

Cultural Identities of Urban Adolescents in Chinese Hip-hop Song: A Case Study of Changsha, Chongqing, and Chengdu Cities

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Abstract

This study explores how the Chinese hip-hoppers constructs their cultural identity and seeks social recognition through the creation and sharing of hip-hop music, from the perspective of the identity theory. The study selects 30 hip-hop songs from the three cities of Changsha, Chongqing, and Chengdu. The content and textual analysis was mainly applied by using documentary research and interviews. The results indicate that the hip-hop music was used to highlight their ‘self’ or personal identity, regional and group identity, and to construct their own hip-hop community in the virtual network world.

Keywords : Chinese Hip-hop music; cultural identity; urban adolescents

1. Introduction

Hip-hop culture originated in the ghetto communities of the Bronx in the 1960s and was initially a movement launched by African people to criticize society and racial discrimination through street art, such as music and dance, and to seek national cultural identity. In the late 20th century and early 21st century, the trend of hip-hop music culture spread to and swept across the whole world along with the wave of globalization and the burgeoning growth of online media. The unique and alternative expressions and styles of hip-hop culture have been favored by youths everywhere, making hip-hop music an important means of expressing themselves and seeking identification. In just a few decades, hip-hop culture has become a youth pop culture throughout the world. It is evident that ever since its inception, hip-hop music has been linked to the construction of the cultural identity of its main participants, the adolescents.

Since its introduction into China in the 1990s, hip-hop music has also been closely associated with its cultural audience and supporters – adolescents in China. They are the major force in pushing hip hop rooting and growing in this country. It will be impossible to study Chinese hip-hop music without studying adolescents and one of the most noteworthy issues for research is their cultural identity.

Thus, the research intended to select 30 hip-hop music samples from Changsha, Chongqing and Chengdu, three inland cities in central and southern China, during the 12 years from 2008 to 2020, to explore the cultural identity of this music group. Hip-hop music is produced and performed

differently from the traditional classical music paradigm in that it is not confined to the musical form itself, and is closely linked to the contemporary social trends of ideas and ideologies. Compared with music melody, the meaning of the textual structure of the lyrics goes far beyond the structural meaning of the musical notes themselves, and the lyrical texts are even the cornerstone for the construction of the identity of the youth group. Hip-hop artists use music as a display of autonomy and a rediscovery of the self through texts and narratives. The implicit social meaning behind the lyrical text symbols goes far beyond the meaning of the musical sound symbols themselves. “This meaning is somehow attributed to concepts, actions, emotional states, and domains of character beyond music” (Meyer,1991:15), becoming one of the prominent manifestations of youth culture identity. Therefore, the textual content is the priority of this study. This study analyzes representative hip-hop music texts by describing the objective features. Through the textual and semantic analysis from linguistic perspectives, this study moves from the surface to the in-depth meanings of the text and explores the cultural context behind Chinese hip-hop music from the texts to grasp the more profound social meanings beyond the literal meanings of lyric texts.

The reasons for choosing these three inland cities are that the three selected cities are typical and representative. Enjoying a certain level of openness, inclusiveness, and compatibility, they have channels to embrace western culture and the conservatism of inland cities harboring a rich local culture of distinctive Chinese features. They are all located in central and southwestern China and have similar cultural attributes endowed by history. Also, they are all key cultural and entertainment cities with the breeding ground for nourishing hip-hop culture. Hip-hop music groups in this region have a more pressing need to shape their identity and seek a sense of identification, which is why they have been selected. The reason for choosing this time frame is that the development of Chinese hip-hop music during these 12 years has transformed from blindly following suit initially to seeking its own unique style with works increasingly maturing and gaining Chinese characteristics. Thus this research selects 30 hip-hop songs from the 3 cities, from the 12 years.

2. Research objectives

To study how Chinese adolescents in Changsha, Chongqing, and Chengdu construct their cultural identities through the hip-hop song.

3. Research Methodology

This research uses a qualitative method by studying from document and interview and make a content analysis with the data. This study collects lyrics from 30 hip-hop music samples, and tries to explore the hidden identity appeal of hip-hop music groups through text analysis and content interpretation. Besides, a total of 15 hip-hop music groups from three cities were interviewed, including 9 artists, 5 audiences who are hip-hop music fans, and 1 music producer. The researchers conducted one to two hours of in-depth, semi-open-ended interviews with each interviewee.

4. Data Collection

This study purposively selects 30 hip-hop music samples from three inland cities in China, namely

Changsha, Chengdu and Chongqing, which were created over a period of 12 years from 2008 to 2010. The criteria for selecting the 30 samples are listed below.

- The ten songs from each city were released throughout the twelve years of the golden period of hip-hop music development, basically presenting the transformation of hip-hop music's thematic development in that city.
- The producers and singers of the works are the well-known musicians of the city's largest and well-known rap labels in different creation periods.
- The ten songs from each city ranked high in hits and comments on the three mainstream music platforms in China that appreciate hip-hop music, namely QQ Music, NetEase Cloud, and Bilibili, and are hit songs on the list of Chinese hip-hop music.

5. Research Results

Chinese hip-hop usually depicts various matters in the daily life of the hip-hop group, expressing their own views, mood, and way of life. Hip-hop singers often narrate a story or describe a feeling through their lyrics. The research showed the representation and connotation of the text by mining, integrating and refining the information in the text of lyrics. Through the analysis of the theme of lyrics of 30 rap works and the statistics of keywords in the texts, this research refined and divided the contents of these works into eight categories: criticism and irony, boasting about singers themselves, persistence in hip hop, Chinese culture, love, hometown, rebellion and disparaging, brotherhood and chivalry.

5.1 Criticism and irony

This theme expresses criticism and irony on social injustice and ugly reality of life. For example, in *Kill the Ninja*, the author compares the villains sneaking around behind the scenes and harming others to benefit themselves to the ninjas carrying out assassination missions, thus making the declaration of "killing the Ninja". In *You Sit on the Last Row, but I Sit Beside the Podium*, the singer Xie Di tells the story of his rise to fame, from being questioned before he became famous to being sought after and made into a billboard at the entrance of his former school to promote himself. The sharp contrast in attitude makes him feel confused and ironic.

A joke, this is a joke for me...

Ever since childhood

I have never been used to such a situation

Being complimented by relatives

Being unexpectedly pulled by people on the road (for a group photo)

This type of writing is based on the singer's experience of life. Everything the singers went through, like poverty and humiliation, crystallized his work and empowered him acute insight. They express their experiences in a plain-spoken way, exposing the dark side of society as it really is.

5.2 Boasting about superior rapping skills of rappers themselves

Rappers build their confidence by boasting about their skills and belittling their opponents. For example, Ma Siwei's song *Taoist in Laoshan* is inspired by a classic early Chinese animation of the same name, which depicts the Chinese Taoist culture of "immortality cultivation". The singer then

borrowed the ancient imagery of “cultivating immortality” to boast of his own rapping prowess to be as miraculous as “immortality cultivation”. The hook part directly borrows the following cartoon clip lines: “*I’m going to fly in a crane like those immortals and learn to turn stone into gold by touching it. I must learn immortality at Laoshan Mountain*”. This alludes to the need for opponents to learn from themselves and indicates that he has reached an incomparable realm.

5.3 Striving to chasing hip hop dreams

This theme expresses the hip-hop singers' persistence and pursuit of hip Hop dreams. They hope to break the prejudice and stereotypes of people around them about the hip-hop business and show their self-reliance and self-improvement by persisting in hip-hop creation and performance. As depicted in *Walking on my way*.

*My dad says that faith comes from the dedicated pursuit of dreams within
When I set out on this path, they said that I was crazy as if being possessed by the Devil
Nobody can stop me
From failure to resurrection like a phoenix*

“Dream” in hip-hop music groups invariably refers to persevering in creating hip-hop music. Songs such as *Walking on My Way* and *Hey Kong* depict the hardships of the early days of music creation from a teenager’s perspective, as well as an optimistic vision of the future, looking forward to making achievements in hip-hop music creation. Since the lyrics are the inner monologues of the authors, they are filled with encouragement and sincere emotions between the lines. The lyrics are reasonable fantasies of what it would be like to be famous, rather than the flamboyant pursuit of money, materials, and sex that characterizes American hip-hop lyrics.

5.4 Chinese culture

Hip hop youth expressed their pride in being Chinese by displaying the traditional culture of the Chinese nation. The writing of this theme is full of patriotic feelings. The lyrics of these themes usually include many traditional Chinese cultural elements, such as Chinese mahjong culture, ancient books, martial arts and other imagery symbols. Matched with the writing style of traditional Chinese poetry, they enable people to have a sense of being in an ancient oriental realm. One example is Gai’s *Huaxia*:

*Appreciate Four Books and Five Classics
I’ll sing in Chinese while you listen
Wherever I go, I’ll always harbor attachment and devotion to China
I want to ride a fast horse to cross Mount Tianshan and take a long bow to the South China Sea
The sun shines on the top of Mount Emei and the moon reflects the silk road through Loulan
How can dust cover up all the brilliance?
China is so vast that it engulfs the green clouds
The 5,000 years resembles quicksand, while it is not a wasted life to live in China*

The “Four Books and Five Classics” are the core books studied by Confucian scholars in ancient times, symbolizing the core embodiment of Confucian cultural thoughts as well as the valuable spiritual wealth of the Chinese nation. “Mount Tianshan”, “South China Sea”, “Mount Emei”, and

“Loulan” are historical sites and monuments all over China. These images display the long history and cultural accumulation of the Chinese nation. The poetic line “How can dust cover up all the brilliance? China is so vast that it engulfs the green clouds.” Compares dust into the low ebb and barriers encountered by the Chinese nation in the past. Though it brings troubles and barriers to the Chinese nation, the Chinese nation always clings to strong will and internal drive and forges ahead in difficulties, while embracing a better future. The writing technique of imitating ancient poetic lines takes the Chinese culture as the image. The whole song is filled with the Chinese people’s love for their home and China, which strongly resonates with other people. Adopting modern hip-hop arrangement techniques, they also present a modern sense, allowing listeners to feel the novelty of traditional Chinese cultural elements colliding with hip-hop music.

5.5 Love story

This theme is the self-emotion of hip-hop musicians, expressing their mixed feelings caused by various love experiences. They depict love from a unique Angle, pointing to a kind of modern civilization under the anxiety of the ambience, be swayed by considerations of gain and loss love. The song “Can’t Take My Eyes Off You” depicts the comical psychological changes of a guy in a bar who imagines a scene of love with a girl at first sight, only to find that everything is the subjective, comical psychological state of himself.

*You get up and my heart beats like an earthquake
Already start to imagine your unique body temperature
(However, you) just look at me and turn around to open the door
I am left at the original place with a puzzled look Yeah
A puzzled look Yeah*

The insertion of female figures in musical texts to express feelings has become one of the common techniques used in hip-hop music. The content of love changes the stereotype of hip-hop’s critical and rebellious characteristics, giving Chinese hip-hop an additional “soft” quality. Meanwhile, the topic of love brings Chinese hip-hop closer to the general audience, thus attracting more listeners.

5.6 Hometown

This theme presented the customs and landmarks of one’s hometown, expressed their love for it and showed a strong regional identity. *Changsha Ce Changsha* and *Ten Years in Changsha* by C-block, a representative rap group in Changsha, and *I Love Chongqing* in Chongqing all extol singers’ hometowns. All of these songs coincidentally and ingeniously adopt local city features as lyrics, including local snacks, street names, slang ballads, and unique local phenomena, writing about singers’ love for their urban hometowns. Smelly D’s song *I Love Chongqing* expresses how much workers in a foreign country miss their hometown of Chongqing as well as its landmarks, food and family. In the prelude of the song, the singer lists the local landscape of Chongqing, from the regional landscape to the local snacks, as follows: “*Guanyin Bridge, Chaotianmen dock, Jiefangbei CBD, Ciqikou Ancient Town, Dahu hot pot, Li’s Rice Noodle, Hua Shi Bean Noodles, Liang Shan Chicken, Tofu Pudding Rice, and Spring Chicken in Chongqing*”. The singer also directly expresses his thoughts: “*I love my Chongqing because of its hot pot, barbecue, Guobin Wine. I love my Chongqing because my daddy, mommy and darling are all there.*”

5.7 Resistance and disparaging

This theme expresses resistance, and hip-hop artists are often accustomed to posting songs dissing everything they dislike, including the underground hip-hop music circle's dissatisfaction and rebellion against mainstream pop music, as well as one regional hip-hop group's denunciation and argument with another group. The underground hip-hop music circle's backlash against mainstream music reflects the group's safeguarding of identity boundaries, attaching great importance to adhering to the bottom line of internal principles and sticking together. Provoking another group or collective in the identity of one group or collective with songs is a common way for hip-hop singers within the circle to deal with conflicts between groups. They use their songs as a weapon, attacking each other and going back and forth until one side is unable to write a better song before the battle comes to an end. For instance, to defend their label's reputation and back up their brothers, DamnShine, a member of a Changsha rap label SUP *Higher Sisters Diss*, to diss Chengdu CDC label. The lyrics have attacked all members of CDC label one by one and provoked in the following way, "*Together, together, all of you come to fight with me. See, I will singlehandedly beat all you five together.*" Thus, they have united the group through their songs.

5.8 Brotherhood and chivalry

This emotional feeling is expressed through the imagination and insinuation of the "Jianghu society". "Jianghu" is a virtual civil society distinct from imperial rule in Chinese martial arts novels, in which the most admired heroes are those who are highly skilled in martial arts and have a sense of justice. Under this theme, the creators use the Jianghu society to imagine themselves as chivalrous heroes full of justice and pride in Jianghu, or as secretive masters in Jianghu, expressing their desire to escape from worldly troubles and their identification with and desire for the spirit of chivalry, righteousness and unrestrainedness. For instance, in *A Laughter to the Sea*, the singer Gai expresses his unyielding resignation to fate with the following lyrics.

Either path is rugged.

I am not against any kind of life

I can't learn to bend over as I have a hard life.

One mountain is higher than the other.

6. Identification Construction

Based on identity theory, the researchers conclude that different textual content reflects the different identity needs of hip-hop singers, classifying the eight themes into corresponding identity categories. The researcher categorizes themes such as boasting, love, and adherence to hip-hop music creation as hip-hop singers' claims to personal identity construction. These themes are the expression of hip-hop singers' personal sentiment based on their "self", laying emphasis on the building of self-image and expressing personal identity. Through these themes, we can see the personalities and characteristics of hip-hop singers and their perceptions of themselves. Other themes are classified as social identity. Among them, creators voice their concern on social events to obtain social identity by criticizing and satirizing social events and adjacent life, thus proving the value of their social presence. The depiction of brotherhood and the attack on other teams aim to defend collective interests and gain group identity. The content of regional and ethnic culture implies the creators' strong belonging and identification with their hometown and nation. Meanwhile, they also expect to gain recognition from residents and ethnic compatriots from their hometown through their songs.

6.1 Personal identity construction with the theme of “self”

Self-expression accounts for nearly half of the 30 songs in the samples, with topics such as bragging about one’s high-level rap skills, writing personal stories expressing complex emotions, and persistently pursuing personal dreams. The hip-hop group hopes to convey the question of “who I am” through their works. The construction of personal identity is reflected in the creation of localized content with a focus on “me,” i.e., not blindly imitating the themes in black American hip-hop, but expressing stories and lives related to individuals and their surroundings. As we can see, the creators do not blindly promote the gangsta rap that was so prevalent in American black hip-hop. It also can hardly see the promotion of violence, sex, and money worship in domestic rap songs as it is at odds with their living environment in China. The rappers said in interviews:

If I suddenly start rapping about cocaine or rock ‘n’ roll bling, it’s not real. The rap has to be about something that I’ve experienced. What I mean by that is we don’t rap about violence. We talk about ourselves. (O Young, 26 years old, rapper, December 12, 2020)

Through the above statement, we can see that domestic hip-hopper try to build their personal identity through hip-hop music creation. What adolescents construct in hip-hop is often a personal identity that is unique and distinctive. The construction of personal identities by teenagers breaks the stereotype of hip-hop fans as “hooded men who only advocate violence, money, and the voluptuous lifestyle”.

The works on this theme are often a cathartic expression of adolescence and are self-contained. They have often existed for a long time on the margins of culture, in a parallel relationship with mainstream society, with few intersection or communication with each other. They are uncomfortable with the moderate and secure aspects of values of the adult society, prefer their own communication style. The content is also quite mixed because some are of positive significance and filled with imagination on the one hand, but are also negative and problematic on the other hand.

It seems that it is not completely consistent with the mainstream of society, but in fact, it has not caused serious impact to the society. For most of the youth who are fans of hip hop music, their love of such culture does not contradict their identification with mainstream values and growth in reality based on social norms. Instead, this shows that they intend to seek some unique, less popular cultural interests outside their normal life. They grow up in a normal way, but also use cultures like hip hop music to support certain youthful sentiments. Such a culture is often ignored by mainstream society. It is the manifestation of youthful impulse but is favored by special groups.

There are 13% of artists express in their songs a relentless commitment to their hip hop dreams and the reasons why they strive to pursue them. Hip-hoppers are “under fire” in society, and they are eager to be understood by others and hope that Hip-hop can be understood and enjoyed by more people. For example, lyrics such as “*When reality shines into the dream world and courage is replaced by consideration, after thinking about all the years I’ve stumbled through, I think it’s time for me to regain confidence.*” and “*I don’t want to miss the beautiful scenery, I don’t have to pretend to return home. How can I escape from the framework of reality? For this reason, you should change yourself.*”

reveal the hope that they aspire to be recognized by others and society through their effort. There seems to be less of a hint of mania and shouting in the hip-hop music of this period, and more of a sentiment concerning the self and self-respecting. A group of musicians growing up in the 1990s placed more emphasis on personal expression. The identity that Chinese youths create through hip-hop music emphasizes the “self”. The researcher argues that the domestic adolescent hip-hop community has achieved separation from both European and American hip-hop, as well as from other domestic adolescent groups, to build a unique identity of “Chinese hip-hop teenagers”.

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

Similarly, singers use hip-hop songwriting to get involved in the construction of local identities, that is, to express a collective, local idea with local dialect and slang. The author summarizes two ways of construction: choosing to sing in local dialects and depicting iconic local features.

6.2.1 Dialect singing

Culture and language have always been inextricably linked. Linguistic identity is a convergence phenomenon for cultural psychology. The higher the similarity of linguistic identity, the higher the degree of cultural psychological identity (Huang and Liu,2008). The current Chinese hip-hop community consists of mostly regional teams. All the three cities of Chengdu, Chongqing, and Changsha have rap groups with distinctive regional features and great appeal. Their works also use dialects as a unique creation method. Among the 30 samples, 16 use dialects (including the whole song or verse sections), accounting for more than half of the total samples. This indicates that the most influential rappers in the oldest, largest, and most established labels in the three cities also seem to favor the use of dialects in their singing works.

In dialect hip-hop music, a singer not only speaks the dialect for hip-hop rapping, but also uses a lot of local slang. Some of them have a long history while some are trendy words of the day, but all of them come from local folk language forms. It is considered that the use of dialect words or accents can indicate the geographical and cultural roots of hip-hop musicians. For example, Chongqing singer Gai is remembered by audiences across the country for his line “Le Shi Wu Du” (A Chongqing dialect that means “this is the city of fog”. Wu Du is another name for Chongqing). His works are mixed with a large number of Chongqing dialect, which not only makes his works more fluent than Mandarin rap, but also has more local meaning and characteristics due to its dialect pronunciation and characteristics.

By using dialects and citing folkloric social issues, the singers not only construct a distinct regional youth identity and consciousness, but also make songs more amusing. Familiar places and voices make people feel close to each other, making it easier to create a sense of security and leisure. Because most people have similar intimate memories of dialects which are the most direct way to express local culture, dialect hip-hop is more familiar and acceptable to local people and even to local culture. Owing to economic variations in different regions, China has a vast geographical range, a complicated ethnic composition, and a diverse social atmosphere. Belonging to the Chinese nation

long known for its agricultural civilization, the Chinese people's devotion to the land and their attachment to their hometown are particularly strong and indelible, and their emotional ties are also often strengthened through regional ties. For local listening, the adoption of the same niche group's conventional language caters to their long-standing listening habits and fulfills a certain aesthetic function of strangeness. Therefore, the regional characteristics of dialects are the most direct expression of China's local culture. Moreover, dialects are more likely to resonate with young people than Mandarin, bearing a greater sense of identification in different regions. Here's what singer Lucy has said about why singers prefer to sing in dialects:

I like dialect rap very much. I think dialect rap is an integral part of Chinese rap, and it has certainly shaped our local image. Many rappers put area codes (phone) in front of their names. Like me, I would put 0731 in front of my name. (Lucy, 26 years old, rapper, September 11, 2020)

In summary, the extensive use of dialect in rap lyrics is a way of expressing and producing local culture through the medium of discourse and culture, which emphasized the congruence of hip-hop music with local cultural values. The creation and use of local slang can better identify with local scenes (Pennycook, 2007). Some hip-hop musicians perform their musical works in their hometown dialects. They first reach a linguistic identity through the dialect. Then, they cultivate a strong sense of local community and establish a local identity based on speakers from the same region who remain ascribed to the same language. Dialect rap helps form a soundscape, where shared linguistic identity features link some groups with the same cultural and linguistic background, shaping a common sense of belonging. The use of dialects is a psychological convergence of local culture and regional history and an important method to construct regional identity (Zhang & Jiang, 2010)

6.2.2 Constructing regional identities via highlighting cities features

The different regional characteristics of China have also inspired and changed the content creation of hip-hop music. To further consolidate regional identity, singers incorporate place names and other cultural elements into their lyrics. Hometowns have become the most frequent sacred places of remembrance in Chinese hip-hop music. The connotative meaning of places is closely related to the construction of individual or social group identities. Hip-hop singers will incorporate the unique regional cultural elements of their cities or provinces' unique culture into their works and leave no stone unturned in spreading the culture of their region to the audience, constantly emphasizing their "origins" in the show. Many of these songs reflect the pride that young urbanites feel for their hometowns and extol their urban roots.

For example, the song "Foggy City Night Talk" by L4WUDU, a singer from the Chongqing-based GOSH label, is based on dialect rap and incorporates local knowledge in its lyrics.

*Shoo Loong Kan is my Hood (hometown)
The earliest downtown of Shapingba
The road I walk from childhood to adulthood
All are tuo'er car drivers.*

.....

This is not a TV drama.

This is a real-life story.

This is our personal story of Chongqing people staging personal stories.

Shoo Loong Kan, Shapingba, and tuo'er car drivers are the cultural symbols unique to the city of Chongqing. The singer writes about life experiences that only locals living in Chongqing can deeply appreciate. He uses special words and languages in authentic Chongqing dialect, supplemented with unique symbols of local culture, to build an image of his hometown in front of an audience across China in the form of rap.

The song entitled *Changsha Ce Changsha* by the hip-hop group C-BLOCK incorporates Changsha's "Baisha" brand, Tanci (storytelling to the accompaniment of stringed instruments), and the youth culture in the street of Changsha, thereby replacing common topics in Hip-hop music such as social order chaos, domestic violence, and juvenile delinquency. Meanwhile, in the hip-hop *Changsha Ce Changsha*, the songwriter incorporates the "area code 0731" with the print of Changsha, the "Xiangjiang River" and "the East and West of the River" symbolizing Changsha's geographical location, "Fallen Street" and "Fire Palace" in the memory of local people into the song. In so doing, the songwriter creates a sense of closeness with local listeners and expresses a sense of pride in the hometown that can be understood by local people. Such regional creation connotations also enable hip-hop music to be detached from the values of its origin and gradually integrate into the regional atmospheres of various localities in China.

These rap songs take full advantage of what Foreman calls "extreme vernacular" sensibilities, with explicit citations and references to specific local landmarks, specialties, cuisine, trademark streets, and other cultural sites of local significance. These rap songs in local dialects are filled with unique knowledge and emotions that originate from the specific places where the language is acquired. The rappers create their own urban imprints. The use of these dialects gives the songs a witty and intimate style that facilitates the awakening of the local consciousness of the adolescents and the construction of unique regional youth identities. This approach also attempts to reshape unique local communities. Most local dialect songs that extol places draw another boundary: they include young people who share the same local native language as the mainstream audience of the local community and exclude those outsiders who are not part of the community. As a result, these songs foster a sense of local communion by fostering connections between local audiences.

6.3 Seeking social identity by giving voice to issues of inequality

"Criticism and irony" are key elements of the Chinese rap community's values for building social identity. They have converted the spirit of American hip-hop's original authenticity into exposing social reality. They relentlessly lash out at real-life ugliness and expose social inequality. This aims to highlight vulgar, rustic, and sincere social effects (Liu & Song, 2019). Rappers throw the most common social topics and values directly at the audience. Their "irony" is based on their own pure and real-life experiences of the underclass. The singer J-ass talks about his understanding of social reality rap.

Daring to speak out about social issues is also a way to keep real. If you ask if we love our motherland and society, our answer is we love it more than anyone else. Therefore, the more we love our motherland, the more we want to blame it.

(J-ass, 25 years old, rapper and event planner, November 24, 2020)

Quite a few rappers keep track of social issues and public events in their own way, while exercising the right to express and participate also in their own fashion. In *Kill the Ninja*, the singers criticize large real estate companies for tearing down ancient city wall relics excavated on their original sites to build commercial centers. The sentence “Maybe Wanda has torn down all the ancient walls for money,” has exposed the company’s profit-oriented nature as a businessman. They have also satirized unoriginal followers who like to copy others in the sentence, “Even if you have copied our appearance, you still do not have the bone of a dragon”. *People, Society, and Money* satirizes the rich who use money to make secret, dirty deals, while the poor can only be scapegoats for the rich because they don’t have money, as evidenced in the sentence “He is just not in control of himself and thinks there is little money. He is brought up as an unlucky scapegoat, so (everyone) says he is a bad guy.” In this way, they criticize a society that takes money as the yardstick and people’s loss of their fundamental conscience and moral values.

They care about social problems, marginalized groups, the fate of nations and countries, as well as the common fate of human communities. These voices are heard and imitated by their young fans. Therefore, the actions of rappers have obtained a broader and deeper meaning. Out of a need for recognition and a strong sense of self-esteem, they try to participate positively in the process of discussing public issues, to make their positive aspects visible to society at large, and to seek recognition. Through their songs, the rappers are responding to the various issues that Chinese society is encountering and seeking a sense of belonging and esteem in this process. The Chinese hip-hop community upholds a new moral and inclusive spirit with its unique cultural practice, carrying the cultural identity dream of the hip-hop group.

6.4 Constructing group or community identity

If the creation of a unique “me” among the complex social roles is the initial stage of identity construction, then the search for a similar “me” among the group is the manifestation of identity reconstruction. Self-identity is built based on the difference from the other, and group identity is built based on similarity from the other. In actuality, the ultimate goal of finding identity is to seek a sense of belonging to a particular group or race (Boggs,2001), which provides the basis for all group activities. The analysis of the lyric texts also reveals the demand of hip-hop youth to find a group of like-minded and similar interest groups.

The appeal for group identity is embodied in the description of "Jianghu" culture. “Jianghu culture is a vital part of classical Chinese culture, and can be seen in various media products. From Jin Yong’s novels *The Heaven Sword and the Dragon Sabre* and *The Return of the Condor Heroes* to the most influential martial arts movies of the 1980s and 1990s in Hong Kong, *New Dragon Gate Inn* and *Swordsman*, these literary works, movies and TV series have influenced a large number of Chinese audiences and constructed the public’s imagination of “Jianghu”.

In martial arts stories, Jianghu is like a separate social system from the real world, with its exclusive code of conduct, value system, and moral yardstick. The concept of “Jianghu” is broad. In general, it can be summarized as an extra-legal world, in which “Jianghu men and women” uphold a free and casual life attitude, not bound by the rules and regulations of the current reality. “Jianghu” has always been a source of creativity for literary creators, and has been a source of infinite reverie for Chinese people about “people and the society”.

“Jianghu”, a “utopia” that does not exist in reality but is presented in people’s minds, is considered by most Chinese to be a place to live in, a place where one can directly face one’s destiny without caring about worldly possessions (Geng, 2019). People can get rid of their original social identities in the world of “Jianghu” and thus reveal their true selves. From this point of view, the connotation of “Jianghu” also somewhat resembles the spiritual core of hip-hop music. Both “Jianghu” and “hip-hop” have become adolescents’ weapons against the real world. Adolescents use these two types of imagery to express their innermost thoughts and build the image of themselves in their minds. It is an ingenious technique to borrow the imagery of Jianghu culture and use it in hip-hop music creation. The Chinese people are no strangers to classical Chinese culture and are born with natural closeness and identification with the traditional Chinese martial arts spirit. Chinese hip-hop singers have also borrowed and transformed the “Jianghu” culture, absorbing the original “Jianghu culture” connotations in their music creation and reconstructing a new hip-hop “Jianghu culture”.

For example, *The Flow of Jianghu* by the hip-hop singer Liu Cong uses the context of “Jianghu” to illustrate the life attitude of “keeping it real” and “free and casual”.

*The whole world is mine, and my life is like a song
I can't take anything with me anyway, so I'll follow the water of the Xiangjiang River.
I will strip all the hypocrisy and travel in distant parts.
I can see every aspect of you in this circle, and where there are people, there is Jianghu.
We support each other and light candles for our predecessors.
Keep real is my machete.
From 0734 to 0731
My flow (rap skills) bears a hometown accent and Homie (brother) friendship
Never be willing to go away and put my brother in mind*

In the piece, the hip-hop singer expresses that he is not bound by the reality of the moment, but can let go of everything to pursue the kind of life he wants. Meanwhile, the friendship also enables them to help and support one another, which echoes the importance of “righteousness” in “Jianghu culture”.

Hip-hop singers are also mostly insignificant people in real life, such as socially weak students, low-income punks living a poor life, and pub singers without decent jobs and singing in pubs every night. Singers use “Jianghu” as a mirror and an alternative symbol to allude to real society, and build an independent kingdom in their inner world. In this spiritual society, they imagine themselves as warriors with high martial arts skills, full of justice, and with the pride of helping the world and the personality of being merciful and righteous. They recreate a different identity in the world of Jianghu,

an enviable identity. Through the creation of such an image, they have also soon attracted some teenagers with the same identity background. They share the same life experiences and long for the world of Jianghu, naturally clustering with similar tastes in music appreciation and establishing group identification based on this. Through the creation of the “Jianghu” style, the hip-hop group has gained a “circle” of like-minded people, a “circle” that rock enthusiasts are willing to identify with. Their behaviors and ideas are also recognized in this group. According to social identity theory, group identity can increase an individual’s sense of self-worth. From the perspective of the hierarchy of needs theory, group identity can satisfy an individual’s need for love and belonging, the need to be respected, and even the recognition of the individual’s will to pursue self-fulfillment.

7. Conclusion

From the above data, it can be seen that the content of Chinese hip-hop music is being diversified and localized. The Chinese hip-hop community is consciously rejecting certain aspects of American rap, such as elements of race, rebellion and class, in favor of distinctly local themes that express themselves and the groups they are in. From the texts, it can be seen that Chinese youth’s lifestyles and cultural values are closely tied to local and traditional Chinese culture. In the process of creating and sharing local hip-hop music, The Chinese hip-hop music community has completed the construction of self-identity and social identity. It is a unique form for youth groups to establish identity through hip-hop music, to seek their own belonging in the large social system, to find the true self among common historical experience and cultural symbols, and to discover "who I am" and "which group I belong to". This is a unique form for young people to build identification. Young people are constantly shaping and constructing hip-hop’s identity system through the search for each other’s real “self” in their cultural interactions. This construction spreads from the individual to the group through musical texts and the presentation of music, using a series of symbols of musical text imagery and implication to establish labels for identity confirmation. This has become a means for young people to establish identities.

For the young rappers of hip-hop music, their love for hip-hop is directly reflected in the process of creation and performance. Through their emotional expression and performance in the lyrical texts, hip-hop singers engage in a dialogue with themselves and present this process or outcome in the form of a musical work to an audience. They gain satisfaction in the production process represented by creation, exhibition, and performance. In so doing, they find, establish and sustain their identity as hip-hop singers. For Chinese hip-hop youth groups, their thirst for social identity is equally strong. They seek regional identity by creating songs in regional dialects to publicize their hometown and national culture. Also, they strive for discourse rights and seek social identity by sharply criticizing and satirizing real life. Besides, they seek collective identity by creating new Jianghu-style rap to attract young people with similar outlooks on life and the world to build their own cultural circles. Furthermore, they share and exchange music through virtual communities to express their more truthful self and the need to be respected, thereby seeking the sense of belonging and the need to be respected and realizing the identification and display of the group.

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