

# Research on Cultural Identities of Hip-hop Music Groups in China Inland Cities

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## ABSTRACT

Thirty hip-hop tracks during 2008 to 2020 from three cities in inland China were chosen for studying the cultural identities of Chinese music hip hop music groups. The study mainly used qualitative research including content research and semi-opened interviews to analyse the text and content of thirty samples. As can be seen, the hip-hop community prefers to build community identities and seek identification in the virtual online world. The objective properties of representative hip-hop music texts are described in this study. From the standpoint of identity theory, the study assess the creation and sharing of hip-hop music, hip-hoppers of China build their cultural individuality and pursue social acknowledgement. Documentary research and interviews were mostly used to conduct content and textual analysis.

## Keywords

Chinese hip hop music groups; Cultural identities; Chinese hip hop songs

## Introduction

The hip-hop culture began in the 1960s as a movement founded by African Americans in Bronx ghettos who used street art like music and dance to protest society and racial injustices, as well as to seek national cultural identity. Hip-hop music culture advanced in fame around the world in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, coinciding with globalization and the rise of digital media. Young people all around the world have embraced hip-hop culture's unique and alternative expressions and styles, making it an important source of self-expression and identification. Hip-hop culture has developed into a worldwide adolescents pop culture in just a few decades. Hip-hop music has been intrinsically related to the development of the cultural identities of its primary players, youth, since its inception.

Since its arrival in China in the 1990s, hip hop music has had a close connection with Chinese adolescents - the players and followers of this music style, the vital force in facilitating the growing and localization of Chinese hip hop. It would be difficult to study Chinese hip-hop music independently without the study of Chinese teenagers, and examining their cultural identities is one of the most significant topics to conduct the study.

Identity is the embodiment of individual subjective emotional experience and objective thought. As the product of the society, individuals have to interact with the society and be continuously constituted and transformed by the external social political culture and discourse representation system

(Hall,1996:596-597).In the process of hybridization between hip-hop music as a western culture with the local culture, local adolescents have generated identity crises, doubting how to construct and define individual identity and how their groups seek social identity. Since the introduction of hip-hop music in China, teenagers have been engaged in self-reflection and cultural self-consciousness through the exchange and collision of eastern and western cultures, seeking their cultural identity. Hip-hop music has also become a way for teenagers groups to build cultural identities. Therefore, the construction of individual and group identity has become an important research topic.

The study's purpose was to collect thirty hip-hop music samples over the duration of 12 years, from 2008 to 2020, from Chengdu, Changsha, and Chongqing, 3 inland cities in central and southern China, in order to better comprehend this music group's cultural identity.

Hip-hop music differs from traditional classical music. Because it is not restricted to a specific musical style. Also, it is closely linked to current society thought and belief patterns. Compared to the musical melody, the importance of the literary composition of the lyrics goes far beyond the structural meaning of the notes themselves, and the lyrical lines are also the basis for forming the identity of the youth group. Hip-hop artists employ poetry and storytelling to demonstrate autonomy and a rediscovery of the self. The cultural meaning inherent in the symbols of lyrical texts goes far beyond that of musical sound symbols. In addition to music, this meaning is assigned to thoughts, behaviours, emotional states, and character regions(Meyer, 1991:15), and it has become one of the most visible representations of youth cultural identity. As a result, the study's focus is on the textual content. The objective properties of

representative hip-hop music texts are described in this study. This study moves from the superficial meaning of the text to the deep meaning through text and semantic analysis from a linguistic point of view, and explores the cultural context of Chinese hip-hop music through the lyrics to find a deeper social meaning beyond the literal meaning of lyrical lyrics.

The following are the grounds for choosing these three inland cities. Firstly, Changsha, Chengdu and Chongqing, witnessed the earliest development of hip-hop music, are the three cities with influential labels and relatively mature rap music currently. Changsha owned the earliest group of rappers from the underground to the ground and also formed the local rap label "SUP Music", which is one of the most successful labels in China. Chongqing's Gosh label has strong regional music characteristics. This label is the earliest one which brings dialect rap to young people throughout all over the country via online platforms. Currently, Chongqing dialect rap has become the strongest style of many dialect raps in China. The CDC Rap House in Chengdu is also one of the top rap labels with the longest history in China. The unique understanding of rap and serious attitude toward music among local rappers have been recognized by many local and external audiences and even many renowned musicians abroad.

Secondly, they are all second-tier or "new first-tier" cities in China in the hinterland of southwest China. Their geographical limitations have prevented them from colliding directly with western cultures to a certain extent. Correspondingly, they are not as open and inclusive as international metropolitan cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou in their level of openness and acceptance of external culture. In the process of acceptance,

they have undergone a deeper “localization” process. The works produced in these cities have more local characteristics and highlight how local youths shape their cultural identities amid the east-west cultural conflict.

The reason of using this time period is that in these twelve years, Chinese hip-hop music has progressed from slavishly following the trend to forging its own distinct style, with works evolving and incorporating Chinese element. As a result, twelve hip-hop tracks from the three cities and twelve years were chosen for this study.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Identity**

Identity occupies an important place in the study of humanities in the contemporary world. Almost any book concerning the keywords or overview of cultural studies has to deal with identity. The connotations of identity are twofold: “ontology and identity”, which is the cognition of “who I am”, as well as “sameness and consistency”, which is the cognition of something that is the same or consistent with oneself. The cognition of the consistency of my group is inevitably accompanied by the cognition of the difference of other groups. Therefore, the study of identity is equal to that of the relationship between the individual and society, and between the individual and the collective. According to the number of identity subjects, “identity” can be divided into individual identity and group identity. Group identity can also be divided into community identity, ethnic identity, national identity, and racial identity. According to cultural connotations, individuals and groups are distinguished by cultural, social, ethnic, racial, and regional identities (Luo, 2008). This study of hip-hop music group identity covers many of the above perspectives and analyzes identity building and group identification of hip-hop

music groups in their works from the perspective of cultural identity.

Hall (2010) noted that cultural identity is a perception of identity that is formed by an individual or a group of individuals under the influence of culture as it provides people with a sense of belonging and alliance. Cultural identity encompasses both construction and identification and involves the self-definition of an individual or collective. Identity refers to “the individual knows himself through a speculative understanding of his own experience”(Giddens, 1998:275). Virtually, identity resembles the so-called “roles” and “roles-sets” in sociology. It is a social position constructed according to certain social systems and organizational rules. An individual’s roles and identities arise from the negotiated arrangements of individuals and their social relationships (Luo, 2016). What we often refer to as an “identity” is actually a cognitive category of the subject. Stuart Hall believes, “Identity is fundamentally a question of the subject, a kind of relational orientation and self-affirmation of the subject in a particular socio-cultural relationship, and a sort of construction and inquiry about the subjectivity of the self” (Zou, 2014). For Samuel Huntington, identity “is the self-knowledge of a person or a group. It is a product of self-consciousness: what special qualities do I or we have that make me different from you, or us different from them” (Huntington, 2005). According to Manuel Castells, identity is the individual’s confirmation of self-identity and status, and the source of experience for individuals, from which individuals experience the significance of life and sense of belonging (Castells, 2006). A comparison of definitions shows that identity is equivalent to “personal identity”. The construction of self is to view the self as a separate entity from others.

Identification, however, is considered as a social identity to a collective or group. It is an active construction of meaning by an individual, which identifies its own source of meaning and can only be considered “identification” when it actively internalizes and accepts its social role as its own source of meaning (Luo, 2016). Henri Tajfel (1981) explains social identity as “an individual’s recognition of one’s belonging to a particular social group and awareness of the emotional and value significance brought to him as a group member.” In other words, social identity is an individual’s self-definition of his or her belonging to a group, namely what Turgot refers to as “collective consciousness” or “common consciousness”. It can be seen that identification is a judgment of value, a choice of self-perception, and a confirmation of and commitment to a collective position. Identification is the emotional resonance that an individual in a group has for the group and other members within it. It is also the attitude of a person in a group that resonates with and accepts the values, culture, and beliefs shared by the group. It has also been pointed out in social identity theory that individuals can generate in-group preferences and out-group biases when identifying with a group. On the one hand, social identity theory means that individuals identify with and belong to a group through social categorization, thus forming an identity of the group image. On the other hand, outsiders’ views of the group are also part of the group image identity. When a group is questioned, individuals in the group will unite to fight back in the identity of a group (Tajfel, 1981). Social identity is an individual’s perceptions and beliefs about the group or category he or she belongs to, while social identity theory is the theoretical basis of group identity. In real inter-group relationships, social identity usually refers to an individual’s group identity with a group (Zhong, 2008). A group is a collection of individuals who perceive themselves as

belonging to the same social category. Group members have an emotional involvement in this definition process and gain some social consensus on the group and the evaluation of the group (Tajfel, 1981). Zhao (2007) defines group identity as “an individual’s categorization of himself or herself into a group and development of a sense of psychological affiliation to it.” Ann (2006) defines group identity as “the conscious alignment of an individual with perceived group characteristics in the context of a group.” The definitions of group identity and social identity are close. If social identity theory focuses on individual-group-society, the scope of concern for group identity is the interaction between individuals and the group. (Tajfel, 1970; Ann & Wang, 2006). This group consciousness develops and metamorphoses constantly in the contrast between their group and the reference group, thus ultimately forming an intrinsic concept that is invariable, namely the group concept generated by regional division or the regional identity mentioned later.

This study focuses on the definition of individual identity, group identity, and regional identity in terms of the group identity of hip-hop groups.

### **Research objectives**

To investigate in what way Chinese adolescents in Changsha, Chongqing, and Chengdu use hip-hop music to establish their cultural identities.

### **Research Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative approach, analysis data from documents and interviews before conducting a content analysis. Using lyrics from thirty hip-hop music samples, this study employs text analysis and content interpretation to investigate the concealed identity appeal of hip-hop music groups. In addition, nine artists, five hip-hop music enthusiasts, and one music producer from three

cities were questioned. Each person was interviewed for 1 to 2 hours in-depth, semi-open-ended interviews.

### Data Collection

- The research used thirty hip-hop audio samples recorded over a twelve-year span between 2008 and 2010 in three inland Chinese cities: Changsha, Chengdu, and Chongqing. The selection criteria for the thirty examples are stated underneath.
- The ten tracks from each city were released over the course of hip-hop music's history, golden period, effectively presenting the thematic progression of hip-hop music in that city.
- At various periods, the works' producers and performers have been renowned musicians from the city's major and most recognized rap companies.
- On China's three mainstream music platforms that support hip-hop music, QQ Music, NetEase Cloud, and Bilibili, the ten songs from each city have received a lot of hits and comments, and They're also popular in China's hip-hop music scene.

### Research Results

The hip-hop China frequently represents numerous aspects of the hip-hop group's daily lives, conveying their own thoughts, feelings, and way of life. Hip-hop artists' lyrics typically describe a story or depict a feeling. They write not only the mediocrity and sadness of life but also their inner anger and resistance. They not only linger in the simplicity and purity of the past but also yearn for the future ideal in the distance, creating the image of youth between roles and non-roles. The 30 hip-hop song samples are all sung in Mandarin Chinese, and more than half of them (16) are sung in dialects.

The information in the lyrics text was mined, merged, and refined to disclose the representation and meaning of the language. The contents of thirty rap compositions were refined and divided into eight groups based on the theme of the lyrics and the statistics of keywords in the texts: criticism and irony, boasting about vocalists, hip hop's perseverance, Chinese culture, love, home, rebellion and disparagement, brotherhood and valor.

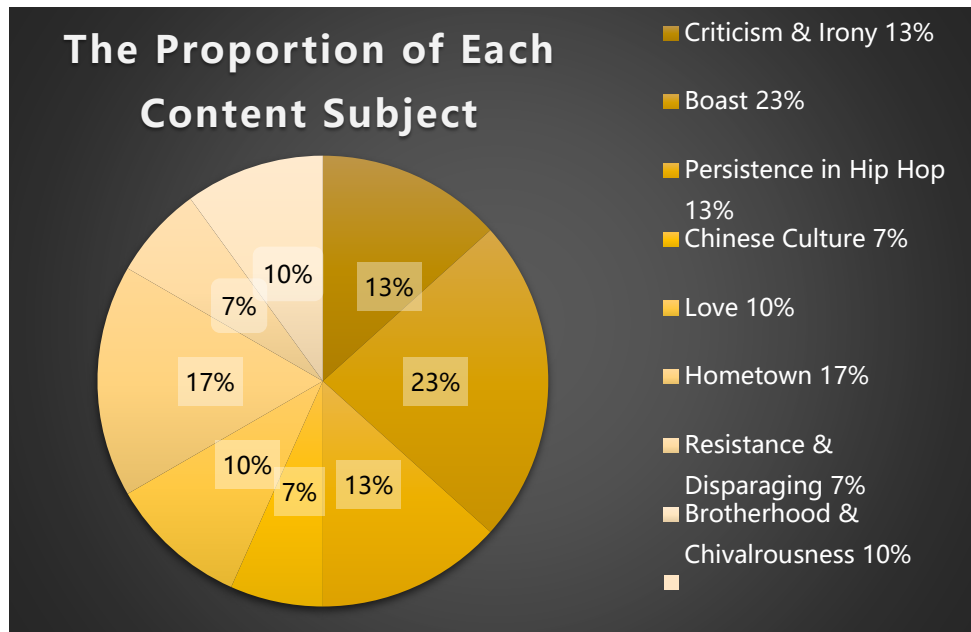
Chart 1, Refined theme and corresponding songs and quantity

No.	Theme	Corresponding songs	Amount
1	<b>Criticism &amp; irony</b>	<i>People, Society, and Money. I'm Not Going to Work Tomorrow. Killing the Ninja. You Sit on the Last Row, but I Sit Beside the Podium.</i>	4
2	<b>Boasting oneself</b>	<i>School Uniform is not Fashionable. Supra-society. Traditional Chinese Martial Arts. Laoshan Daoist Priest. Yao Ming. William Trap. I'm out ya</i>	7
3	<b>Persistence in hip hop</b>	<i>Walking on my way. Yejia Boxing. Mount Lu. Hey Kong</i>	4
4	<b>Chinese culture</b>	<i>Made in China. Huaxia</i>	2
5	<b>Love</b>	<i>Can't take my eyes off of you. Opponent. Love song</i>	3
6	<b>Hometown</b>	<i>Changsha Ce Changsha. Ten Years in Changsha. Chongqing Forest. I Love Chongqing. Foggy City Night Talk</i>	5

7	<b>Resistance and dissing others</b>	<i>Power to the People. Higher Sisters Diss</i>	2
8	<b>Brotherhood &amp; chivalry</b>	<i>Jianghu Flow. A Laughter to the Sea. Ascetic Monk</i>	3

The proportions of the eight themes in the 30 samples are shown in the following pie chart:

Chart 2. The Proportion of Each Content Subject



As the chart shows, the content of hip-hop works is expanded. At the top of the list (23%) is the theme of self-brag, a way for hip hop artists to emphasize their status in hip hop domain and build confidence. The way of boasting is quite novel, unlike the American hip hop to show off money, fame, women, luxury cars, etc., but to the Chinese Taoist culture of immortal, Traditional Chinese Martial Arts images to imply that their rapping skills is superior to others. The description of hometown accounts for 17%, which shows that hip-hoppers have a strong sense of identity and belonging to their hometown. The theme of persistence on hip-hop was also a popular content (13 percent). The rappers describe their experiences of not being understood, not being recognized, being questioned, and being suppressed on making hip-hop music, but they still have not give up their beliefs.

### Identification Construction

Other topics fall under the heading of social identity. Creators criticise and satirise social events and surrounding life in order to achieve social identity, highlighting the relevance of their social occurrence. The performance of group as well as the attacks on other teams are meant to safeguard communal interests and promote group identity. The authors' deep belonging and affiliation with their hometown and homeland are reflected in the content of regional and ethnic culture. Meanwhile, they hope to achieve recognition from their hometown's citizens and ethnic compatriots through their songs. The researchers believe that different linguistic content expresses different identity demands of hip-hop vocalists, and they have classified the eight themes into relevant identity categories using identity

theory. The researchers categorise hip-hop vocalists' claims to personal identity building bragging, affection, and commitment to hip-hop music production. Personal expressions focusing on the self of hip-hop singers, emphasising self-image growth and personal identity presentation. These themes highlight hip-hop vocalists' personalities and qualities, as well as their self-perceptions.

### 1. Personal identity construction with the theme of "self"

Almost half of the thirty tracks in the sample are about self-expression, with issues such as showing off high-quality rapping skills, create personal stories that convey complex emotions, and never give up on ambitions. Through their songs, the hip-hop group aims to address the question "Who am I?". The creation of self-centered, localized content that not only recreates the themes of black American hip-hop, but also delivers experiences and lifestyles related to people and the environment, reflects the growth of an individual's identity. The creators make it clear that gangster rap, which dominated American black hip-hop, is not their style. It also says that domestic rap music's celebration of violence, sex, and money worship is incongruous with their Chinese living conditions. In interviews, the rappers stated that:

*"It's not authentic if I start rhyming about cocaine or rock 'n' roll bling. I'm sure it's about something I've gone through. To put it another way, we don't rap about violence. We discuss things between ourselves(O Young, 26 years old, rapper, December 12, 2020)".*

Domestic hip-hoppers aim to create their own unique personality through hip-hop music

composition, as evidenced by the aforementioned arguments. Hip-hop is widely used by adolescents to create a unique and distinct personal identity. Youths' development of distinct identities challenges the typecast of hip-hop listeners as "hooded men preaching only violence, money, and a hedonistic lifestyle". As Xie Di (a Chengdu rapper) wrote in his song *I'm Not Going to Work Tomorrow* when he decided to quit his job because of the stress of his daily work, *"I'm not going to work tomorrow, so I can be as relax as I want. I don't have to work tomorrow, so I don't have to pretend to be others' grandson to meet my customers."* He speaks in an witty and humorous way with a seemingly cynical tone, revealing his image as a "natural and unconventional" young man who wants to release his repressed emotions after not going to work the following day, and who wants to play all night long without thinking about anything.

Adolescent paintings on this theme are typically self-contained cathartic emotions. They've frequently existed on for a long period, on the periphery of culture, with little crossover or communication with mainstream society. They reject the solid and moderate beliefs of adult society and choose to communicate in their own unique style.

Another 13% of vocalists use their songs to demonstrate their steadfast dedication to their hip hop ambitions and the reasons for achieving them. Hip-hop musicians are "on the defensive" in society and want to be heard. They also want more people to understand and enjoy hip-hop music. "When truth shines into the fantasy world and courage is replaced by contemplation," they sing, "I believe it's time for me to restore confidence".

While Hall has analyzed the complex mix of youth discourse and class discourse. In other

words, the middle-class counter-culture revolts against the dominant patriarchal culture, while the resistance of Chinese rap youth filters out class and reflects more the untamedness of youth and their desire to defend their independence through hip-hop creation. As rapper Xiao Ming says, "I just want to write some songs to show them to my family. I have never thought of becoming a superstar, but I hope I can bring something out and make people feel that what I do is meaningful." Hip-hop music from this era looks to have less hysteria and ranting and more of a message of self-respect. Personal expression was treasured more than ever by a generation of musicians growing up in the 1990s. Chinese teenagers are encouraged to develop their "self" identity through hip-hop music. According to the study, the Chinese teenage hip-hop community has grown into "Chinese hip-hop teens," Hip-hop in Europe and the United States, as well as other local youth groups, are distinct.

## 2. Seeking social identity by various ways

### 2.1 Participating in the construction of local identities and seeking regional and national identification

Hip-hop composition is used by singers to contribute to the construction of local identities by imparting a collective, local idea through the use of local dialect and slang. Two construction tactics are highlighted by the author: singing in local dialects and showcasing well-known local locations.

#### 2.1.1 Dialect singing

Long has there been a symbiotic relationship between culture and language? Linguistic identity is a cultural psychological convergence phenomena. The degree of cultural psychological affinity is linked to linguistic

identity similarity(Huang and Liu,2008). Regional groups currently dominate the Chinese hip-hop scene. Rap ensembles with different regional tastes and broad appeal may be found in Chengdu, Chongqing, and Changsha. Dialects are regularly utilised in their works as a distinctive creative tool. Dialects are used in sixteen cases, more than half of all samples belong to this group. This shows that some of the most influential rappers from the oldest, biggest, and best-known labels in the three cities prefer to use dialects in their music.

The vocalist of dialect hip-hop music not only raps in dialect, but he also utilizes a lot of lingo from the area. Some have a long history, while others are more recent, but they all come from regional dialects. Hip-hop performers' geographical and cultural backgrounds are considered to be revealed by their use of dialect terminology or accents. The Chongqing singer Gai's phrase "Le Shi Wu Du," for example, is recognized by audiences all over the country(a Chongqing dialect that meaning "this is the city of fog"). Chongqing is also known as Wu Du. His songs contain a substantial amount of Chongqing dialect, This not only improves their fluency over Mandarin rap, but also provides additional local meaning and peculiarities due to regional pronunciation and traits.

In the piece *I'm Not Going to Work Tomorrow*, Chengdu singer, Xie Di, used a lot of words with Sichuan and Chongqing characteristics such as "Ba Shi" (A Sichuan dialect that means "comfortable" or "great") and "Nao Ke" (A Sichuan and Guizhou dialect that refers to someone with a low IQ), As a result, the song gains a sense of pleasure and resonance with listeners.

The vocalists not only use accents and highlight local social issues to develop a distinct regional young identity and consciousness, but they also



add humour to the songs. People feel closer to one another when they see familiar places and hear familiar voices, making it simpler to build a sense of security and happiness. Dialect hip-hop is more recognised and acceptable to local people and even local culture because most individuals have similar deep recollections of dialects, which are the most direct means of portraying local culture. China has a broad geographical range, a complex ethnic mix, and a diversified social environment due to regional economic variations. Because they come from a country known for its agricultural civilisation, the Chinese people have a particularly deep and everlasting devotion to their homeland, and their emotional bonds are generally formed through regional links. Local listeners who use the specialised group's standard language satisfy their long-standing listening habits while simultaneously achieving an aesthetic goal of strangeness. As a result, dialects' regional differences are the most direct reflection of Chinese culture. Dialects also have a stronger feeling of regional identity than Mandarin, making them more appealing to young people.

Lastly, a rap song with a dialect emphasizes the compatibility of hops and local cultural norms as a means of expressing and expanding local culture through discourse and culture. To better identify with local scenes, local jargon is established and employed (Pennycook, 2007). Dialects are an important instrument for establishing regional identity and bringing local culture and history together psychologically (Zhang & Jiang, 2010).

### **2.1.2 Constructing regional identities via highlighting cities features**

The diverse regional features of China have likewise affected and inspired hip-hop music production. Singers add place names and other cultural features into their lyrics to further

establish regional identity. In Chinese hip-hop lyrics, hometowns are the most common hallowed locations of recollection. The creation of individual or social group identities is inextricably linked to the connotative importance of places. Hip-hop performers would incorporate unique regional cultural elements from their cities' or provinces' unique customs into their compositions, making little effort to hide their "origins" throughout the show. Many of these songs celebrate and applaud young city dwellers' pride in their neighbourhoods.

Changsha Ce Changsha is a song by the hip-hop group C-BLOCK that combines Changsha's "Baisha" brand, Tanci (stringed instrument storytelling), and Changsha's young culture, thus replacing common topics in hip-hop music such as social order unrest, marital violence, and juvenile criminality with Changsha's young culture. Meanwhile, the Changsha Ce Changsha songwriter incorporates the "area code 0731" with the Changsha print, the "Xiangjiang River" and "the East and West of the River" symbolising Changsha's geographical location, "Fallen Street" and "Fire Palace" in memory of local people, and the "Xiangjiang River" and "the East and West of the River" symbolising Changsha's geographical location, and the "Xiang. As a result, the songwriter builds a rapport with local listeners and conveys a genuine feeling of communal pride. Hip-hop music can progressively blend into the regional atmospheres of many Chinese places due to such localised production meanings, separating it from its origin values.

With distinct local monuments, delicacies, food, distinct streets, and clear hints and references to other local cultural areas, these rap compositions make the most of what Foreman calls "tart folklore" perceptions. The facts and feelings from the places where the language is

learned are packed into these regional language rap songs. Rappers have a significant impact on the city. The songs have a hilarious and intimate feel due to the use of various languages, which aids in the awakening of adolescents' local consciousness and the building of distinct regional youth identities.

In short, hip-hop singers place great emphasis on their hometown and origin, believing that they represent the image of their hometown, which invariably creates a reaffirmation of self-identity and reinforces a sense of self-identity. These rap songs are presented in regional languages, incorporating unique local knowledge and place-specific emotions. These songs reflect a particularly musical by adhering to a strong convention within the rap music genre of representing one's identity, status, city, region, and territory, urban youth can form a collective local identity. Chinese young people, on the other hand, are forging a strong localized identity by altering hip-main hop's routines, exhibiting a strong sense of identity and creating local meaning. The artists (subjects) bring his own context to fully integrate the text of the object he interprets and its context so that the music fans (objects) is fully immersed and moved by his music. Finally, the music with the subject's unique interpretation emerges from the object's heart and fully integrates with it (Xie, 2005). Objects with similar feelings reach emotional resonance and form identity in the subject's music. The regional nature of the content of the songs enables it to be recognized and welcomed among specific audience groups, which has become one of the criteria for establishing group identity (Jameson, 1991).

## **2.2 Constructing group or community identity**

Identity reconstruction is the search for a similar "me" within the group, whereas identity

formation is the creation of a distinct "me" among the various social roles. Self-identification is focused on individual differences, whereas group identity is based on shared characteristics. The goal of self-major identification is to have a sense of belonging to a particular group or race (Boggs, 2001). All group activities are built on this foundation. The lyric lines also indicate hip-hop's desire to be a part of a group of people who share their passions.

### **2.2.1 Jianghu style rap and "chivalry" group identification**

The necessity for group identification is represented in the "Jianghu" culture description. According to the author, "Jianghu culture is an important aspect of traditional Chinese culture as exhibited in various forms of media." These literary works, movies, and TV series have influenced a large number of Chinese audiences and constructed the public's imagination of "Jianghu" from Jin Yong's novels *The Heaven Sword and the Dragon Sabre*, *Demigods and Semi-Devils*, and *The Return of the Condor Heroes* to *New Dragon Gate Inn* and *Swordsman*, the most influential martial arts films of the 1980s and 1990s in Hong Kong.

Jianghu is a social structure separate from the real world of the martial arts story, with its own code of conduct, value systems and moral standards. Jianghu is a broad concept. In a nutshell, it's an extralegal realm where "Jianghu men and women" enjoy a free and carefree existence free of the norms and restraints of modern life. "Jianghu" has long been a cause of stimulation for writers, as well as an infinite source of "people and society" reverie for Chinese people.

Jianghu, a "utopia" that does not exist in reality but does exist in people's minds, is perceived by

most Chinese as a good place to live, a place where fate can meet regardless of worldly wealth(Geng, 2019)". People can shed their old social identities and unveil their true selves in the "Jianghu" cosmos. The meaning of "Jianghu" is akin to the spiritual core of hip-hop music from this standpoint. For teenagers, Both "Jianghu" and "hip-hop" have become weapons in the fight against reality. These two types of imagery are used by adolescents to communicate their innermost ideas and construct mental representations of themselves. Using Jianghu culture imagery in hip-hop music creation is an excellent strategy. Traditional Chinese martial arts have a natural affinity with and connection to people born in China. Chinese hip-hop musicians also embraced and modified the "Jianghu" culture, incorporating the original meaning of "Jianghu culture" into their songs, creating a new hip-hop "Jianghu culture" in the process.

For example, in the song *A Laughter to the Sea*, Gai vividly portrays an unimportant guy in Jianghu.

*"Both paths are difficult.*

*I am not opposed to any way of living, but I cannot learn to bend over since I have had a difficult life.*

*One mountain towers over the other."*

This song is both reckless and unconventional. It has not only the temperament of ordinary city dwellers but also the style of a chivalrous man. The song can laugh to its heart's content but also resembles a gangster. It is like a person seeing through the world but is enjoying debauchery. You can see he blends in with the world but feels deeply that he comes from the marketplace. In this song, he portrays himself as a cruel unimportant person in the marketplace. He is well aware that "one mountain is taller than the

other," saying, "I can't learn to bend over since I have a hard life." Despite the thought that he is humble and ordinary, he is never willing to be mediocre and will forge ahead courageously.

Gai and his friends wrote these tunes when they were in their early twenties. In real life, hip-hop singers are often socially awkward students, poor punks, and bar singers who perform every night in taverns. Singers use "Jianghu" as a metaphor for existing society while fantasising of a distinct homeland. They regard themselves as great martial artists, full of righteousness, pride in helping others, and a merciful and just demeanour in this spiritual community. They create a new identity in Jianghu's cosmos, one that is enviable. They quickly attracted some kids with comparable identity origins after building such an image. Because they have comparable life experiences and a longing for Jianghu's world, they naturally gravitate toward similar musical interests and form a group identity around them. The hip-hop group found "circles" of like-minded people as a result of the formation of the "Jianghu" style. This group is also aware of their own acts and viewpoints. Group identification, according to social identity theory, can boost people's self-esteem. According to the hierarchy of needs theory, group identification can satisfy an individual's needs for love, belonging, and respect, and can even satisfy the identification of needs for self-actualization.

### **2.2.2 Constructing identities in virtual networks, seeking identification and forming unique cultural groups**

Hip-hop music groups frequently build their own identity on the virtual network, in addition to pursuing group identification in "Jianghu". When analyzing the debut platforms for the 30 samples, the author has found that all of them are online forums or online music platforms,

such as NetEase Cloud Music. The songs are also circulated and shared on Internet platforms. The audience listen to, share and communicate also through online platforms. It can be seen that Internet technology and new media have changed the way young people access hip hop music and how they interact with it. As can be seen, the hip-hop community prefers to build community identities and seek identification in the virtual online world.

In fact, Howard Rheingold (2000) coined the term “virtual community” to refer to a gathering place in cyberspace in the early 1990s. In this place, a sufficiently skilled group of people engage in a prolonged public discussion with full passion, thus forming a network of interpersonal relationships in cyberspace. The Internet has created a virtual world that remains different and isolated from mainstream culture. New media technology has created a “natural” space for the severance of Chinese hip-hop culture with the external real world, thus obscuring the real relationship between people and reality and contributing to the construction and identification of the hip-hop community. In this virtual world, their culture is given more space for free expression, which is always the basic premise for the production and dissemination of adolescent culture. It enables adolescents to overcome their timidity, shyness, restraint, and immature anxiety and express themselves fully and freely. Those participants of hip-hop music have built a new community in the virtual online world outside the real world.

Unlike American hip-hop, Chinese hip-hop originally spread and proliferated in online communities such as online chat rooms and forums. The anonymity of cyberspace allows people to break through the boundaries of geography, age, gender, and identity, allowing young people who are chasing the freedom to achieve a dynamic balance of self-identity and

construction through various symbolic systems in the process of interconnected interactions on the Internet as entities of online society. In this decentralized Internet era where young people are the main players of practice and the Internet is the new media technology, hip-hop music groups seem to have found a multicultural and inclusive space. Through some websites, hip-hop singers associate with one another and exchange their latest homemade rap songs. Although Internet users are “not physically present” on online social platforms, their high dependence on the Internet and the strong penetration of online social platforms have made “virtual presence” a norm (Yang, 2018). They escape from social reality by constructing virtual communities, and seek identity by expressing their feelings in the network world.

When asked why these adolescents choose the Internet for sharing and communication, they answer in the following way:

*Writing songs is more about speaking from the heart for me. There are a lot of things in life that you can't express directly. Therefore, you have to take into account your job, the feelings of people around you, and quite a few issues. That wouldn't happen in hip-hop because I can say whatever I want in songs, criticize what I don't like, and share them with a wider audience online..*

(Yuan, 27 years old, rapper, October 04, 2021)

In the digital living space constructed by the Internet, they usually show a more authentic backstage behavior that is more in tune with their true intention. Hip-hop fans can express their views more freely on the Internet to present a character image closer to what's on

their mind. The subcultural group makes full self-presentation behind the scenes, hence rectifying their repressive mental state in a real society to some extent. They try to gain the approval of others and self-satisfaction by playing the virtual role of idealized characters, which actually interferes with the subject's performance on the stage. This influence also reflects the subcultural group's strong desire to achieve subjective self-satisfaction.

It can be seen that this community is built by hip-hop adolescents based on "musical interests". This informal unstructured virtual space built with unstable elements of community identity has dissolved structural and solidified identity divisions and identification relationships, such as class, race, and gender. The network and virtual communities have changed the way hip-hop groups express themselves. "The fierce emotions of antagonism to society are no longer seen in the subcultural communities, but rather they cluster with the same interests, either to vent their feelings through emerging media such as the Internet and cell phones or to revel continuously in their virtual communities." (Zhao, 2007) As it can be seen, contemporary youth subculture is not openly resisting and opposing authorities, but uses pun, parody, ridicule, and irony to playfully tease and satirize them to their heart's content, while obtaining self-pleasure and revelry. (Chen, 2016)

Hip-hop music belongs to a specific youth subculture. The Internet is a catalyst that accelerates the development of hip-hop music, forming a unique hip-hop music circle culture. Young music fans are engaged in "circle social interaction" in their favorite circles by interacting with one another and commenting and forwarding posts on online platforms. In such a social interaction process, young individuals with different personalities and

hobbies can find other like-minded individuals, thus spontaneously forming self-organization. These groups are not official organizations but are formed by a group of independent music lovers, regardless of their status or geography, thus providing a platform for topics of discussion among like-minded individuals. As long as you share similar interests or experiences, you can join them. Young people with common goals and hobbies participate in activities, complete tasks, and share their experiences in this kind of online community. While highlighting their self in online communities, they can also gain recognition from others and reach consensus.

To sum up, the hip-hop music community has taken the initiative to use hip-hop to establish a virtual community on the Internet. New media and technology are also adopted to provide such a platform. The platform established by community members through the virtual network possesses natural barriers and capital to resist external intrusion, turning it into a powerful and unassailable community. It provides a space for like-minded people to socialize in a relatively safe environment.

## Conclusion

The foregoing data demonstrates that Chinese hip-hop music is getting increasingly diverse and regional in nature. In favour of distinctively local topics that convey themselves and the organizations they are in, Chinese hip-hop culture purposefully rejects key elements of themes of racism, rebellion, and class in American rap. The lifestyles and cultural values of Chinese adolescents are intricately linked to local and traditional Chinese culture. The Chinese hip-hop music community has perfected the formation of self-identity and social identity through the process of creating and distributing local hip-hop music. It's a

one-of-a-kind means for adolescent groups to develop identity through hip-hop music, seek social connection, and find "who I am" and "which group I belong to" inside shared historical experience and cultural symbols". For young people, this is opportunity to shape their identities. Young people are continually constructing and creating the hip-hop identity system by searching out each other's authentic "self" through their cultural connections. Through musical texts and music presentation, this construction spreads from the individual to the collective, establishing labels for identity affirmation through a chain of musical text imagery and implication young people are using this to define themselves.

Adolescents' affection to hip hop music is reflected in the process of producing and performing. Hip-hop singers have a conversation with themselves through emotional expression and performance in lyrical sections, and they communicate this process or result to an audience in the shape of a musical piece. The creative process, which encompasses make, display, and performance, brings them joy. They discover, develop, and maintain their identity as hip-hop singers in this way. The desire for social identification is equally as prevalent among Chinese hip-hop youth communities. They want to showcase their hometown and culture by making songs in regional languages. By brutally criticizing and satirizing real reality, they also seek social identity and freedom of expression. Furthermore, they create fresh Jianghu-style rap in order to attract young people with similar worldviews, allowing them to form their own cultural circles. They also use virtual communities to share and trade music in order to express their more authentic selves and a desire to be recognised, as well as to attain group identification and presentation.

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