrued details is not only inauthentic, but false. Food crafted from anything other than the ingredients and spices endemic to the region of origin is always, at least to some degree, inauthentic. We encounter these value judgements daily.

Implied in any interrogation of authenticity is that there is a certain gatekeeper or author who is able to determine the true, authentic original. It also assumes that there is an objective, value-free method of evaluating authenticity for oneself. According to Benjamin, specifically with reference to the production of art, the authenticity of art is based in the “location of its original use value.”

This ritual, or cult, value lies in the existence of the original work of art itself – its unique presence in space and time. Reproductions of that work transform it and move it into the realm of political, or exhibition, value, which presents the work as an object for social use rather than its original, artistic purpose. To take this view would be to discount the authenticity of a great number of mediated images and symbols. It is a view that many “purists” might agree with.

This claim of aesthetic authority, however, must be viewed in its historical context. Benjamin, a German Jew, formulated such a theory amidst the rise of fascism in Germany, during a time when many scholars lost faith in the traditional

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33 Benjamin, 6.
value of art and saw it being used primarily as a political tool in mass culture society. The increasingly influential Frankfurt School of social theory, of which Benjamin was a member, comprised thinkers with similarly critical views of political and socioeconomic systems at the time. For example, Benjamin’s contemporaries Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno’s famous critique of the “culture industry” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* also discusses the ways in which mass media manipulates the arts into sameness and strips them of true meaning, casting the individual as a freedomless pawn.\(^{34}\) Photography, one of the primary targets of Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” has had a particularly complicated relationship with the concept of authenticity throughout history, with many early critiques of the format taking root in classist distinctions between the aristocratic art of painting and the cheaper, more democratizing photograph.\(^ {35}\) Those tensions have persisted. For example, in his 1981 essay “Photography and Representation,” English traditionalist conservative Roger Scruton takes a forceful stand against photography as a mechanical process, in contrast with painting, that serves merely to capture the *reflection* of any real artistic representation.\(^ {36}\) His argument, which relies on the distinction between causal and intentional processes, essentially eschews any consideration of the ways in which photographs are not complete mechanical reproductions, the limitations of which necessitate photographers to


impose important creative decisions that introduce additional intentionality.

Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida* (1980) also serves as a strong rebuff from the perspective of the spectator, pointing to the specific emotional connection one can develop with the object of a photograph. The view that photographs cannot carry real significant artistic or personal meaning is almost laughable today, where photography has become a prolific activity practiced for its own sake.

Thus, it is clear that the definition of authenticity itself has been politicized and can evolve with time, and it is fair to assume that gatekeepers and evaluative methods might be fluid as well. Indeed, the creation and interpretation of authenticity is as much a result of sociocultural movements as is, for example, the way we talk. For instance, as Theo Van Leeuwen points out, we are predisposed to perceive certain performances as more or less authentic depending on the emotion put into their delivery:

This relates to the social norms which govern the expression or restraining of emotion. If we exceed the norms valid in a certain context, if, for instance, we use too wide a pitch range and too much dynamic variation in our speech, this may be seen as excessive and hence inauthentic, and not trustworthy. On the other hand, if there is too much restraint, the performance will come across as learned by rote, and hence also as inauthentic and insincere. It hardly needs to be pointed out that such norms are culturally specific.

Authentic performance, then, becomes dependent upon a few layers of communication. Van Leeuwen breaks these “roles” down into the “principal,” the “author,” the “animator,” and the “encoder/transmitter,” which could all be

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unified in one person or spread across multiple. The principal is judged against
the initial meaning being conveyed, the author is judged against the wording
being used, the animator is judged against the delivery style, and the
encoder/transmitter is judged against the medium through which everything is
received. It is evident from this list that the chain of transmission could go on
and on or even cyclically as information is passed along, but Van Leeuwen’s
point is simply that communicated authenticity is not all or nothing, but rather
entirely subjective at any given point.

Van Leeuwen’s view of authenticity in mediated interaction appears to be
a nuanced, micro-level variation of the encoding/decoding model of
communication first popularized by Stuart Hall, who posited that each media
message undergoes a process of production, circulation, distribution,
consumption, and reproduction, each stage connected yet distinct in its specific
modality. Rather than viewing the individual as a passive receiver, as suggested
by Horkheimer and Adorno, Hall’s model takes audience members as active
agents in the circulation of a message, the meaning of which is always mediated
by language and reshaped through discourse. How a message is encoded, then,
carries no necessary influence on the way the message is decoded; it “can attempt
to ‘pre-fer’ but cannot prescribe or guarantee the latter.” That is, how exactly an
individual interprets any given message is mostly subjective, although in any
society, as Hall points out, “there exists a pattern of ‘preferred readings’; and

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39 Van Leeuwen, 395.
these both have the institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them and have themselves become institutionalized.”

In the context of my inquiry, it would appear that since there exists no universal metric for the evaluation of authenticity, subjectivity demands that individual and sociocultural interpretations are taken into consideration in the active negotiation of such a value.

Under this framework, perceived or communicated authenticity is not about some objective reality. Rather, the influence of our own socialized experiences and opinions in establishing moral or aesthetic authority is just as important as the object at hand. Authenticity becomes as much about the person or institution that transmits as it is about the person that receives and as much about the first transmission as the next, and the next, so on and so forth. The question we are encouraged to ask then, according to Van Leeuwen, is not “How authentic is this?” but rather “Who takes this as authentic and who does not?” and “On the basis of which visible or audible cues are these judgements made?”

Taking this view, I maintain that there can always exist a norm against which something’s authenticity can be judged, but that such a norm is completely dependent upon the process by which any individual forms their subjective evaluation of authenticity. That process is never fully transparent. However, the following sections in this chapter focus on two modes of interpretation from which principles of authenticity are oftentimes derived: self and culture.

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41 Hall, 513.
When discussing authenticity on the individual level, we often create a distinction between one’s “true” thoughts, decisions, and actions and those which are not truly expressive of one’s core. While everything one does is of course a product of the self, what is being implicated here is not simply of metaphysical nature, but also based in moral and social psychology. The question is not only “What is authenticity?”, but also “How does one live an authentic life?” It is an inherently normative evaluation, influenced heavily by sociocultural movements yet also feeding its influence back into the world. Throughout both Chinese and Western philosophical thought, such existentialist explorations have swung between proclamations of the ideal human being and critiques of such essentialism – this section explores a few of these perspectives.

The great tension within the concept of individual authenticity lies in the boundary between self and society. As Somogy Varga and Charles Guignon write with regards to Western philosophy, cultural shifts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries led to the emergence of two ideals: that of human beings as individuals rather than “placeholders in systems of social relations,” and that of society “not as an organic whole of interacting components, but as an aggregate of individual human beings, a social system with a life of its own” – the product of a social contract.43 This distinction influenced the deterioration of a popular conception of authenticity at the time: sincerity, or the will to “neither violate the

expectations that follow from the position [one] holds in society, nor to strive to appear otherwise than [one] ought to” – that is, truth to oneself as a means to social cohesion. In its place, a form of authenticity developed that more closely resembles the type of self-determination many of us ascribe to today. Based in the Kantian notion of autonomy, this ethic of authenticity relies on a degree of reflexive consideration and self-determination to qualify the true reasons and motives for one’s existence. It draws from the view that moral principles and legitimate authority are all grounded in the self-governing individual. Authenticity, if Kant were to name such a value, lies not simply in acting for the sake of one’s moral duty, but in choosing to act in such a way for the sake of oneself.

In Chinese philosophical tradition, similar views on the individual and morality can be found millennia prior to Kant in the teachings of Confucius (Kongzi 孔子). In Confucian moral philosophy, two of the most important concepts are li (礼, “ritual”) and ren (仁, “benevolence” or “humaneness”), each of which emphasizes the cultivation of human consciousness at both the individual and societal levels. According to Chung-Ying Cheng, li serves as an “institution that links human individual development to the development of a society or community,” maintaining social order and generating a sense of

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44 Varga and Guignon.
45 Varga and Guignon.
responsibility to others.\textsuperscript{47} It is somewhat analogous to Kant’s notion of moral law, or the categorical imperative. However, the mere practice of \textit{li} without feeling is meaningless – it must be coupled with \textit{ren}, or as Cheng defines, “the consciousness of an underlying bonding between human persons which expresses itself in terms of affection, care, and regard of one for the other.”\textsuperscript{48} Thus, there is also a component of practical reason in Confucian morality. That is, one should not only follow the moral law of \textit{li}, but also choose to do so out of a personal regard for \textit{ren}. Authenticity in self, in Confucian terms, consists of such a full commitment to becoming a moral human being.

Unlike Kantian rationality however, \textit{ren} is rooted in the cosmological view of humans as part of an interconnected whole. As Katrin Froese argues, Kant’s focus on moral duty and practical reason demands that “morality cannot be based on how another is connected to me, but rather must be based on the common humanity that we all share.”\textsuperscript{49} It is a nuanced distinction, but in Confucianism, as Froese writes, “rather than viewing each individual as a representative of the whole… the whole is the social order of which each person is a part.”\textsuperscript{50} That is, Kantian ethics are self-originating while Confucian ethics are relational and intrinsically tied to one’s community. The Confucian appeal to the universe, then, includes the view that immorality, and thus inhumaneness and

\textsuperscript{48} Cheng, 17.
\textsuperscript{50} Froese, 265.
inauthenticity, represents society’s departure from the Way (Dao, 道) of natural order.\textsuperscript{51} To fully realize oneself in Confucian terms would be to re integrate oneself with the cosmos, whereas for Kant, that separation is what allows humans to be moral to begin with. Thus, we can see that Confucian principles are much less concerned with the pursuit of freedom or autonomy and more centered around social order and sincerity.

A fundamental critique of Confucianism is its rigidity, particularly with regards to rituals and social hierarchies. Indeed, the use of Confucian ideals to justify stratification, perhaps against individual will, would appear to directly contradict contemporary notions of authenticity. One critical response to this system in pre-modern China is Daoism, which rejects the practice of li and laments the construction of a social order. Instead, as Cheng writes, “Daoism advocates a spontaneous reality that is free from fragmentation and strife, and of human invention and artifice. We see here a critical consciousness of natural understanding which values non-action \textit{[wuwei 无为]} and naturalness” (emphasis added).\textsuperscript{52} While Daoists also believe in Dao, theirs is radically naturalist one. Harmony between self and universe can only be achieved by a return to the primordial Way through non-purposeful action – through the embodiment of a genuine virtue of de (德).\textsuperscript{53} As a result, Daoist texts are deliberately non-prescriptive and apophatic, oftentimes relying on stories that might help one

\textsuperscript{51} Froese, 263.
understand how to cultivate the self in accordance with the Way, but never in positive terms.\textsuperscript{54} To realize oneself and be authentic in this system necessitates action without reflection or pre-meditation – a repudiation of Confucian or Kantian morality.

In many ways, the Daoist view of self-cultivation – that is, the belief that adherence to social order constitutes inauthentic existence and that individuals should learn by “undoing” themselves – is reflected in the more recent Western philosophical tradition. Unlike the norm of autonomy alone, the Western modernist and postmodern concept of authenticity includes the idea that some motives, desires, and commitments are so fundamental to the cohesion of one’s own identity that not even rational reflection by the autonomous moral conscience could do one’s true self justice. As Varga and Guignon point out, the modern notion of authenticity is not only about the making and following of self-given law, but also about how any given law, whether of intrinsic or extrinsic source, “fits with the wholeness of a person's life, and how or whether it expresses who the person is.”\textsuperscript{55} Even if one lives an autonomous life, they can still lack the means to true self-understanding.

Naturally, this philosophical definition of authenticity begs the question: How do we know what our true self is? Again, the answer lies in the relation between self and the universe. In the modern context of mass society in which we are, starting from conception, constantly imprinted upon by outside perspectives,

\textsuperscript{55} Cheng, 22.
Kierkegaard suggests that the self must be understood in relation to itself as a being in the world. That is, if, unlike objects or works of art, it is impossible to identify the essential characteristics of the human experience, self-understanding consists of the ongoing pursuit of such understanding in itself. We must constantly create our own meaning and concrete identity through expressions by which one manifests oneself in the world.\[^{56}\]

Similarly, Heidegger’s conception of *Dasein* (German for “being-there”) adopts a relational view of existence wherein our identities are always in question, representing a gap between what we are at any moment and what we can and will be throughout the unfolding and happening of life. And because humans are always existing within a world that places certain demands and expectations on us, we are always engaging in a life-project of understanding our true being, whether purposeful or not. If such language of being and non-being in the world sounds similar to the concept of *Dao*, it is partly because Heidegger himself was known to be familiar with and influenced by the teachings of Daoism.\[^{57}\]

However, the Heideggerian project of self-understanding, in departure from Daoist spontaneous non-action, focuses on an inextricable tension between true authenticity and our existence within socially functional roles. As Heidegger notes, the inescapable social context that we live in ultimately “prescribes that way of interpreting the world that lies closest.”\[^{58}\]

\[^{56}\] Varga and Guignon, “Authenticity.”

day is certainly dictated by an existing set of norms and expectations, though we may choose from the full array of given behaviors. This everyday level of conformity represents an inauthentic lack of ownership over one’s own life. According to Heidegger, we are able to realize our capacity for authenticity only through a process of personal transformation wherein we tear ourselves away from the everyday; first, through an intense, world-collapsing anxiety that individualizes one’s existence; second, through the realization of our own finitude in death, forcing us to focus not on the actualization of all possibilities, but on how we conduct our limited life; and third, through a feeling of debt to ourselves, compelling us to strive to reach our full potential. It is through such transformative events that we learn how to authentically care about our being, engaging in a constant narrative-construction that relates who we are and who we could be on a concrete level.

In his repudiation of the “spirit of seriousness,” Sartre also rejects the existence of transcendent values but does so by rooting all value creation in human activity, distinguishing between our facticity, or what we are “in ourselves,” and our transcendence, or what we can be “for ourselves.” Like Heidegger, Sartre believes that we are able to interpret and give meaning to the world but that such interpretations and activities are always constrained by our antecedent commitments or experiences. However, Sartre’s conception of authenticity is realized not necessarily through a world-relative transformation, but through an escape from what he calls “bad faith,” or the belief that oneself is

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59 Varga and Guignon, “Authenticity.”
60 Varga and Guignon.
something one knowingly is not. Ironically, Sartre also seems to suggest that such self-deception is inescapable given our constant pursuit of self-realization – we believe in what we can be, but that belief in itself signals our separation from transcendence. Varga and Guignon, however, make the claim that to accept such a conclusion would be to adopt the deterministic view of human existence that Sartre attacks from the outset. As Linda A. Bell points out, one might be able to recognize that one’s belief is always in question yet also held in good faith – one can recognize their true self as what it is not, and not what it is. Thus, authenticity lies in “the awareness and acceptance of – this basic ambiguity.”

61 Human freedom and the construction of self, then, consist of concrete actions that are taken on behalf of our perceived reason for being – as Heidegger would say, it consists of caring about who and what we are.

Given the myriad contradictions and similarities across both Chinese and Western philosophical traditions, of which I have only barely scraped the surface, it becomes clear that any attempt to identify a unified view of authenticity in self would be both theoretically unfounded and culturally impossible. As Nicholas Bunnin notes, a survey of the diverse range of influences on both traditions reveals that one cannot have a monolithic view of either. 62 Recalling our initial question of “How does one live an authentic life?”, perhaps a more fitting – and answerable – question then is “How do we decide how one lives an authentic life?” Rather than looking for an answer for all individuals and societies, I must

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61 Varga and Guignon.
apply different philosophical frameworks to different cultural contexts and even to different individuals. Thus, my exploration of authenticity demands that I also look at the actual human activity we engage in and the structure of the world we live in. This, to me, seems to be the project of anthropology and the overarching goal of my thesis. Furthermore, as Chapter 3 will show, much of what is discussed in traditional philosophy is actually deeply embedded in Chinese hip-hop via the mantra of “keep it real” and the cultural discourse that surrounds it. Thus, I am interested in the existence of an actual “culture of authenticity” in itself as a framework for my inquiry. Therefore, the last section of this chapter focuses on the construction of culture and ways in which different conceptions of authenticity might be adopted in a collective context.

*Authenticity in (Sub)Culture*

The principle of authenticity in culture is more concrete than the aforementioned communicated authenticity and less ontological than the authenticity of self, as the authenticity of any given culture, at least on the surface, relates more specifically to the actual embodiment of a moral authority. The assumption here is that culture functions with a set of meanings and values which can be constantly renegotiated but always remain rooted in a specific history and its people. In order to examine this history and its associated values, including the purported principle of authenticity, the concept of culture itself must also be constructed.
Like authenticity, culture, in the Western context, is a term that has evolved over decades and centuries of intellectual thought. With regards to our modern understanding of culture in anthropology, Dick Hebdige points to the origin of “culture” in the English vision of society as an integrated whole, one with a trajectory that either pointed backward to a feudal ideal or pointed forward to a socialist Utopia where labor and leisure merged. The latter, future-oriented trajectory gave rise to two basic definitions of culture: first, as a standard of aesthetic excellence, such as in classical art forms like opera, ballet, or drama, and second, as a way of living, rooted in anthropology.\(^6^3\) Taking the anthropological view, I must then ask: How are meanings and values embedded within this conception of culture?

To answer this question, I look to Raymond Williams’ discussion on three general categories in the definition of culture. The first is the “ideal” definition, wherein culture embodies a set of absolute or universal values and the role of analysis is to discover those values; the second is the “documentary” definition, wherein culture embodies a set of intellectual or imaginative works that collect human thought or experience, the role of analysis being to discern certain ideals from those works; the third is the “social” definition, wherein culture is a way of life embodying meanings and values not only through works but also in institutions, ordinary behaviors, and other social constructs of everyday living.\(^6^4\)

In the third definition, which is the one Hebdige most closely follows, analysis is


the “clarification of the meanings and values implicit and explicit in a particular way of life, a particular culture.”\textsuperscript{65} While the social definition of culture appears to be the most expansive and relevant form of analysis for my purposes, there is value in each definition for the sake of identifying the roots of meaning and value. In looking at the ideal analysis, for example, it is easy to discard the existence of absolute principles in something as mutable as culture, but if, according to Williams, we look at the process not as human perfection but as a moving ideal in human evolution, then it may be possible to identify meanings and values that are “universal” in the sense that \textit{history} has proven their contribution to the enrichment of an individual within a particular society.\textsuperscript{66} Thus, even though ideal analysis leads to documentary analysis and documentary analysis leads to social analysis when we are trying to be as culturally precise as possible, the consideration of a general, near-ideal allows us to accept a human evolution of principles that makes the purpose of determining meaning and value significant in the first place.

So, the propagation of such principles throughout history is how they become embedded within a given culture. However, this process – which we might also refer to as encoding – is far from transparent. As Hall explains:

Certain codes may, of course, be so widely distributed in a specific language community or culture, and be learned at so early an age, that they appear not to be constructed – the effect of an articulation between sign and referent – but to be ‘naturally’ given. Simple visual signs appear to have achieved a ‘near-universality’ in this sense: though evidence remains that even apparently ‘natural’ visual codes are culture-specific.

\textsuperscript{65} Williams, 48.
\textsuperscript{66} Williams, 49.
However, this does not mean that no codes have intervened; rather, that the codes have been proundly *naturalized.* 67

For example, in the United States, the red, octagonal stop sign has become a near-universal symbol for stopping, although the color, shape, and even text are entirely arbitrary constructions. The same goes for expected social cues or behaviors. Hebdige articulates this naturalization of certain meanings as “common sense,” which both validates and obscures the ideologies that we take for granted:

“It is through this process – a kind of inevitable reflex of all social life - that particular sets of social relations, particular ways of organizing the world appear to us as if they were universal and timeless.” 68 Given the existence of a near-ideal set of values or meanings in culture, my question then becomes: Can authenticity exist as a “universal” value? That is, does there exist a culture of authenticity? Without diving too deep into this question, we can see that, at least per our previous discussion on authenticity in self, Western history has produced a societal emphasis on self-realization and individualism, and previously an emphasis on sincerity and social order (which still persists to some degree). These appear to be manifestations of a naturalized code.

Per Hebdige, we then pose the crucial question: How do we determine which ideologies dominate at any given moment and time? Hebdige’s answer is to first consider the distribution of power in society: “That is, we must ask which groups and classes have how much say in defining, ordering and classifying out the social world.” 69 In society at large, that power belongs to those who control

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69 Hebdige, 14.
wealth, mass media, armed forces, social capital, etc., while more marginalized
groups hold less power to produce and define meaning. However, the focus of
Hebdige’s project is not the meaning of dominant culture but rather the meaning
of sub-culture, and particularly stylistic youth subcultures. What fundamentally
sets subculture apart from dominant culture is its composition of groups and
classes that directly oppose and subvert aspects of the larger culture in which they
reside. Power over meaning in a subculture lies, for the most part, with those who
lack power in greater society, expressing themselves through what Hebdige calls
“the construction of a style, in a gesture of defiance or contempt.”

Taking after his mentor Hall, Hebdige emphasizes the audiovisual signs of a subculture as the
key avenue by which it is represented to and eventually incorporated into
dominant culture.

Indeed, one of the fundamental tensions within the trajectory of every
subculture is that its inherent opposition to the mainstream is always contradicted
by its own growth, and while Hebdige focuses his study on British postwar
working-class youth subcultures like skinheads and punks, his framework
provides an analysis of transition that remains relevant to my inquiry. Describing
the initial stages of this process of incorporation, Hebdige 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.”

However, as Hebdige notes, it is through a “continual process of

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70 Hall, “Encoding and Decoding in Television Discourse.” 3.
71 Hebdige, *Subculture*, 93.
re recuperation that the fractured order is repaired and the subculture incorporated as a diverting spectacle within the dominant mythology,” a process which takes two forms:

1. the conversion of subcultural signs (dress, music, etc.) into mass-produced objects (i.e. the commodity form);
2. the ‘labelling’ and re-definition of deviant behavior by dominant groups – the police the media, the judiciary (i.e. the ideological form).  

Ultimately, these forces of marketization and redefinition coincide with one another, neutralizing and naturalizing the subculture. Hebdige argues that all subcultures experience this trajectory, rendering their subversive, radical nature ineffectual.

This presents an interesting dilemma for the general concept of cultural authenticity as well as the culture of authenticity, which I distinguish as two separate layers of the principle. The former, for which I refer mainly to views of genuineness, judges the degree to which one adheres to the “way of life” of the culture itself, with those rules being different for each system at hand. It inherently exists as the gatekeeper which pressures individuals to conform to traditions of a given society and culture in order to “earn” their membership, similar to the ethic of sincerity discussed previously. The latter is a value in itself, such as “keeping it real” in hip-hop, encoded in a culture or subculture throughout history. With regards to subculture, authenticity to the culture is characterized by styles and behaviors that oppose dominant culture, so its incorporation appears to fundamentally undermine its authenticity. Meanwhile, the principle of authenticity within a subculture, as with other characteristic beliefs, might also be

72 Hebdige, 94.
destabilized through ideological transformation. Thus, it seems that when a
subculture becomes incorporated, the entirety of its resistive power begins to die.

It might appear that Hebdige, in charting the trajectory of subculture,
presupposes something about its true nature that guides us towards this nihilistic
view. That is, in rooting the identity of subculture in resistance and rebellion,
Hebdige seems to suggest a categorical distinction between subculture and
dominant culture. While such an existential tension certainly persists, Hebdige’s
own analysis of the origins of subculture indicates that such a boundary is actually
quite nebulous. Hebdige writes that, because of the way that mass media provide
such a strong basis for image-making and class-construction in society, “much of
what finds itself encoded in subculture has already been subjected to a certain
amount of prior handling by the media,” relaying back an image “which is
‘contained’ or ‘framed’ by the ideological discourses which surround and situate
it.”73 That is, outside of simply constituting the mainstream that signifies when a
subculture has begun to break into dominant culture, media help circulate the
meanings and practices that constitute the semiotic fabric of a subculture itself.
Alluding to Hall, Hebdige also suggests that, in perceiving these mediated images
of themselves, members of a subculture 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.”74 Given
this type of exchange, authenticity as a moral or aesthetic value in an evolving
culture seems like a flawed principle from the outset.

73 Hebdige, 85.
74 Hebdige, 86.
However, recalling Van Leeuwen’s guidance to ask not “how authentic” but “who deems this authentic” as well as Hebdige’s initial question of how we determine which ideologies dominate, our dilemma might be resolved by answering this final question: Who holds the power to negotiate meaning in any specific context? Since there has never existed a singular authority on subculture in the first place and since I’ve acknowledged the transitory nature of all cultures, my focus must center on this question and those who have the power to interpret. While the dominant system certainly carries the most leverage in naturalizing these value judgements, power is not an all-or-nothing faculty. Indeed, referring back to Hall’s model of encoding/decoding, we can recall that consumption is a key step in the circulation of meaning. Following Hall’s theory further, we might consider how an individual consumer can receive a message in the preferred code and either a) decode the message in terms of the existing dominant-hegemonic code, b) understand such hegemony and decode the message in terms of a more differentiated negotiated code, or even c) “[detotalize] the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference,” operating in an entirely oppositional code. Given such potential for counterhegemonic interpretations of media, it would appear that there may be a way for even marginalized subgroups to retain power over the meaning of culture within a dominated system. Michel de Certeau situates this power in the modes of operation within everyday life, casting the individual not even as a consumer, but rather as a user of their produced environment. The

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process of consumption, according to de Certeau, “insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order.”

In this framework, subversion and negotiation become nearly universal in the sense that anyone can be marginal to the production of culture. As a result, we are left only with that tension between producers and consumers – between what de Certeau calls “strategies” – the preferred meanings inscribed by dominant structures – and “tactics” – the unique, improper ways that the “weak” navigate spaces designed by the “strong.” I especially like this verbiage because of the way it invokes the language of the battlefield, not to mention the Daoist ethic of weakness over brute strength. Indeed, for a subculture like Chinese hip-hop, caught in a steady state of uncertainty and transition, the existential tension participants face can very much feel like the forces of an unbalanced cultural war.

Throughout my research across China, I have identified three groups that are actively engaging in this war of authenticity: the state, the industry, and the subculture itself. To a large degree, the state and the industry in China are allied on one side of the frontline conflict – that is, the external friction between Chinese dominant society and hip-hop subculture as the latter struggles to maintain power and agency amidst transition. The culture of authenticity is invoked: How does one “keep it real” with outside power structures?

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77 Certeau, xix.
Concurrently, there is intracultural strife within the headquarters of Chinese hip-hop, between artists and fans as cultural gatekeepers. In this context, strategies and tactics give way to the more ambiguous power dynamic of *internal* negotiation between individual participants and their different understandings of *real*-ness as Chinese hip-hop tries to reconcile with its own heterogeneity.

Cultural authenticity itself is invoked: How does one “keep it real” as a participant within the culture? Each chapter in this thesis examines one of these conflicts from the perspectives of those fighting the war, and as a Chinese-American hip-hop scholar, industry employee, fan, and practitioner tangled up in the middle of it all, I can truly only represent their views through the lens of my own experiences. To that end, this is as much a project for my own journey of self-understanding as it is a project for them.
Chapter 2: “Keeping It Real” with the State and Industry

This story actually begins in the summer of 2017, long before I had even considered Chinese hip-hop as a focus for my intellectual passions. I had just finished my first year in college as a tentative economics major with hopes of entering politics or the nonprofit sector, and I was in Shenzhen interning at a private NGO, mostly doing research for charitable giving projects. The concept of working in or with the music industry in general, let alone the Chinese hip-hop industry, felt entirely foreign to me. Still, hip-hop was part of my way of living – I followed new music releases religiously, loved learning the latest dance trends, tried writing and recording my own raps, and dressed as hip as the South China weather and my own still-budding sense of fashion permitted. But that summer in China, listening to rap and watching dance videos on the small couch in my one-bedroom apartment, bobbing my head during daily commutes on the subway, earbuds in browsing Spotify at my desk at work, I felt like I was living hip-hop alone, and only by turning my gaze back to the United States.

However, one day about a month into my time in Shenzhen, I bumped into some coworkers huddled together in the break room, eyes glued to the television. When I walked up to see what they were watching, I became fascinated. It was a reality competition show, not unlike American Idol, except instead of singers and musicians, every contestant was a rapper. Here I was in a workplace dominated by women in their mid to late 20s, most of whom it was safe to assume had never seen or heard of hip-hop before, watching young Chinese rappers with dreadlocks, braids, and designer streetwear freestyle in front of celebrity judges.
with equally ostentatious getups. At first, I thought it was funny that the hip-hop I knew and loved had revealed itself to me in China through such a warped medium. Like many other Americans if they were to watch such a program, I thought that the contestants looked rather incongruous and that their rhymes sounded a bit off. My mind immediately raised questions of cultural appropriation and authenticity. Still, when I returned to my apartment that evening and found myself bored with nothing to do, I proceeded to load up iQiyi (爱奇艺), the Chinese video platform producing the show, and searched it up: The Rap of China. Despite the garishness of the production design and my intermittent urge to cringe at certain scenes, I was oddly hooked, at times finding myself legitimately impressed by the talent of the rappers competing. Throughout the remainder of my summer, I followed each weekly episode with the same zeal I did for fresh music from America. By the time the last episode of the season aired, I was already back in the United States yet deeply invested in the outcome of the final vote.

Little did I know, back then, that this first season of The Rap of China would become the single most influential event in the history of Chinese hip-hop and one of the greatest disruptions to Chinese popular entertainment ever – that it would help spur a multi-billion-dollar industry in the span of just a couple years and change the lives of hundreds of thousands of rappers and youth across the country. That in doing so, hip-hop would become the new battleground of a government crusade against Western values and culture, throwing the entire operation, from the mainstream to the underground, into turmoil. I didn’t realize
the significance of *The Rap of China* until early 2018, when news started circulating in Western mainstream media that the Chinese government had issued a culture-spanning “hip-hop ban” due to controversies that arose from the show. This puzzling crackdown is what actually launched me into the academic study of Chinese hip-hop culture, particularly in terms of its relationship to greater Chinese society.

Accordingly, this chapter starts with some historical context on the contemporary hip-hop phenomenon in China, focusing on *The Rap of China*, the 2018 hip-hop ban, and the relationship between the Chinese state and mass media. I then conduct an ethnographic analysis of the post-*Rap of China* hip-hop market, focusing on the mainstream’s alignment with party-state interests, its commercial influence on hip-hop, and the ways in which cultural participants cooperate with the dominant forces of the state and industry. This is then countered by the ways in which participants oppose state and industry influence, drawing upon the everyday tactics deployed in hip-hop against censorship, restriction, and commercialization. Throughout this chapter, a line is drawn between producers and consumers – between the dominant strategies of the state and industry complex and the subversive tactics of artists and fans – but this line is hazy and rife with ambiguity. Roles often overlap, particularly at the junction of artist and industry, where rappers may cross over whenever they engage in the creation of commercial products.

Within my analysis, I incorporate the views of hip-hop artists, industry employees, and fans I met during my time in the field as well as responses by the
online community, probing into the specific ways in which participants navigate the tension between subculture and dominant culture to stay true to their understandings of real-ness. Their perspectives often make a subjective judgement about what real actually means, and I should make clear that this chapter is not focused so much on the question of what authenticity in Chinese hip-hop is so much as how authenticity in Chinese hip-hop is maintained. Ironically, “keeping it real” operates as a constant principle regardless of whether participants are cooperating with or opposing dominant forces, posing a contradiction that transcends descriptive analysis. Thus, my focus within this chapter on the interaction between individuals and society – the frontline of the war of authenticity – serves simply as a framework by which conceptions of authenticity in hip-hop can be better understood in relation to each other. It is the stage upon which real-ness is performed.

“The Show,” the “Ban,” and Chinese Cultural Hegemony

Earlier, I stated that The Rap of China was the single most influential event in Chinese hip-hop history, and here is some cultural context for that claim: throughout my conversations with various stakeholders in Chinese hip-hop, people often made first mention of the show without ever using its actual name. That is, they simply brought it up as “the show” (jiemu 节目), “that show” (nage jiemu 那个节目), or the “talent show” (zongyi 综艺), usually prompting me to ask for clarification about what show they were referring to. The answer, of course, was obvious. Indeed, following its June 2017 release, The Rap of China
immediately became a national sensation, attracting 2.7 billion total views over the course of its three-month inaugural season.\(^7^8\) Those are the highest viewing numbers for any online program in Chinese history.\(^7^9\) To better understand the scale of reach here, it is helpful to compare *The Rap of China* to Hunan TV’s *Super Girl* (*Chaoji nüsheng 超级女声*), a female-only pop idol contest that first aired in 2003 and eventually reached 210 million viewers during its peak in 2005.\(^8^0\) Similar to *The Rap of China* in that it was a singing talent competition, *Super Girl* is considered to be one of the most successful programs in Chinese entertainment history.\(^8^1\) Calculating average viewership based on *The Rap of China*’s total views on iQiyi, that same figure comes out to around 225 million over twelve episodes during its first season, easily exceeding the viewership of *Super Girl* at its peak.\(^8^2\) The result of this phenomenon has been the unexpected and rapid transition of Chinese hip-hop from a relatively underground subculture to a bewilderingly mainstream cultural commodity, with rappers ascending as the new pop superstars, thousands of concerts and festivals across the country, endless hip-hop-inspired products and commercial sponsorships, and validation at all levels of Chinese popular media. The growing pains of this marketization form

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\(^8^2\) This method does not take into account iQiyi’s algorithm for calculating views on its shows, which likely differs from the calculations used by television stations.
the basis for cultural pushback against the influence of commercialism, which I explore later in this chapter.

To be clear, The Rap of China was by no means the first significant point of contact between the Chinese public and hip-hop. Elements of hip-hop were first introduced to the Chinese mainland in dance form through American shows and films like Wild Style (1983) and Breakin’ (1984), quickly catching on in youth culture and expanding to encompass rap music with the development of dakou (打口) culture, which de Kloet describes as an adoption of Western popular culture through unsold, discarded music records – referred to as “cut-outs” by the industry, or dakou CDs or cassettes – shipped 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 (Zhou Jielun 周杰倫) incorporated rap into some of their music, growing its mainstream popularity. With the spread of the internet, hip-hop and, in particular, rap spread quickly through online communities and forums specifically dedicated to discourse and media on the culture. In the past decade, the influence of Korean rap through K-pop and K-hip-hop as well as the popular

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85 Amar, “Do You Freestyle?,” 108.
86 Xiao, China in the Mix - Cinema, Sound, and Popular Culture in the Age of Globalization, 205.
87 Xiao, 198; Xiao, 212.
88 Xiao, China in the Mix - Cinema, Sound, and Popular Culture in the Age of Globalization, 217.
rap talent show *Show Me the Money* has also shaped the perceptions of Chinese audiences, with the latter playing an undeniable role in the inspiration for *The Rap of China* itself. And even in 2014, Chengdu rapper Fat Shady (*Xie Di* 谢帝) brought hip-hop to a wider audience when he appeared on the program *Sing My Song (Zhongguo hao gequ 中国好歌曲)*, becoming one of the first rappers to appear on mainstream television.  

However, what significantly complicates the historical influence of *The Rap of China* is that throughout the three seasons that have aired since 2017 (with the 2019 season rumored to be the last), the show has been the subject of a dramatic national – and at times even international – political debate. On January 19, 2018, just months after the conclusion of the show’s first season, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT, now known as the National Radio and Television Administration, NRTA) issued an advisory notice “banning” hip-hop from televised media, demanding that all programs exclude “artists with tattoos, hip-hop culture, subculture (non-mainstream culture), and demotivational culture (decadent culture)” and creating a list of “Four Absolute Don’ts”:

1) Never use actors who are at odds with core values of the Party and lack high moral standards.
2) Never use actors who are indecent, obscene, or vulgar.
3) Never use actors who have low ideological level and no class.
4) Never use actors who have stains, affairs, or moral issues.

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90 *Amar, ““Do You Freestyle?,” 109.*
The impacts of the ban were immediate, resulting in the cancellation of television appearances by various successful contestants from the show and leading many to believe that *The Rap of China* would be discontinued moving forward. But beyond just mainstream media, the regulations had a chilling effect on other cultural industries as well, with various online platforms, music festivals and venues, record labels, and even individual artists engaging in forms of self-censorship and re-strategization in order to fall in line with the state’s messaging on hip-hop. In accounts I’ve heard from my colleagues in the hip-hop industry, the months following the 2018 ban were an eerily quiet time for all of Chinese hip-hop, since everyone was alarmed and uncertain about the future of their work.

The most commonly cited trigger for this crackdown is a series of high-profile scandals involving one of the first season’s co-champions, PG One. Following a slew of online complaints about the rapper – an increasingly popular means of reporting individuals to authorities in China – the Communist Youth League, on January 4, 2018, denounced PG One on Weibo and accused him of encouraging young people to use drugs and insulting women in the lyrics of one his old songs, “Christmas Eve” (*Shengdan ye* 圣诞夜). The statement was shared over 17,000 times and received over 55,000 comments and 140,000 likes. In an even more viral response posted that same day, PG One apologized for the lyrics of the song, promised to remove it from all music streaming platforms, and, to

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92 Liu, “Hatin’ on Hip Hop.”
93 Liu.
much controversy, blamed the influence of Black culture for his irresponsibility.\textsuperscript{95}

Moreover, just weeks prior, rumors had started circulating of an alleged affair between PG One and then-married actress Li Xiaolu (李小璐),\textsuperscript{96} a massive scandal that seems to be reflected in the fourth “Don’t” issued by the SAPPRFT.

However, an astute observer might point out that such a controversial individual alone wouldn’t seem to necessitate such a far-reaching ban on the culture itself. Indeed, the Chinese government frequently engages in the arbitrary process of \textit{fengsha} (封杀), which is essentially the act of “blocking” a celebrity or entertainer from mainstream society to preserve cultural values, without issuing any type of strict media guidance. This is exactly what happened to PG One, who largely disappeared from the public eye, returning to Weibo in April 2018 only to address recent events by uploading an a cappella rap, which was quickly taken down by the site “according to related laws and policies.”\textsuperscript{97} It also happened in 2015, when the Ministry of Culture blacklisted 120 songs for “promoting obscenity, violence, and crime and harming social morality,” 17 of which belonged to Beijing rap group In3 (\textit{Yin san er 阴三儿}).\textsuperscript{98} As a result, it become practically impossible for them to perform live again.\textsuperscript{99} It even happened with the

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\textsuperscript{96} Feng.
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“Father of Chinese Rock” Cui Jian (崔健) when he and his music played a prominent role in the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, leading to heavy restrictions on where he could perform from 1990 all the way until 2005.100 Yet even in that political of a context, nothing was done to the culture of rock itself. The fact that this time, the Chinese government felt compelled to issue a preemptive cultural ban on hip-hop signals that something much deeper is at play – something that can help us better understand the existential tension between Chinese society and hip-hop.

To understand this tension, one must realize that China, like most other globalized countries, is deeply concerned with its soft power, wherein culture plays a prominent role in shaping both national power and foreign influence. It is as Arjun Appadurai argues, that “the craving, even in the non-Western world, for new commodities and spectacles… can become caught up in new ethnoscapes, mediascapes, and eventually, ideoscapes… that the state cannot tolerate as threats to its own control over ideas of nationhood and ‘people-hood.’”101 President Xi Jinping has adopted a particularly hardline approach to cultural policy with his development of “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” (simply known as Xi Jinping Thought) an addition to Deng Xiaoping’s socialist theory that focuses on what Michael A. Peters identifies as “structural market reforms as well as an enhanced governance… and the

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promotion of Chinese culture in both its traditional and revolutionary forms as a foundation for soft cultural power, socialist culture and Chinese identity. “102 In fact, Xi Jinping Thought has been added to the Communist Party’s Constitution, a move that solidifies Xi’s ideas as China’s national ideal.103

There is a strong case to be made for the view that Xi Jinping Thought has led to the most stringent environment for culture in the post-Mao era. Armed with an increasingly developed regulatory authority in an increasingly institutionalized industry landscape,104 China’s ideological control is frequently cited by my colleagues in the media as the hardest part about working in the mainland. In October 2014, Xi delivered a landmark speech on arts and culture at the Beijing Forum on Literature and Arts, an event that drew comparisons to Mao Zedong’s similar remarks at the 1942 Yan'an Forum on Literature and Arts.105 During the speech, Xi emphasized his view that the arts should serve a social purpose, calling for a “rejuvenation” or “restoration” of Chinese culture as a global force, particularly in comparison to the United States.106 Speaking to China’s core moral values, he attacked vulgar popular culture and art that chases after foreign ideals, at one point even making explicit reference to hip-hop:

103 Peters, 1299.
After reform and opening, our country widely studied and borrowed from the world’s arts. Nowadays, circumstances are still the same, and many art forms arise from overseas, such as hip-hop, breakdance, etc., but we should only adopt them if the masses approve of them, while also endowing them with healthy, progressive content.\(^\text{107}\)

A popular political buzzword was emphasized throughout the event: “positive energy” (zheng nengliang 正能量).\(^\text{108}\) Two articles published by the *Global Times*, a subsidiary of the Communist Party’s *People’s Daily*, less than two weeks before the 2018 ban are imbued with similar language. One article condemns Chinese hip-hop, arguing that given the absence of an American social environment, Chinese rappers’ “pursuit of a strong, cool, personal style evolved into a vulgar performance” and that “[s]uch a twisted facsimile of hip-hop could not survive in China.”\(^\text{109}\) The other lauds “patriotic hip-hop” as a counterexample to the PG One scandal, focusing on pro-government rap group CD Rev and fellow *Rap of China* contestant Sun Bayi (孙八一) as exemplars of “positive energy” and “rap with Chinese characteristics.”\(^\text{110}\) Both make clear reference to PG One as not simply a controversial individual, but also the catalyst for a national debate about the negative influence of hip-hop in China.

In that context, it becomes apparent how the 2018 hip-hop ban was about much more than the actions of one rapper. Rather, the groundbreaking popularity of hip-hop through a show like *The Rap of China*, in which contestants adopted

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\(^{107}\) Canaves.


various styles from American culture, represented a Western hegemonic threat to the Chinese state. Hip-hop without mitigation would be untenable. As Michael Keane writes:

In China… the distinctions between culture, creativity and industry are more finely inscribed. Culture is directly associated with the hegemony of the state: it is place-specific, laden with historical significance, governed by conventions and micro-managed by censors. Creativity on the other hand is often associated with foreign content imported from Hollywood or from China's near neighbors South Korea and Japan. Creativity according to this account is liberating, offering a window of opportunity to break out of the constraints of state sanctioned culture.  

Thus, it makes sense that hip-hop as a cultural and creative industry drew the government’s attention as soon as it set foot into the mainstream. Rather than looking at past instances of fengsha then, perhaps a more fitting comparison to the hip-hop ban is China’s stance on the Korean Wave (Han liu 韩流, also known as hallyu), or the import of Korean cultural products like K-pop and K-dramas. In 2016, after South Korea agreed to cooperate with the United States to build a THAAD missile defense system, which China regarded as a threat to its security, the government abruptly banned hallyu imports, leading to the exclusion of virtually all Korean entertainers and music artists from the mainland for the following two years.  

However, just like the hallyu ban eased up over time, the hip-hop ban also left open the possibility of recuperation, particularly given that its direct targets were part of domestic industries. In fact, Rap of China head producer Chen Wei (陈伟) clarified in an interview that “hip-hop was never

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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.”

As I discuss in the next section, this ambiguity and flexibility has allowed *The Rap of China* to continue, at least for another two seasons, albeit with significant changes to its content. More importantly, the quietest period for Chinese hip-hop has passed, with participants steadily gaining the confidence to actively produce and consume again. However, the government has made its stance abundantly clear: hip-hop in its original form runs counter to the core values of the Chinese party-state. What are the implications of this tension for the concept of *real*-ness, the defining principle of hip-hop? How has the culture changed to accommodate government and commercial messaging? How has it tried to push back? These are the types of questions I explore in the remainder of this chapter.

In doing so, a consistent theme arises in the fluidity of power. Although the state and industry comprise what I frequently refer to as “dominant society” based on the power disparity between institutions and the participants of hip-hop, the industry is still, at the end of the day, less powerful than the government and oftentimes even beholden to culture. Similarly, although I tend to group rappers and fans together given the participatory and collaborative nature of hip-hop, the performative and public role of career hip-hop artists inherently gives them greater leverage in the cultural debate while also bringing them closer to

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commercial industry. Rappers can also be fans of other rappers. Therefore, the friction surrounding authenticity in Chinese hip-hop is never just between the strong and weak. It is between the strongest (state), the strong (industry), the weak (rapper), and the weakest (fan). This is a dynamic I return to throughout this chapter, and it significantly complicates the power relations between the individuals and institutions of hip-hop. Roles cross and contradict. Views fluctuate and consolidate in unexpected ways. It can become almost impossible to provide narrative and structure to this war, and sometimes it is best to just let people speak for themselves.

The Show Must Go On? Cooperation from the Culture in Transition

What happened after the hip-hop ban was a substantial realignment of cultural messaging in order to adhere to the realities of Chinese society, much like in Hebdige’s discussion of the stylistic incorporation of subculture into dominant culture. In 2018, The Rap of China launched a second season under a new Chinese name, this time as Zhongguo xin shuochang 中国新说唱, literally “New Rap of China,” instead of the original Zhongguo you xiha 中国有嘻哈, translated as “China Has Hip-Hop,” suggesting a push to mitigate hip-hop’s cultural influence and focus on Chinese rap alone. 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, the show’s production team stated that new Rap of

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China mission was to “justify rap music among young people – it can be young, uplifting and full of positive energy,” echoing the language of the Communist Party. In an off-the-record interview I conducted with an iQiyi employee that has worked on all three seasons of The Rap of China, they affirmed that during the first season, the production team felt like they had free rein to do whatever they wanted with the show, whereas during the second, the team felt immense pressure from “above” (shangmian 上面), limiting the type of content they could produce. Whenever my questions hinted at government involvement, we immediately defaulted to that term: “above.”

Indeed, the second season of The Rap of China took on a conspicuously nationalistic air with a particular emphasis on positive messaging. For example, the first episode opens with a performance by the celebrity judges that includes an instrumental using traditional Chinese percussion instruments, imagery of red flags and other red set design (Figure 1), a hook from Kris Wu (Wu Yifan 吴亦凡) that repeats the line “I’m from China so / 我代表这片地 (I represent this land),” and positive encouragement for youth to use hip-hop as a platform for their dreams. Throughout the season, various narratives are pushed that reflect the new direction of the show. Tattoos are covered up and Chinese culture is celebrated.

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117 Che Che, “中国新说唱之华语说唱舞台燃燥开启 60s 淘汰赛明星制作人严格上线,” The Rap of China (iQiyi, July 14, 2018).
118 This was mentioned to me on multiple occasions, including once by a colleague at RADII who had been present at the 2019 Rap of China auditions and saw an area where contestants had to get
Rocco, who was eliminated during the auditions of the first season for rapping exclusively in English, a faux pas in China according to the judges. Shortly after his elimination, he released a diss track online targeted at the show and the judge who kicked him off, Chang Chen-yue (张震岳), rapping “You singing motherfucker man now 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.”

In the second season, however, Al Rocco is invited back as a reformed man. After a year of practicing his Mandarin, he takes the first round stage by storm, rapping lines like “我的梦想就是中国文化到了世界” (My dream is for Chinese culture to come to the world) and “我的皮肤黄, 和你真的没有分别” (My skin is yellow, I’m really no different from you). He is showered by praise from all the judges and contestants, and he thanks Chang Chen-yue for helping him realize the opportunity to work on himself. Throughout the rest of his performances during the season, he constantly makes reference to himself as a “China representer.”

covered up (June 15, 2019), and another time by rapper Dough-Boy, who reiterated this version of events and added that his hair was considered too curly for the show (June 19, 2019).


Che Che, “中国新说唱之 60s 战况白热化明星制作人严 格升级 1V1 淘汰赛难抉择,” The Rap of China (iQiyi, July 21, 2018).
Outside of the ideological transformation of the show, *The Rap of China* has also consistently been at the center of discussion regarding its overwhelming commercial influence on the culture. On the one hand, it has been a boon for the hip-hop industry. At least half of the fans I spoke to stated that their earliest or most significant exposure to hip-hop came from the show, representing a small portion of the millions of new enthusiasts attracted by the phenomenon. A tour manager from StreetVoice (*Jie sheng* 街声), a leading Chinese music promotion company, told me that when he started out in 2013, no rapper could have accomplished a national tour. But now, Chinese rappers were selling out 5,000-person venues across China without even needing the major label support that the biggest American rappers needed in their country. While the two of us went back and forth about the preciseness of his claims, it was undeniable that a fundamental shift had occurred. On NetEase Music (*Wangyi yun yinyue* 网易云音乐), one of

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121 Interview with Peter Fish in Kunming. April 27, 2019.
the most popular music streaming platforms in China, the Higher Brothers had the top streamed album in the first quarter of 2019, beating out competitors like pop superstar Ariana Grande and the soundtrack to worldwide film phenomenon *The Wandering Earth* (Liulang diqiu 流浪地球).\(^{122}\) Rappers around the country have experienced similar success on various social media and streaming platforms.

On the other hand, much of this transition came at the expense of what many might call *real*, authentic hip-hop. A key part of the show’s success has been the draw of its five celebrity judges (one judge, G.E.M. or Deng Ziqi 邓紫棋, was added in the second season), but the irony of this is that only one of them, MC HotDog, is widely considered to be a reputable *hip-hop* artist or “OG” (an abbreviation for “Original Gangster” that has simply come to mean “original”).\(^{123}\) One industry employee even argued that MC HotDog is less of a rapper and more of a pop star given his roots as a signee to a major record label in Taiwan.\(^{124}\) This contradiction is compounded by the fact that the show doesn’t actually hold a completely open audition process, inviting relatively established artists and micro-celebrities to participate.\(^{125}\) Numerous rappers have told me that they were invited by producers to audition, sometimes even with the promise of a spot on the show.\(^{126}\) Such a focus on commercial success and mainstream appeal

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\(^{122}\) Discussed in 88rising Shanghai office. April 6, 2019.  
\(^{123}\) Yin, “Hip-Hop Lovers Say China’s First Rap Talent Show Is Out of Tune.”  
\(^{124}\) Interview with Peter Fish.  
\(^{126}\) The Higher Brothers and Dough-Boy are among the rappers who have received invitations, though I have lost track of the total number.
seems suggestive of Adorno and Horkheimer, who argue that the industry of mass culture “rejects anything untried as a risk.”127 Adding the fact that iQiyi’s 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 videos performed by contestants themselves (Figure 2), the presentation of hip-hop in Chinese mainstream media seems to contradict its roots in resistance against such dominant influences. Behind the scenes, contestants from the show are also required to sign one-year contracts to The Rap of China’s own record label, which facilitates follow-up concerts, public appearances, and endorsement deals for the most successful artists.128

Figure 2. Che Che. “中国有嘻哈之 60 秒淘汰赛 吴亦凡冷面杀手上线.” The Rap of China (iQiyi, July 1, 2017).

127 Adorno and Horkheimer, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” 50. 128 I first became aware of this during an 88rising meeting in 2018, but it was also corroborated to me during an interview with Rita Fan on July 1, 2019.
Given the existing prominence of pop idolism in China and East Asia as a whole, it comes as no surprise that hip-hop quickly grew a “fan circle” (fanquan 饭圈, also referred to as fantuan 饭团) culture and its own set of idols (ouxiang 偶像), influencing not only popular contestants from the show, but also rappers across the spectrum of hip-hop. At nearly every show and festival I attended, some attendees would complain to me about the presence of fangirls (fanquan nüsheng 饭圈女生 or nüfen 女粉) – although fanboys (nanfen 男粉) were present as well – who always arrived early and filled up the front row of the audience.\(^\text{129}\)

Another common occurrence is for fans to swarm well-known artists at airports and other public spaces, an example of “star-chasing” (zhuixing 追星).\(^\text{130}\) As a result of this idolism, a clear dichotomy has been delineated across the culture between what is perceived as underground (dixia 地下), “old school,” or subcultural (ya wenhua 亚文化) and what is mainstream (zhuliu 主流), “new school,” or trendy (chaoliu 潮流). Shanghai’s three-day AYO! Music Festival, one of the largest hip-hop festivals in China, even set the 2019 line-up according to these classifications – the first day was filled with more hardcore, boom bap rappers who had been in the scene for several years and risen with the general marketization of the culture, and the second day focused on newer rappers, many of whom were famous primarily because of their appearances on The Rap of

\(^{129}\) After the Higher Brothers concert in Kunming, one group of longtime fans laughed as they told me how Psy.P, one of the members, told the front row to get more excited or to move to the back (April 27, 2019). Dough-Boy also told me how, ever since The Rap of China, fangirls would come to his shows without knowing any of his songs just to check things out (June 19, 2019).

\(^{130}\) This type of behavior was first described to me by a fan/volunteer at the Higher Brothers show in Kunming. April 27, 2019.
When I went to the second, “idol” day of the festival, around three-quarters of the attendees appeared to be what some might refer to as fan circle girls. Several of these fangirls were very direct with me about their reasons for attending – they wanted to see their favorite idols. Within this tension, reality is implicated in that the more mainstream or “trend-chasing” (zhufeng 追风) one becomes, the less real they are often perceived to be. Pushback against the influence of such commercialization is common, which I discuss in the next section – intracultural critiques are explored in the next chapter.

Still, the existence of ideological or commercial tension does not necessarily mean that rappers and fans will choose to stay underground forever or try to fight back. On the contrary, every member of the culture makes decisions about their own path, and in the post-Rap of China era, many underground rappers have tried making the jump to the mainstream market for the sake of their careers. The fact that rappers have continued to audition for the second and third seasons of the show is evidence enough of that – even many rappers I met who had critiques of the mainstream had tried to get on the show and failed. The most commonly expressed sentiment I heard from artists and fans that approve of such a decision is the idea that “everyone has to eat,” a phrase that simply reflects the necessity of money in modern living. In one conversation, Hong Kong hip-hop star Dough-Boy, who was invited to audition for the third season, described

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131 This strategy was pointed out to me by a media employee working the AYO! Music Festival. August 3, 2019.
133 Some rappers who told me this include Shanghai’s jiafeng, Fujian’s lows0n, Xining’s飞行少年, and Tibet’s YOUNG13DBABY.
to me his willingness to do things for money in cruder terms: “I’m a prostitute
man, I don’t give a fuck.” His friend Daniel, a member of the popular Hong
Kong rap group The Low Mays, chimed in with agreement, clarifying, however,
that they wouldn’t lower their music standards. To them, engaging with
commercialism is not a binary choice between selling out and staying real.
Rather, it is an opportunity to further one’s career, consistent with real-ness as
long as they are able to maintain a degree of artistic freedom. Along those lines,
another argument I’ve heard across the board is that by increasing hip-hop’s
presence in media, more and more Chinese people can come into contact with the
culture. In this view, participants acknowledge the role that exposure plays in
spreading and diversifying hip-hop, benefitting new members and old members
alike – indeed, it is how virtually anyone outside the United States learns about
hip-hop in the first place.

Furthermore, much of what finds itself embedded in the style of Chinese
hip-hop culture already lends itself to commodification: fashion, material
possessions, money, and “flexing” (showing off, or zhuangbi 装逼) the
aforementioned are all part of contemporary hip-hop, particularly the sub-genre of
trap. The pursuit of individual commercial success, then, is entirely consistent
with many participants’ perceptions of not only the necessity of making a living,
but also the authentic hip-hop lifestyle. Indeed, one reason I was often given for

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134 Interview in Hong Kong. June 19, 2019.
135 This was a view strongly held by my informant in iQiyi, who maintained that commercialism
the appeal of hip-hop in China is that youth simply find it cool and trendy. Analogous to the countless slang to describe coolness used in the United States like “fire,” “dope,” “sick,” or “lit,” Chinese youth have invented their own terms to describe hip-hop and practically anything else they take interest in. Lingo I often heard and used were hai (嗨), which sounds like “high” and is applied, much like “lit,” to high energy situations; diao (屌), which actually translates to “penis” but also means “dope”; and more than anything else, niubi (牛逼), which roughly means “fucking great” and is applicable in a staggering variety of contexts. That concert was hai. This rapper is diao. Everything is niubi. In making hai, diao, and niubi experiences and feelings more accessible, commercialism has inevitably become accepted by many parts of the culture.

As I mentioned in the previous section, China’s ideological control plays an enormous role as soon as any culture gains mainstream traction. The development of the hip-hop industry, then, not only brought about the 2018 hip-hop ban and changes to The Rap of China, but also subjected every rapper with an audience to the increased scrutiny of the Chinese censorship apparatus. Ironically, no one actually knows for certain what type of content or activity is punishable nor when a crackdown might occur. As we saw in the case of PG One, a song he had released years prior to the scandal was resurfaced as a justification for his fengsha, and ultimately, the only guideline given is that values should align with party interests. This effectively amounts to a blank check for the government to

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136 This was mentioned by more cynical observers, such as one of my coworkers at 88rising who had run a hip-hop nightclub in Shanghai for several years (May 16, 2019) as well as one of my Shanghainese friends, a self-proclaimed anti-fan (June 12, 2019).
claim that anything can be unlawful. However, some explicit themes and activities are known to get rappers in trouble: drugs, sex, violence, and of course, politics, just to name a few. As a result, most rappers simply don’t engage with these topics in their music, deferring to more commercial themes and subverting certain rules, as I discuss in the next section, only through their everyday living. After all, the government is primarily only concerned with hip-hop’s influence on the youth.

But unlike the products of commercialism, state involvement has never been able to pass off as cool to the youth, despite attempts by the government to use hip-hop for its own purposes, such as through music videos to promote government policies and even for military recruitment.\footnote{Mai Jun, “Corruption Gets a Cartoon Rap: Chinese Propaganda Spins Lyrics on Xi Jinping’s Reforms,” South China Morning Post, December 28, 2015, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/1895587/chinese-propaganda-cartoon-raps-lyrical-xi-jinpings; “Chinese Army Releases First Hip-Hop Video,” Military.com, May 3, 2016, https://www.military.com/defensetech/2016/05/03/chinese-army-releases-first-hip-hop-video.} In this context, cooperation from the culture is less about acceptance and more about compliance. No one wants to be banned, so as many rappers, employees, and fans have voiced to me, “it is what it is.” There is a fundamental ambivalence and concession in contemporary hip-hop’s attitude toward censorship and regulation. The first time I met with Tibetan rapper YOUNG13DBABY, one of the fastest rising members from the Chengdu underground scene, he immediately addressed the elephant in the room – he wasn’t going to talk about politics, especially given the taboo nature of his birthplace.\footnote{Interview conducted backstage at Arkham in Shanghai. June 13, 2019.} Even the Higher Brothers, arguably the most popular rap group in China, have had multiple songs taken off of streaming platforms.
without warning. The last time it happened, my colleagues at 88rising hardly batted an eye, immediately working to figure out what part of the song lyrics could have triggered the censorship in order to ameliorate the situation.\textsuperscript{139}

That being said, certain parts of Communist Party ideology do align with existing views in Chinese hip-hop. On the extreme end of the spectrum, radical pro-China rap group CD Rev has consistently released songs speaking out about political issues \textit{in favor} of the Chinese government, making them some of the few members of hip-hop who are actually promoted by the party-state.\textsuperscript{140} Another notable example is when, following the August 2019 clashes between police and protesters at the Hong Kong International Airport, many of the most prominent rappers in China posted their support for the Hong Kong police, echoing a widespread sentiment in the mainland that protesters had overstepped in the conflict.\textsuperscript{141} While part of this was likely due to internal pressure to appeal to government narratives, it is also clear that the tension between hip-hop and government does not preclude rappers and fans from being political themselves.

Outside of the explicitly political, there is also a significant strain of hip-hop culture that strongly aligns with the government’s obsession with “positive energy,” operating with the understanding that hip-hop can carry certain moral obligations. In response to the question “What is the value of hip-hop to greater society?” JUMPFLY, a small rapper from Kunming, told me that hip-hop’s

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\textsuperscript{139} This occurred in the 88rising Shanghai office on March 8, 2019.  
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“greatest value to society is that it motivates more people to fight for their dreams and the things they want, but it does not challenge the status quo.” A long-time fan, also from the region, explained:

I am very happy that I was exposed to hip-hop during my time as a student, before hip-hop blew up [in China]. I saw the most authentic side of Chinese hip-hop – LOVE and PEACE! I have always seen hip-hop as underground, because the origin of hip-hop comes from the streets. But it’s also full of peace and love.

Such views evoke a conception of hip-hop that is not entirely at odds with the vision of a more harmonious society, wherein “keeping it real” can be a means to positive realizations of the self. Some fans have even expressed that the actions taken by the government to censor Chinese hip-hop have led to beneficial outcomes for the culture. Yet despite this view’s shared rhetoric with the government, the form in which it manifests is frequently imbued with contradiction and subjectivity. The same Kunming fan who preached about peace and love also explained that his first entry into hip-hop was through In3’s track “Hello Teacher” (Laoshi nihao 老师你好), notable for its heavy use of expletives and for the fact that it was one of the songs that got In3 banned in 2015 (as mentioned in the previous section). Indeed, this fan rattled off a whole list of old school rappers with explicit lyrics, telling me that, at the time, he was going through a period of rebellion and was attracted by the swearing. He went on to reference a line by more contemporary rapper Pharaoh (Falao 法老) from the

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142 Interview conducted over WeChat after in-person meeting. April 29, 2019.
143 Interview conducted over WeChat after in-person meeting. April 29, 2019.
144 Expressed most strongly to me by a pair of fans at the AYO! Music Festival. August 3, 2019.
song “Interview” (Caifang 采访), which he said represented his view of hip-hop: “粗鲁的歌词正能量的背后” (Crude lyrics behind positive energy).^146

Thus, for many participants in hip-hop, cooperation with dominant society simply entails a rebrand that still remains consistent with their conceptions of real-ness. It is a stylistic adaptation to the realities of state and industry. A particularly notable case is that of Chongqing rapper GAI, The Rap of China’s other season one co-champion. Prior to his appearance on the show, GAI was known as one of China’s most “gangsta” rappers – his 2015 song “Super Gangsta” (Chao shehui 超社会), the music video for which depicts him shirtless waving a machete rapping lines like “日你妈, 日你娘” (Fuck your mother, fuck your ancestors),^147 had made him famous in the underground scene. At the same time, he also received widespread acclaim on the show for performing with a distinct delivery that harkened back to more traditional Chinese music. After winning, GAI signed with The Rap of China’s hip-hop label Door&Key, which developed a positioning strategy that aimed to emphasize his unique Chinese style while hiding the “improper” elements of his music.^148 In an online interview, Rap of China music director Liu Zhou (刘洲) explained:

Kindness, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trust, qualities that GAI emphasizes, are good things. How to practice hip-hop in a Chinese way and to create a Chinese hip-hop style are really important questions. In this

market, imitating the West is not what GAI needs to do. What we lack is artists who have cultural consciousness, but GAI has it.\textsuperscript{149}

Prior to the 2018 ban that erased all hip-hop from mainstream media, GAI seemed to be fully bought into this strategy, performing on popular reality show \textit{Singer} (\textit{Geshou} 歌手) as well as on \textit{I want to be on the Spring Festival Gala} (\textit{Wo yao shang chunwan} 我要上春晚), a talent show to select performances for China’s premier televised event.\textsuperscript{150} GAI himself has publicly denounced his “gangsta” roots and embraced his shift towards “positive energy,” and many people started joking that “Gangsta GAI is turning into socialist GAI,” a play on words between “gangsta” (\textit{shehui} 社会) and “socialism” (\textit{shehui zhuyi} 社会主义).\textsuperscript{151} Following the 2019 season of \textit{The Rap of China}, Gem (\textit{Baoshi} 宝石), an OG rapper from northeast China, experienced similar breakout success with viral hit “Wild Wolf (\textit{Ye lang} 野狼) Disco,” eventually becoming the first rapper to perform a song on the CCTV Spring Festival Gala when he debuted a nationalistic remix of the track called “Spring Festival (\textit{Guonian} 过年) Disco.”\textsuperscript{152}

Amidst the rapid transition of Chinese hip-hop from subculture to mainstream product, it appears that participants in the culture have developed a variety of cooperative responses to the increased presence of government and commercial forces. With regards the growth of the hip-hop industry, many rappers and fans have actively accepted marketization as the new norm, reveling

\textsuperscript{149} “‘红色’嘻哈 货真价实的‘中国有嘻哈’_百科 TA 说,” Baidu Baike, accessed March 18, 2020, https://baike.baidu.com/tashuo/browse/content?id=5d5bb1f89b0df0495d7b2193.
\textsuperscript{150} Fan, “Will GAI Bring Hip-Hop to the Biggest Stage in China?”
\textsuperscript{151} “‘红色’嘻哈 货真价实的‘中国有嘻哈’_百科 TA 说.”
in the exposure and excess that mainstream capital can bring. When it comes to the state’s interests, cooperation borders between passive acquiescence and active ideological alignment. Perhaps most importantly, all of these participants believe that what they are doing is consistent with real Chinese hip-hop. That at the end of the day, they are doing what they want to do given the reality of their situation. As the next section will demonstrate, this conception of real-ness, that of “doing what you want to do,” is actually almost universal across Chinese hip-hop, which raises the question of how two diametrically opposed approaches of cooperation and opposition can both stem from the same cultural framework, and sometimes even the same people. I explore the answer to that question in Chapter 3.

Opposition from the Culture and the Tactics of Everyday Hip-Hop

Compared to its first season, the second season of The Rap of China is generally considered to be a flop. Aside from its decline in viewership, practically every single fan I spoke to that had followed the show stated that the second season was less real or too commercialized and that the first season was more underground, often using the actual English words for “real” and “underground.” What is implied here is that there is a spectrum of real-ness and that changes made to the show following the first season had shifted its position on the scale – that there is not only a real, but also a fake. The most fascinating part about this understanding of real is that it is one that has been disseminated by The Rap of China itself and facilitated by the discourse surrounding it. Indeed, one of the strongest narrative arcs built into the first season of the show is the tension
between underground rappers, who generally gain recognition through local rap scenes and social media, and “idol rappers” (the English term is used), who are usually scouted for their looks and performance talent and signed to entertainment agencies from the start of their careers. For example, in one episode, idol rapper J.zen (Zhu Xingjie 朱星杰) is shown being booed at by several contestants during a performance, reflecting the belief of many underground rappers that commercial rappers represent a fake 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.

As a matter of fact, real and other American hip-hop concepts became popular throughout China precisely because of their emphasis during the first season. Audiences inevitably take these narratives and re-totalize them within their own understandings of the culture. In one interesting conversation I had at the LHC Music Festival in Xi’an, a pair of local youth described themselves as more underground than commercial despite gaining their initial interest in hip-hop through The Rap of China. They cracked jokes about idol rappers. They critiqued rappers for trying to make it big off the show, which fans refer to as zuoxiu (做秀, literally to “make a show”). They condemned commercialism. GAI,

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153 In this context, “idol” or ouxiang is primarily used in reference to one’s career path, representing an industry-produced rapper. It is different from the more general usage of the term from previous discussions of commercialization, which can also encompass underground rappers who become celebrities.


155 Interview in Xi’an. July 6, 2019.
perhaps the most mainstream rapper of all, was already “no more” and “unacceptable.” They were certainly not the only Rap of China fans I met who thought this way – most were well aware of the spectacle and fabrication surrounding the production of a talent show, forming unique opinions on hip-hop that diverged from mainstream messaging.

Indeed, because hip-hop has always been a foreign cultural import that gained popularity in China through market channels, it makes sense that participants frequently seem to embody this contradiction. This ability of individuals to construct alternative and even oppositional interpretations of mass media like The Rap of China seems indicative of Hall’s theory of encoding/decoding and my discussion of authenticity in media and communication from Chapter 1. It also invokes de Certeau’s notion of tactics, wherein the “presence and circulation of a representation… tells us nothing about what it is for its users. We must first analyze its manipulation by users who are not its makers.”\textsuperscript{156} In this context, I again refer to “keeping it real” as a battleground – a war between the strategies of the dominant state and industry and the tactics of artists and fans.

With regards to media consumption, perhaps the strongest example of opposition from fans lies in the appropriated use of hip-hop lingo in The Rap of China, which was recast and weaponized against mainstream media by the online community. During the first season of the show, terms like “freestyle,” “diss,” and

\textsuperscript{156} Certeau, \textit{The Practice of Everyday Life}, xiii.
“battle” quickly became viral buzzwords on social media, although a quick internet search reveals that they became so primarily through their controversial use. The earliest example is “freestyle,” which judge Kris Wu frequently used during auditions to ask contestants “do you freestyle?” (你有freestyle吗?). In hip-hop culture, freestyling, or the improvisation of rap lyrics, serves as a demonstration of one’s skill and has its roots in authentic hip-hop culture. However, the fact that Wu, a pop star, questioned so many underground rappers on the subject of freestyling rubbed many netizens the wrong way, resulting in a viral onslaught of memes mocking Wu and questioning his legitimacy (Figure 3). Recalling the tension between underground rappers and idol rappers presented within the show itself, we can also see where fans might have picked up such principles of authenticity.


A similar phenomenon occurred during the show’s second season when Kris Wu explicitly coined the slang term “skr” – frequently used as an ad-lib in American rap music – as the season’s popular buzzword and used it to describe anything that he found “cool.” As was the case with “do you freestyle?”, “skr” quickly became an internet joke (Figure 4), propelled by a Weibo post from a large online community, Hupu Pedestrian Street (Hupu de buxingjie 虎扑的步行街), that parodied a recording of Wu rapping and called it quite “skr.” This resulted in a war of words between Hupu and Kris Wu, including a diss track released by Wu entitled “Skr” and a Hupu counter diss that gathered over 120,000 likes and 70,000 shares.

Such online mass mobilization seems to come not just from an understanding of authenticity in hip-hop, but also out of a general internet culture

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161 “Skr: Slang Term Used by Kris Wu Leads to Online War of Words.”
that pokes fun at and satirizes anything that crosses sociocultural lines. This egao (恶搞, literally “make evil”) culture is extremely potent and well-documented in China, most notably for its presence in online political discourse, such as the famous “grass mud horse” (cao ni ma 草泥马, a pun on操你妈, which means “fuck you” or “fuck your mother”) phrase used to subvert state censorship of profanity. As Tao Zhang writes:

The main challenge of the internet to the Party-state lies not… in the small spaces in which dissident intellectuals directly confront it on political grounds. Rather, it lies in the vast spaces of mundane online discourse that extend across the fields of cultural expression, consumption, and the constitution of cultural and personal identity. Taken together these, as Foucault said of discourse in general, ‘proliferate to infinity’ and offer constant scope for contention.

From my experiences with other people my age in China, egao is a culture that has permeated all youth communication, ranging from the slang we use to the references we make with friends. In fact, one summer night hanging out with a group of college students in Chengdu, they sat me down in front of a phone and “lectured” me for over an hour about the contemporary history of Chinese internet memes, playing various videos and name-dropping countless internet icons.

Speaking in this register, Chinese hip-hop fans often talked to me about artists not as people, but rather as memes. Throughout my time in the field, opinions on rappers that had gone astray of the real were often framed as jokes and accompanied by laughter.

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163 Zhang, 88.
I do need to stop at this point and clarify something about the complexity of such targeted critiques. One might wonder why a diss against Kris Wu or an indictment of GAI doesn’t simply constitute an intracultural negotiation of who is real or fake. After all, aren’t they part of the culture as well? However, one must also realize that the rapper who makes music for a living occupies a peculiar role in hip-hop. They are aligned not only with fans and fellow members of the community, but also with record labels, media companies, and other institutions of the hip-hop industry. That is, the participant who engages too heavily with the industry becomes an extension of it. In many ways, I myself was implicated in this tension because of my work with 88rising and RADII. While this doesn’t necessarily make one fake in the eyes of the culture, it does leave the individual open to criticisms reserved for commercialism or the industry as a whole. This duality of existence within hip-hop is positioned at the center of the contradiction explored in Chapter 3.

Outside of individual egao critiques, participants have also pushed back directly against the influence of The Rap of China. Even during the first season, netizens who viewed the show as too curated and self-censored cracked jokes that the show should be renamed to “China Has No Rap” (Zhongguo mei xiha 中国没嘻哈). Rappers across the culture condemned the program for similar reasons, taking to the internet to express their own criticisms. Weibo posts with the hashtag #rapofchinadiss were read over 10 million times before the first season ended, and certain diss tracks even gained more traction online than songs

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165 Zhang, “China’s Patriotic Hip-Hop Quickly Gains Steam as Rappers Repent Past Deviations.”
that were actually performed on the program. Rappers have fought back on set as well. In an off-the-record conversation with one season two finalist, I was informed that producers explicitly told contestants that they were not allowed to rap about certain themes, including those which promoted “materialism” (weiwu zhuyi 唯物主义), but another top-15 contestant disregarded these guidelines and performed a song about “flexing” money. The producers then made him re-record the performance with modified lyrics.

Furthermore, leading up to the premiere of its third season in 2019, The Rap of China released a series of promotional graphics on Weibo, each introducing different hip-hop slang terms like “homie,” “hood,” and “fresh.” The top comments on each post are filled with sarcasm, with users mocking the show for clearly trying to create a new viral buzzword: “Are you doing this everyday?”, “Just say it, what hot word do you want this year?”, “This again? We have no time to play with you.” Other commenters call on the show to improve from the previous season, with some even writing out rap disses of their own that make reference to the National Radio and Television Administration.

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169 中国新说唱, “#中国新说唱# 热词还不到，金句等你造！It’s HIP-HOP Slangs TIME. 这里是俚语 Vibe,” Weibo, May 9, 2019, https://m.weibo.cn/status/4370378530997093.
170 中国新说唱, “#中国新说唱# Homie！你对说唱的一切看法，你最真实的 HIP-HOP 态度，都可以在#DT Time#输出。” Weibo, May 5, 2019, https://m.weibo.cn/status/4368920565367208.
(formerly the SAPPRFT) for censoring the show.\textsuperscript{171} It appears that at some point, the show started deleting negative responses, with later posts carrying slews of comments like “Real shows don’t need to control comments, if you control comments you must die” (Real节目不需要控评，控评必死).\textsuperscript{172}

If it feels like I have only been discussing pushback in the context of The Rap of China, that is because for the vast majority of hip-hop fans – and thus the majority of hip-hop participants – The Rap of China is the most tangible representation of hip-hop’s commercialism and ideological transformation, one that they are actually able to engage with through online discourse and buying power. Not only that, but their ability to re-contextualize media narratives and conduct viral counterattacks is actually quite powerful. On May 9, 2019, a month before the start of the third season of the show, The Rap of China’s director Che Che (车澈) took the stage at iQiyi’s 2019 World Conference to deliver a “self-critique” (\textit{jiantao shu} 检讨书), wherein he acknowledges a number of “disses” against the show, including their biased audition process, over-commercialization of rap, and censorship of themes to make the show peaceful.\textsuperscript{173} He apologizes and assures viewers that the coming season will be better, and he ends the speech by promising that “this time, we’ll keep it real” (这一次, 我们keep real). Even then, online feedback was mixed, with one top comment on Weibo asking if it was a

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\textsuperscript{172} 中国新说唱, “#中国新说唱# 说仔（压箱底）的#HIP-HOP 日推#歌单首发，听歌 TIME,” Weibo, May 12, 2019, https://m.weibo.cn/status/4371487093498960.

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“self-critique” or “show off” (xuanyao 炫耀),174 responding to the fact that parts of the speech still emphasized the show’s positive influence. My informant within iQiyi clarified that although part of the speech was for public relations purposes, their team actually felt quite responsible for negative cultural impacts from the first two seasons, prompting them to appeal to the conscience of consumers.175 Indeed, a general consensus I heard in the field was that the third season was in fact “real-er” (更 real) than the second – although still not as real as the first.

Of course, the war of authenticity is not just about direct confrontation that leads to change. It is also about subversive tactics, which are especially important in a political environment and power dynamic where direct opposition can lead to severe punishment. We saw earlier that egao reconfigurations of “freestyle” and “skr” could play this role – a linguistic tactic. Another modality of tactics, particularly for rappers, is more operational. These are ways in which the structures of state and industry are used for ends entirely independent of their dominant strategic purpose, with implications ranging far beyond internet and media. The battleground where these modes of operating take place is the act of everyday hip-hop – in the routine ebbs and flows of the market and the physical spaces frequented by participants.

One of the most striking examples of everyday disruption lies in the subversion of baopi (报批, “apply for approval”), which is the bureaucratic process of submitting documentation to Chinese authorities in order to gain

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175 Interview conducted over phone. July 17, 2019.
permission to perform. During this process, rappers are required to provide the lyrics of all the songs in their set, subjecting them to the censorship and regulation of the government. However, multiple rappers have told me that, while baopi might seem stringent, few people actually care about it. Generally speaking, they will almost always submit a clean version of their lyrics only to perform an entirely different version during the actual concert or festival. At the LHC Music Festival, one rap group – who I intentionally leave nameless – even led a chant of “freedom” (ziyou 自由) and “fuck the police,” which shocked me given the heavy presence of security at such a commercial festival. On top of that, colleagues in the industry have told me that the Ministry of Culture (Wenhua bu 文化部) specifically assigns people in each city to attend and supervise shows. Ironically, it is clear that individual police and authorities do not always follow government ideology in its entirety. A humorous revelation I had while on tour with the Higher Brothers was that at most concerts, the security officers themselves were oftentimes fans of the artists on stage – I frequently caught them bobbing their heads, singing along, and even pulling out phones to record the experience.

That being said, violations of baopi and other mandates are still illegal, and so any government presence always poses a threat to the status of hip-hop. In April 2019, Shanghai-based promotion company STD hosted a show for American rapper A$AP Rocky, a prominent artist who has performed in China in

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176 This occurred on Day 1 of the festival. July 6, 2019.
177 Interview in Kunming. April 27, 2019.
178 I witnessed this at tour stops in Shanghai (March 30, 2019), Shenzhen (April 13, 2019), and Kunming (April 27, 2019).
the past. However, in reports I’ve heard within the industry, STD did not present the proper identification documents for A$AP Rocky during the baopi process, leading to a police investigation of the show that shut it down partway through.\footnote{Discussed by colleagues in Shanghai. May 16, 2019.} As a result, STD had to pay a staggering multi-million RMB fine in addition to event fees and a refund for all attendees. A similar mishap with authorization occurred when Rocky tried performing at Shanghai’s Innersect Festival in 2017.\footnote{That’s Shanghai, “WATCH: A$AP Rocky Storms Off Stage After Mic Cut at Shanghai Gig,” That’s Online, accessed March 18, 2020, https://www.thatsmags.com/shanghai/post/20853/watch-a-ap-rocky-storms-off-stage-after-mic-cut-at-shanghai-gig.} In these instances, what is particularly interesting to note is that rapper and fan interests have aligned with those of the industry, demonstrating a co-option of power structures to fulfill mutually beneficial goals. However, the power of the state still prevails.

Part of the reason for the A$AP Rocky crackdown is undoubtedly the fact that foreign artists are always subjected to higher scrutiny than domestic ones, but during my time in China, Tier-1 cities like Shanghai and Beijing were also increasingly tight on regulations because of the then-upcoming 70th anniversary of the People’s Republic of China, which took place on October 1, 2019. Huge red banners denouncing gang activity were hung throughout metropolises, which many found ironic given that gangs are virtually non-existent in higher tier cities. Especially around the time leading up to the June 4 anniversary of the Tiananmen Square protests, clubs and bars across Shanghai were closing down early, and there were countless stories among my circles of increased crackdowns on illegal behavior. In the absence of any overt actions one could take to combat the hostile
cultural environment, people simply went on the defensive. Those who used drugs shaved their heads clean, down to the eyebrows, in order to evade hair follicle drug tests. People warned each other about places that were being more heavily patrolled. AYO! Music Festival, which was initially scheduled to take place in June, was indefinitely postponed, rumored to be because President Xi was visiting Shanghai around the same time.\footnote{Discussed by colleagues in Shanghai. June 11, 2019.} When the festival eventually did happen later in August, about a week before I left China, one image sticks out clearly in my mind: at the end of the festival, as rappers and fans began emptying out, every screen on the stage became lit up with the red glow of waving Chinese flags (Figure 5). Across each flag read the same line: “Celebrate the 70th Anniversary of the Motherland!”
Sadly, a consistent theme in the history of Chinese hip-hop is that no matter how hard the culture might try to fight or subvert dominant interests to “keep it real,” the party-state, through its control over the industry, will always be able to shut it down if it wants. Resistance by the culture, then, is constantly bounded by the anticipation of what the government might do at any given moment, especially in Chinese hip-hop’s current transitional state. Many of the youth I met were familiar and comfortable with the use of virtual private networks (VPNs) to access Western media on the other side of China’s “Great Firewall,” including alternative sources of hip-hop culture, but even those services were reported to have stopped working as consistently during the months leading up to the anniversary. In a country where nothing is out of the reach of the government, how can hip-hop possibly hope to win? Perhaps the only way to stay real is to truly stay underground, severing all ties between hip-hop as a culture and hip-hop as an industry. Some rappers have tried to do this – during a conversation with MC Yily, an old school event MC from Xinjiang, we discussed Purple Soul (Long dan zi 龙胆紫), a Beijing rap group that includes one member from the banned group In3. He pointed to them as one of the few well-known Chinese rap groups still trying to keep the ethos of the old school and the underground alive, releasing an album in 2018 called “F.T.W.” (Fuck the World) that was only available in limited quantities of physical CDs in order to avoid

182 One fan at the Higher Brothers show in Kunming was particularly well-versed in 88rising content, which he admitted was only possible by watching YouTube, a banned site in China. April 27, 2019.
183 I started hearing reports of this in early June 2019.
184 Interview conducted over phone after in-person meeting. August 7, 2019.
online censors. For the majority of the culture today, however, such anti-commercialism is not only unsustainable for living, but also not exactly what people want to do. Thus, we again return to this fundamental contradiction in contemporary Chinese hip-hop: How can one “keep it real” while conceding to the powers that supposedly strip participants of real-ness? Finally, I am ready to answer the question that I began with: “What is real?”
Chapter 3: “Keeping It Real” within the Culture

One of the most elucidating conversations I had about the concept of reality in Chinese hip-hop took place where I never even expected to take my research: Hong Kong, a sociocultural environment drastically different from the Chinese mainland. It was the middle of June, and I was in the region to get my Chinese visa renewed. I had initially planned for the trip to be a break from my fieldwork – I’d been in China for almost four months already, and I needed some rest before the final stretch of the summer, where I would be travelling non-stop around the country during China’s peak music festival season. By coincidence, I also arrived just in time for the largest protest in Hong Kong’s history, the anti-extradition bill march of June 16, 2019. Amidst this political backdrop, I happened to get in touch with Daniel, a member of Hong Kong rap group The Low Mays, who I mentioned briefly earlier. After meeting up with him the day after the march, he invited me to dinner later that week along with two of his friends, rapper and producer Dough-Boy and Cantopop singer-songwriter Serrini. Daniel was a student around my age with an international background, and The Low Mays were known throughout Hong Kong as a group with a distinct brand of irreverent humor, something I had never encountered before. Dough-Boy was the career hip-hop artist – years into the industry, signed to a record label, carrying a resume of collaborations and performances that spanned some of the biggest names and festivals across China. Serrini was a hip-hop outsider and a PhD candidate at the University of Hong Kong – while she spoke the least during the meal, her pop career had brought her on tours throughout the mainland, which,
combined with her academic background, brought her a deep understanding of the music industry.

Unlike nearly every other hip-hop interaction I’d had leading up to that point, our conversation that night was conducted almost entirely in English. And perhaps, partly because of that ease of communication, partly because of the diversity of experiences in that room, and partly because of the fact that we were chatting in a small, quiet diner in Quarry Bay and not in line at a concert or in a noisy waiting room backstage or in between sets at a music festival – perhaps because of those factors, our two-hour dinner conversation focused almost entirely on the single concept of *real*-ness in Chinese hip-hop. The themes we touched upon that night form the foundation for a framework of authenticity that serves as the structure for this chapter. As I’ve mentioned throughout Chapter 2, it is also a framework that seeks to reconcile a set of seemingly contradictory realities in Chinese hip-hop: the steady mainstream transition of the subculture, the increasing influence of state and industry as it does so, and the belief that every participant in hip-hop should “keep it real.”

The root of this framework lies in the fact that hip-hop has always been a participatory culture in China. At any given point in one’s engagement with it, the individual must make a choice for their own self. At the point of first exposure, the individual must make a choice of whether they want to take part or not. When they are confronted by the realities of the market and by conflicting cultural norms, the individual must choose how to react. When opportunities present themselves for further involvement or growth, the individual must choose whether
to pursue or to stay. These choices are what guide the cooperation and opposition described in the previous chapter. Where choices become coerced, they give way to tactics of subversion. How any individual actually makes these choices is entirely subjective, but real-ness serves as the metric by which anyone deems their choice valid or not. In that sense, real-ness is both extrinsically and intrinsically sourced. It is extrinsic in that every person’s understanding of hip-hop is shaped by their outward interactions with the state, the industry, and the culture at large. It is intrinsic in that every person ultimately constructs an inward understanding in their own way, based on their own set of interactions.

As a result, “keeping it real” is inextricably tied to the mission of understanding the world in relation to oneself. Hip-hop becomes deeply existential. Analogous to Kant’s practical reason, Confucius’ ren (仁), Laozi’s de (德), Heidegger’s care, or Sartre’s good faith – indeed, perhaps all of existential philosophy – there is a virtue associated with authenticity in hip-hop that calls for one not only to understand, but to be concerned with the project of understanding. “Keeping it real,” then, is about the pursuit of real-ness in itself – the very use of the verb “to keep” within the mantra hints at this definition. It is a life-project directed at the realization of transcendence, at being in accordance with the hip-hop Way. It is constantly being constructed and entirely determined by the individual. In that sense, the distinction between real and fake within hip-hop, even amidst the contradictions posed by state and industry influence, simply does not exist – the only point at which one can be deemed fake is if they purposefully abandon their project of hip-hop altogether. This framework of subjectivity is the
only way we can reconcile the infinite differences between participants in the first place.

At this point, it might seem as if I have discarded my own question. “What is real?” as an intracultural negotiation is a debate that will never actually resolve itself. However, it is undeniable that a power dynamic exists within Chinese hip-hop that shapes how this discourse usually occurs. There are in-groups, and there are out-groups. There are sages, and there are students. Thus, my goal within this chapter is to place that conversation in the contemporary context and to explain the process of how a student becomes a sage through the lens of three acts of development and three modes of real-ness. The first act for any hip-hop participant is the introspection that occurs when they realize that they are part of a larger culture. Thus, the first mode of real-ness entails learning about and identifying with the culture itself. The second act is when the participant gains enough confidence to negotiate with others about their own positionality and principles, oftentimes implicating questions related to dominant society. Thus, the second mode of real-ness entails critical self-expression and active engagement in the intracultural discourse. It is the modality where cultural norms and collective identity are formed. The final act is when the participant no longer feels the need to think about whether they belong or not anymore – they transcend the dialectic of real-ness and simply do what they want to do. Thus, the third mode of real-ness entails a fundamental ambivalence towards the discourse itself. How one raps, how one consumes, how one dresses, how one talks… one’s being in hip-hop is no longer dictated by what they think they should be, but rather guided by what
they want to be, given a full awareness of what is possible. They are able to teach through their own doing and non-doing. For someone to reach this last stage, they must consciously commit themselves to the identity of Chinese hip-hop while also understanding that participants themselves comprise and define the culture. In the end, the progression through all three modes is how sagely real-ness becomes achieved.

“I Am Not Hip-Hop”: The Inward Turn to Real-ness

No matter how quickly someone progresses in their understanding of real-ness, every single participant in Chinese hip-hop initially enters the culture in a preexisting form that can be considered fake. That is, prior to their engagement with hip-hop, every participant is certainly not yet a “true” member. The first encounter, then, always starts from consumption, and it is at this stage of development that every potential participant begins to decide whether hip-hop aligns with their style or not. As emphasized numerous times before, The Rap of China’s most immediate impact was to bring the culture of hip-hop before millions of new Chinese viewers, inherently commodifying it in the process. Even for many fans who had listened to rap music before, watching the show and engaging with its narratives was the first time they began to actually think of hip-hop as a culture rather than a genre of music.185 As one of the Higher Brothers, Knowknow, said to me: it is how many people even started interrogating the

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185 A couple of girls I met on Day 3 of the MTA Festival explained that, despite liking American rappers like Eminem and Tupac early on, they didn’t realize that hip-hop was a culture beyond music until The Rap of China. June 30, 2019.
tension between real and fake to begin with. For others I talked to, artists and fans alike, their first notions of hip-hop came through other channels and at other points in time. Some people were fans of Korean rap competition Show Me the Money. Some had listened to American hip-hop artists ranging from N.W.A. to Eminem, with the latter playing a surprisingly important role in the entry of many participants. Some first started with Chinese rappers in their region, particularly in hotbeds of hip-hop culture like Beijing, Chengdu, Kunming, and Xi’an. Some were exposed to the music by their friends. Some were algorithmically recommended rap songs by music streaming platforms. Some started listening when they got into skateboarding. Some through basketball and AND1 Mixtapes. Regardless of how, what is important is that every single person I talked to had encountered hip-hop in their own way and developed an initial understanding of it.

As soon as any individual enters the world of Chinese hip-hop, they become exposed to its myriad principles and discourses, immediately setting down the path of learning and self-identification. The prominence of the mantra “keep it real” thus triggers a type of existential anxiety and reflexivity similar to that described by Heidegger or Sartre. Every participant begins to wonder: “Am I real? Do I belong?” This turn inwards – this self-doubt and nervousness – was

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186 Interview backstage on Day 1 of the LHC Festival in Xi’an. July 6, 2019.
187 A number of fans at the MTA Festival shared this experience. July 30, 2019.
188 This was usually the case for fans of old school hip-hop, such as a cameraman I worked with on tour who had been listening to rap since the early 2000s (April 27, 2019).
189 One of my colleagues in Beijing grew up deeply involved in the local rap scene. July 2, 2019.
190 This was the case for a guy I met in Kunming (April 28, 2019) as well as a girl at the MTA Festival (June 30, 2019).
191 Expressed by Lil Butterfly, a designer in Chengdu (July 30, 2019), as well as YOUNG13DBABY in Shanghai (June 13, 2019).
present on the faces of many participants I interviewed, particularly those of new or unfamiliar fans. Many fan circle girls who I approached at festivals, most of whom had only become familiar with hip-hop through *The Rap of China* or a handful of recently famous rappers, expressed this to me through phrases like “I don’t quite understand [hip-hop]” or “I can’t say clearly,” especially when I asked them questions about *real* versus *fake*. While part of this might’ve certainly been an aversion to answering questions from a relative stranger, when I asked these same fans about which artists they liked, they were quick and eager to delve into the specifics of their favorite idols. It was clear that they simply did not know what they did not yet know. At the Higher Brothers show in Kunming, one male volunteer who became interested in hip-hop through the show bashfully stated that he didn’t think he was a *real* fan, prompting laughter from the other volunteers around us: “I only listen to songs. I haven’t wanted to do this type of thing… I’m not fully integrated.”193 Ironically, to even make such a statement implies some conceptual grasp of Chinese hip-hop. Indeed, this same volunteer also explained to me that he thought rappers should start from the underground, that idol rappers were inferior, that some fans were truly passionate (*re’ai* 热爱) and that some were simply trend-chasing. His self-designation as not *real*, then, was based on his initial conception of what it meant to *be real*.

The impact of such cultural gatekeeping is not exclusive to the process of consumption. Dough-Boy told me about how, early on in his career, he would question himself about whether or not it was okay for a Chinese person to make

192 This was particularly common at the MTA Festival and AYO! Festival.
trap music – about what “keeping it real” truly entailed. MC Yily also explained that the topic of real-ness was one he and other people engaged in primarily when they first entered the circle. lows0n, a new school Beijing-based rapper who I became close with through multiple encounters across the country, told me that she was not hip-hop – she simply used rap. This is despite the fact that she is signed to WR/OC, one of the most prominent hip-hop labels in the country; auditioned for The Rap of China; and performs and hangs out with some of the most well-known hip-hop artists in China. Along similar lines, lows0n also stated that she was not a yinyue jia (音乐家), but a yinyue ren (音乐人). Both phrases mean “musician” when translated to English, but in Chinese, jia (家) indicates someone who is an expert in their field, whereas ren (人) simply means person. While such categorical distinctions for lows0n served more as an expression of her anti-mainstream and anti-label tendencies – of her identification with a “no frequency” sound – they do, nonetheless, reflect an understanding that what she does isn’t in complete alignment with the gatekeeping culture of hip-hop. What is implied is that she has decided that she does not belong.

Upon entry into Chinese hip-hop, participants thus begin to understand and conceptualize their own identity as part of a larger whole. For those that want to continue, they look for ways to signify their membership. In that sense, the development of fan circle culture has been an extremely potent platform for the

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194 Interview in Hong Kong. June 19, 2019.
195 Interview conducted over phone. August 7, 2019.
inward turn to real-ness. At the MTA Festival, one attendee estimated that at least two-thirds of new hip-hop fans consisted of fan circle or star-chasing individuals.\textsuperscript{197} Despite critiques of such commercialism, the reality of fan circles is that fans become so enamored by their favorite idols that they legitimately endeavor to better understand the culture. Within a fan circle, fans also have varying degrees of experience in hip-hop, allowing for discourse that can guide newer fans’ learning. During the AYO! Music Festival, I spoke with two ninth grade girls who were self-proclaimed star-chasing fans of Young Jack (\textit{Man shu ke} 满舒克), a breakout star from the second season of \textit{The Rap of China}. One of them stated that when she first started listening to his music, she was so affected by it that she wanted to better herself and better understand his lyrics.\textsuperscript{198} Throughout our conversation, these unassuming junior high students presented a conscientiousness towards real-ness that I rarely saw from anyone in the field: being real is being yourself and doing what you want to do; fandom is not about a dichotomy between real or fake, but rather about distinguishing between the conditions of different situations; rappers should be allowed to act as they want, free of society’s judgement. They also touched upon another important component of signification: fashion and aesthetics.

\textsuperscript{197} Interview on Day 3 of the festival in Zhangjiakou. June 30, 2019.
\textsuperscript{198} Interview on Day 2 of the festival in Shanghai. August 3, 2019.
Indeed, while patterns of music consumption or discourse are not always immediately discernible, the expression of self through a hip-hop appearance is overwhelmingly apparent throughout the culture, as noted by Hebdige with regards to all subcultures. For many participants, they engage in this form of identification without even being aware of its meaning. In recent years, a major phenomenon at Chinese rap shows is the popularity of long, narrow towels which are frequently worn draped across the head, usually carrying the names of the artists on stage (Figure 6). They are sold ubiquitously outside shows and festivals. Beyond that, day-to-day clothing also becomes a way for participants to engage with hip-hop. Streetwear brands like Supreme, Off-White, and Bape have come to
carry special meaning amongst rappers and fans alike. Putting people side-by-side and judging by looks alone, one would actually find it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to tell roles apart. One 18-year-old fashion designer in Chengdu who had already followed hip-hop for several years described the importance of style to me in terms of its history in the West, noting the distinctions between East Coast and West Coast rappers and the differences in dress that went along with them:

Different eras and different regions all have different dress styles… So when I come to understand these cultures, I think that clothing is a very important way for people to express themselves. They don’t need to talk to you. They can just feel your energy or your views through clothes.¹⁹⁹

Similarly, hairstyles like dreadlocks and cornrows and accessories like gold chains have become heavily associated with the culture in China despite coming from African and Afro-diasporic origins, a source of much outside critique regarding China’s cultural appropriation and anti-Blackness. Even the towels worn by fans across the head seem to resemble, to a degree, the durags frequently worn by African Americans. However, as I have discussed before, participants in Chinese hip-hop themselves do not actually conceive of hip-hop in relation to Blackness outside of its historical origins – the concept of authenticity in Chinese hip-hop is not tied to race or ethnicity. Thus, all forms of physical representation point back to commodified symbols of what it means to be hip-hop, one of the first points of stylistic alignment for many members.

¹⁹⁹ Interview conducted with Lil Butterfly over WeChat after in-person meeting. August 31, 2019.
I must make clear that I have not sought to describe every way that participants in Chinese hip-hop learn about the culture. It would be impossible to do so. Rather, I have tried to provide some examples of the first act of development in any given participant’s project of understanding. Throughout this mode of real-ness, participants are mostly focused on consuming and learning from the culture. They are followers and students. As a result, they have yet to formulate strong opinions of their own about what they think hip-hop should be. The next act, then, is about their progression to the point where they feel comfortable placing their own opinion in communion and contestation with that of others. They begin to engage in the intracultural discourse no longer as passive receivers, but as active producers of meaning.

Crews, Beef, and Discourse in the Culture

Long-time fans of Chinese hip-hop would love to tell me about rap “beef,” where rappers air grievances against each other in extremely public, lyrical ways. As is the case in American hip-hop, there is a rich history of such conflicts between rappers in China, and it is a history so deep and active that I would never be able to cover them all in this thesis. Always described to me in a drawn-out, didactic manner as though they were lore, Chinese rap beefs consist of a rapper or multiple rappers in one crew taking aim at a rapper or multiple rappers in another crew in the form of a diss track, usually leading to a back-and-forth exchange of disses that draws the attention of the entire hip-hop community. What is most important about this history, in the context of my project, is the
existence of location-based hip-hop crews and antagonistic discourse in themselves. Whether it’s Changsha’s SUP, Chengdu’s CDC (*Shuochang huiguan* 说唱会馆), Chongqing’s GOSH, Xi’an’s HHH (*Hong hua hui* 红花会) and NOUS, or any of the numerous other crews across China, the formation of “sides” and locales in Chinese hip-hop represents the consolidation and contestation of different beliefs and preferences. Fans of individual rappers or rap groups will gravitate to their larger regional crew – Higher Brothers fans like CDC, PG One fans like HHH, GAI fans like GOSH, so on and so forth. As a result, every participant becomes implicated in the process of beefs by association.

This alignment within the culture is a perfect representation of the second mode of real-ness, a step beyond following a fandom or questioning one’s own authenticity. In this act, rappers and fans take their own conceptions of how one should be in hip-hop and pit them against the understandings of other participants. For example, The Low Mays’ Daniel told me about his rap group’s beef with fellow Hong Kong rap crew Wild Style, which he claims effectively ended Wild Style’s career when the crew refused to issue a counter-diss and resorted to online harassment. However, when I visited Hong Kong Community Radio a few days later, an employee there, a local, scoffed when I told him I had talked to The Low Mays, arguing that they were rich kids who had the capital to do “meme” rap and that Wild Style was a much more legitimate rap collective. In this mode, participants are quick to criticize others and establish the dominance of their own viewpoint. One fan I hung out with in Chengdu even condemned his home team,
CDC, when talking about a series of disses they released in 2017, asserting that they were poor quality raps because the rappers were dissing just to diss.\textsuperscript{202}

In this contestation, all opinions and values are fair game, and countless tensions arise as people attempt to defend their own beliefs against outside contradiction. There is the oft-recited mantra of “peace and love,” which many participants take to correspond with more old school themes that emphasize “conscious” hip-hop. That tradition conflicts with new school, trap-influenced rap that focuses on the expression of more materialistic or violent aims – a style fueled by the commercial culture of \textit{hai} as well as the proclivity for \textit{beng} (蹦, “jump”), which refers to what one usually does in the club while they listen to such music. Those I met who ascribed to the former school of thought usually came into contact with the culture years before \textit{The Rap of China} aired, oftentimes through the consumption of American hip-hop. Once, while walking together through the streets of Chengdu, a local friend told me everything he knew about American rap history, proudly stating that his playlists were full of old school boom bap, which was much better than the trap music that only talked about drugs.\textsuperscript{203} When I pressed him on how the history of trap is fundamentally different from the history of boom bap, lending to its unique themes and styles, he went quiet – it was clear that my input wasn’t going to make a difference.

Similarly, MC Yily described to me how Black hip-hop originators like Afrika Bambaataa and DJ Kool Herc invented hip-hop music as a way to improve life in the poor conditions of the ghetto, something he resonated with personally growing

\textsuperscript{202} Interview in Chengdu. July 28, 2019.
\textsuperscript{203} Interview in Chengdu. July 28, 2019.
up as an ethnic minority in Xinjiang – it was not about being “gangsta,” toting guns, or doing drugs. With regards to the contemporary Chinese context, people with this viewpoint criticized the current scene as too lacking in substance, a critique very much tied to hip-hop’s mainstream transition.

As mentioned in the context of beefs, there are lines drawn on the basis of regional affiliation, but along with that, there is a distinct pride rooted in the unique dialects used in different parts of China. The Higher Brothers, famous for rapping in Sichuanese, even changed up their lyrics along different stops of their national tour to accommodate local fans. While performing in Shanghai, they held the microphone out to the crowd and asked the audience to teach them how to say the refrain to one of their most popular songs, “Gong Xi Fa Cai” (恭喜发财), in Shanghainese. They did the same in Shenzhen for Cantonese, the predominant dialect of southeastern China. As one Kunming fan described to me with regards to his own province: “Yunnan-dialect rap is really special – my personal opinion is that it has more character than Sichuan dialect… Yunnan’s older generation rappers… all rap in dialect. It has accompanied me since I first started listening to hip-hop.” Indeed, people wield their dialects like weapons in the world of beefs, disses, and regional pride, and in that sense, dialect also becomes a framework by which hip-hop participants position themselves within the larger culture, generating their own meanings and values in relation to others.

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204 Interview conducted over phone. August 7, 2019.
206 Observed at the Higher Brothers show in Shenzhen. April 13, 2019.
207 Interview conducted over WeChat. April 29, 2019.
As discussed throughout Chapter 2, *The Rap of China*, commercialism, and state intervention have all brought into play additional themes that have become contested in Chinese hip-hop. Now there is the narrative of underground rappers versus idol rappers. There is tension between old fans and the fan circle. Within the fan circle, there is tension between those who are seen as truly passionate and those who are seen as trend-chasing. There are even critical underground crossover rappers like AR, who released an album that sought to “explore how to make high-quality ‘Chinese pop rap,’ and to discuss its status quo.”

A commonly expressed view in this modality is that even if commercialism and state censorship are given, one should never stray from their original principles or views as a result of those external pressures. Across all of these tensions, there is a consistent push towards developing an in-group and out-group and a set of immutable laws – an attempt to establish one’s own way as the Way.

However, I should note that it is also this stage of progression in Chinese hip-hop that has brought the culture closest to its greatest existential threat – the Chinese party-state. As I mentioned previously, because Chinese hip-hop, a foreign cultural product, has become so expansive and influential across virtual and physical space, it fundamentally represents a hegemonic danger to the Chinese government. And within Chinese hip-hop, the open discourse between its participants and their tendency to form actual value judgements is what poses the

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209 Notably conveyed to me by MC Yily over the phone. August 7, 2019.
largest disruption to ideological control. As a result, this second mode of *real*-ness – the association and conflict of principles that occurs within hip-hop – provides the basis for any and all state action against the culture. As industry colleagues have noted, it is the reason why, after the hip-hop ban, *The Rap of China* was not even allowed to air on-screen beefs between rappers until the third season, and even then, it was only allowed on the condition that all conflict eventually became resolved through music.\(^\text{210}\)

In fact, during my time in China, two of the most influential regional rap crews in the country, Chengdu’s CDC and Xi’an’s HHH, were dissolved out of fear of government retaliation. The first incident occurred in May 2019, when every member of CDC officially “quit” the collective. According to rumors I heard, this was because their leader, Fat Shady, was planning a potentially controversial release in the United States and didn’t want anyone in his crew to be implicated.\(^\text{211}\) Then, at the beginning of August, Beibei (贝贝), perhaps the most well-known member of HHH after the already-departed PG One, caused a national media frenzy when he cut off his own pinky finger on livestream video.\(^\text{212}\) That same day, in a clear attempt at damage control, HHH released a statement on Weibo announcing their immediate disbandment. Both crews were ended by their own discursive presence. Indeed, PG One himself would not have been *fengsha*’d if people didn’t make the content of his lyrics or behaviors a public issue. *The Rap of China* wouldn’t have been significant if there wasn’t

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210 Interview with Rita Fan over phone. July 1, 2019.
211 Discussed by colleagues over WeChat. May 23, 2019.
such fervor and discussion surrounding it. Hip-hop itself would have never experienced such scrutiny if participants never cared enough to engage with each other critically to begin with.

Regardless, the reality is that, as in all participatory cultures, people do care, and so hip-hop has been subjected to the influences of not only government regulation, but also commercialization and internal negotiation. “Keeping it real” must constantly adapt to that reality. Ultimately, this stage of understanding in Chinese hip-hop is not necessarily about resisting changes that are happening to the culture, since no participant is able to stop or effect change alone. Rather, it is about trying to establish one’s own position of real-ness within the wider project of hip-hop. There are infinitely many ways to do so, but all of them entail a degree of constructive engagement with oneself and others. Thus, the limitation of this stage of development is that one is still concerned about what others think. They engage in the project of self-understanding but do so out of a feeling of need to defend oneself against outside forces. While they are certainly still “keeping it real,” it is only by transcending this anxiety and becoming a sage that one can fully break free and find their own true way. The next and final section will discuss what it looks like to reach that point.

“Gatekeepers Get Left Behind”: The Dao of the Real

During my dinner with Daniel, he joked that The Low Mays tried so hard to be ridiculous with their music that they were actually trying to not be real. However, even their absurdist version of hip-hop, he argued, was legitimate. He
stated that, in the end, *real* people don’t care about whether one is *real* or not. That in the grand scheme of hip-hop history, “gatekeepers get left behind.”

Indeed, what has turned out to be one of the most profound things said to me—though in the moment always extremely annoying to hear—is the sentiment shared by many people that they simply don’t think about what it means to be *real* anymore. Dough-Boy said it. MC Yily said it. 21-year-old YOUNG13DBABY, who had started listening to hip-hop at the age of 6 and started rapping around the age of 15, said “I write whatever I want to say” just moments after telling me that he didn’t want to talk about politics during our interview on account of him being from Tibet. When I spoke with the Higher Brother’s Knowknow, he said that being *real* can be rapping about one’s real life, but it can also be rapping about things one wants their real life to be. Thus, it appears that in the final stage of development in one’s understanding of *real*-ness, participants fully embrace the contradictions present within their existence in Chinese hip-hop. Even amidst the transition and conflict I described in previous sections, in this final mode of “keeping it real,” participants no longer feel the need to reflexively consider how one should be. They simply *be*.

In this context, even beefs can become a sage-like activity, since ultimately, no one involved in the beef is *actually* right or wrong, *real* or *fake*. To suggest so would be to disregard the subjectivity in each participant’s project of *real*-ness. However, being *real* also does not preclude individuals from partaking.

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213 Interview in Hong Kong. June 19, 2019.
215 Interview on Day 1 of the LHC Festival in Xi’an. July 6, 2019.
in such discourse for its own sake. One fan at the MTA Festival told me that his favorite rapper, Pharaoh, once had beef with the Higher Brothers but added on that everyone involved was really just “joking.”\footnote{Interview on Day 3 of the MTA Festival in Zhangjiakou. June 30, 2019.} At Xi’an’s LHC Festival, the Higher Brothers and HHH, who have had beef with each other in the past, were conspicuously scheduled to perform back-to-back on the same day, resulting in the spectacle of an audience divided between fans with purple Higher Brothers towels and fans with red HHH towels. In the crowd, I met a pair of friends with one person on each side of the rivalry. When I brought up the tension between their two favorite rap groups, one fan stated that “it didn’t matter, that’s all of hip-hop” while the other added that “hip-hop’s theme is still peace and love.”\footnote{Interview on Day 1 of the festival. July 6, 2019.}

Implicit in these fan accounts of beefing is that no matter what happens in the posturing of Chinese hip-hop, everyone comes out of the conflicts all right. Even after describing his beef with Hong Kong’s Wild Style crew, Daniel proceeded to speak of them endearingly as part of the same hip-hop community.\footnote{Interview in Hong Kong. June 17, 2019.} He wished they released a diss track in response – hell, he would’ve sent them a list of all his insecurities just so they could do it.

Even government propaganda or commercialized “nonsense,” if consciously pursued, can be profoundly real. As the heavily-criticized nationalist rapper Sun Bayi explained in an interview with the Party-affiliated *Global Times*, “keeping it real” is one of the core principles of hip-hop, and so: “If American rappers want to talk about oppression in their society, they have every right ... But

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\footnote{Interview on Day 3 of the MTA Festival in Zhangjiakou. June 30, 2019.}
\footnote{Interview on Day 1 of the festival. July 6, 2019.}
\footnote{Interview in Hong Kong. June 17, 2019.}
I've never personally experienced oppression – instead I want to focus on the opportunities and advantages I've experienced living in China.” The question of whether or not oppression exists in China is irrelevant to his perspective – it is only the feeling behind his own action that matters. Similarly, YOUNG13DBABY told me that one of his first songs was entitled “购买世界” (goumai shijie), which literally means “buy the world.” He said that when he wrote it, he didn’t actually have any of the fancy stuff he was rapping about. Rather, the materialism of his lyrics was a reflection of his aspirations: “I wanted to express an attitude – my dreams are big, even as big as buying the world.” The more he explained his life to me, the more it all made sense: the fact that he wanted to eventually move back to his hometown in Tibet and lift up his community; his view that, regardless of what anyone else said, he was one of the best rappers in China. Because of the way that attitude manifested in his music, he said that his songs all had a lot of “positive energy,” but that they were also very real. He distinguished his self from the changes occurring within hip-hop: “Real is real. Commercialism is commercialism. They’re separate.” Commercialism allowed one to get rich while rapping. “Keeping it real” allowed one to maintain their attitude while doing so.

In Chinese thinking, there is a popular concept called “the golden mean” (Zhongyong zhi dao 中庸之道). Initially described to me by my friend in Chengdu, it was used in response to my question of whether commercialism was

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219 Zhang, “China’s Patriotic Hip-Hop Quickly Gains Steam as Rappers Repent Past Deviations.”
good or bad for Chinese hip-hop. What it amounts to is essentially the notion that all things should come in moderation – that there can be both good and bad, a duality of existence in everything. Throughout my fieldwork in China, countless artists and fans expressed this principle to me through their ambivalent responses to my questions. Many of them said that there was simply no such thing as real or fake, right or wrong, good or bad. Everything that happened in Chinese hip-hop was "just the way it is." That in the end, hip-hop was about doing what one wanted to do – given what one could do. That is perhaps the greatest departure in Chinese hip-hop from its American counterpart, which oftentimes seems to be about doing what you want to do in spite of what you can’t. In fact, it has even been argued in other papers that hip-hop’s mantra of “keeping it real” is philosophically at odds with China’s emphasis on the golden mean and the modesty associated with it. However, in my experience, this dichotomy, as with many other supposed contradictions in Chinese hip-hop, simply does not persist. Rather, it is the acceptance of ambiguity that has allowed real-ness to build its own form within Chinese culture to begin with.

Thus, being real will always trace back to the care one has for their own project of understanding and the way they pursue it for themselves. It is, as YOUNG13DBABY described, an attitude. One Chengdu fan I became close friends with explained his progression in hip-hop through this same lens:

Anything can be hip-hop. The way you talk. The way you eat. The way you walk. The way you sleep. It’s an attitude… My fundamental nature is

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very much about freedom and expression, so it just happened to merge together [with hip-hop]. It was a great fit, so it just added to my passion.\footnote{Interview in a pizza shop in Chengdu. July 31, 2019.}

As a fan, my friend didn’t question whether or not he belonged in hip-hop. He just saw himself as one individual existing within it, embodying the attitude that he felt was right for himself. Of course, it is always easier to say these things than to fully live by them, and it is entirely possible that a number of the people in whom I saw sagely qualities of real-ness still felt anxiety about the authenticity of their participation. However, what is most important is that, even without the presence of a consummate sage in Chinese hip-hop, I have met countless people who are trying to understand what it is that they want for themselves not only within this cultural framework, but also within their lives. In that sense, what I have seen from participants in Chinese hip-hop is a concern for real-ness that truly does point to transcendence. Chinese hip-hop becomes a philosophy like any other.

Throughout this essay, I have pointed to countless contradictions that seem to jeopardize the legitimacy of Chinese hip-hop: its origins in cultural appropriation; its recently hyper-commodified form; its heavy regulation and censorship; its internal negotiation and strife. All of these tensions could be pointed to as reasons to discount the culture and disqualify the authenticity of its participants. However, to do so would be, in my opinion, to fall into the trap of making the same orientalist judgements about China that have been made by Western academics for as long as the study of the East has existed. That is not the goal of my thesis nor the goal of my life-project. Instead, I maintain that Chinese hip-hop exists as a distinct, legitimate, and authentic culture. The unequivocal
truth of my experience in China and of my experiences as a Chinese-American member of hip-hop is that every single Chinese participant in the culture is engaging out of a genuine desire to do so. If “keeping it real” is simply doing what one wants to do, then everyone who wants to be real can be real. No gatekeeper can ever deny them that.
Conclusion

I have constantly returned to the question “What is real?” as a lodestone for my inquiry into Chinese hip-hop. I have sought to answer it in theory. I have tried to describe the way people operate under real-ness in everyday life. I have even constructed my own framework of achieving sagely real-ness. No scholar has done this yet in the context of contemporary Chinese hip-hop, and this is certainly not an approach that has been accepted by the Western academic tradition. Indeed, I am proud of the way I’ve represented my fellow members of the culture. Still, it appears that in answering this question, I have raised even more uncertainties than I began with. Given that real-ness itself is a concept constructed entirely subjectively for any individual, it seems that even my attempt at classifying and representing different viewpoints is a laughable one. In the end, “keeping it real” is about what any individual wants for themselves, and so the ambiguity of the concept makes the mission of my project practically irrelevant to anyone else’s selfhood.

This is why it is so crucial that this project has been personal. In embarking on this ethnographic journey, I have not only observed and studied the culture of Chinese hip-hop. I have participated in it. I have fundamentally engaged with the structure of its industry, made friends with its people from all walks of life, and further solidified my own love and passion for its mission. I truly believe that my future lies in this realm and that I have the ability to become a sage – one who serves as an inspiration and guiding figure for others. When I
am going to get there is not yet clear to me, but this thesis has provided me with a framework for understanding how.

Even though she didn’t identify with hip-hop herself, my friend (and rapper) lows0n once told me something about real-ness that perfectly encapsulates everything I have been trying to express in this thesis. Sitting together in a tent backstage at the MTA Festival, in the middle of rolling sand dunes in Zhangjiakou, she answered the question that I had already asked countless individuals: “What is real?” She said that, while she couldn’t speak for hip-hop, she could speak for music in general. In her view, being real all rested upon whether or not one felt guishu gan (归属感). I didn’t know what that phrase meant, so I had to look it up: “sense of belonging.” However, when I explained to her what the English translation was, she said that it was off, because in Chinese, guishu isn’t simply about belonging to something. The word gui (归) entails a return to origins. The word shu (属) entails a familial or subordinate relationship. Thus, to experience guishu gan is to understand that one has grown out of something greater, and anything created out of that feeling is authentic.

In the process of writing this essay, I have been unable to shake a lingering question in the back of my mind: What is suggested about my own real-ness for me to be so obsessed with questioning real-ness itself? Within my own framework of authenticity in Chinese hip-hop, doesn’t that suggest that I am still nothing but a student? But when I listened to my conversation with lows0n again, I realized that while explaining guishu gan, she asked me whether or not it was
something I myself could feel. I realize now that I can. I realize now that I do. I realize now that I always have.
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Appendix A

Icebreaker Questions

1. How did you first get into hip-hop?
2. What does hip-hop mean to you?
3. What is real hip-hop?
4. Do you think China has real hip-hop?
5. Where do you think Chinese hip-hop is headed?
6. Have you seen The Rap of China? Thoughts?
7. Is hip-hop mainstream in China? When did it go mainstream?
8. Do you think hip-hop in China is facing any issues?
9. Is there anything about Chinese hip-hop you wish more people knew?
## Glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term (pinyin + Chinese / “English”)</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>baopi 报批</td>
<td>to apply for approval (from officials)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“beef”</td>
<td>to have a grudge or conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beng 蹦</td>
<td>to jump (in the club)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dakou 打口</td>
<td>cut-out (CDs and cassettes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diao 扌</td>
<td>dope (lit. penis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“diss”</td>
<td>to disrespect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fanquan 饭圈</td>
<td>fan circle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fengsha 封杀</td>
<td>to ban (a celebrity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“freestyle”</td>
<td>to improvise (a rap)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hai 喊</td>
<td>lit, high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“idol rapper”</td>
<td>commercial rapper (distinct from ouxiang)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>niubi 牛逼</td>
<td>fucking great</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“OG”</td>
<td>“Original Gangster,” original</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ouxiang 偶像</td>
<td>idol, celebrity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“real”</td>
<td>authentic (in hip-hop)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“skr”</td>
<td>cool (in jest)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“underground”</td>
<td>not yet mainstream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zheng nengliang 正能量</td>
<td>positive energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zhuangbi 装逼</td>
<td>flexing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zhufeng 追风</td>
<td>trend-chasing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zhuixing 追星</td>
<td>star-chasing</td>
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<tr>
<td>zongyi 综艺</td>
<td>talent show</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zuoxiu 做秀</td>
<td>to make a show</td>
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