Chapter 5
The New Hip–Hop Generation of China

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ABSTRACT

In 2017, an online reality show single-handedly ignited China's passion for hip hop, garnering more than 2.5 billion views and ensuring stardom for its contestants. Prior to this, Chinese hip-hop culture was only an "underground culture"; a small number of people sang in subway stations, not in mainstream media or culture. Based on research into the concept of "post-subculture" and the Birmingham school's theory of youth subcultures, this research takes the TV music show The Rap of China as an exemplary case study and explores how media companies make use of power emerging from fandom to "break the rules" of the traditions of mainstream culture in China. Through online observations of hip-hop songs and artists as well as interviews of hip-hop fans, this research explores the identities constructed in the age of consumerism and how new hip-hop generation fans perceive hip-hop culture.

INTRODUCTION

China was the most prominent emergent economic force of the 1990s (from the perspective of the second decade of the 20th century). As such, it has begun to recognize and replicate the latest global cultural production and marketing trends at an astonishing pace. Certain "new media outputs" including online literature, web TV series, hip-hop music, and e-sports have become a familiar aspect of daily life. With the rise of digital media, specifically, the web 2.0 environment, the everyday interactions people have with media today have changed (Dwyer, 2010). As those interactions continue to change, research is required to bridge the divide in academic study between investigations into popular culture industries and research into popular culture fandom. Media companies can no longer be meaningfully studied in the absence of an understanding of how they relate to their consumers. By the same token, consumers, audiences, fan communities and users, can no longer be fully understood without a better understanding of the economic and technological contexts within which they operate. Therefore, academic research

into fan creativity, online communities, and participatory culture has become central to a range of different, yet related, disciplines.

The case study chosen for this research is the *Rap of China* (RoC). RoC is a Chinese reality rap competition show produced by iQiyi. The RoC became a major cultural sensation in China quite suddenly and this revealed as much about the state of China's entertainment industry as about its socio-political environment. The RoC was broadcast on the iQIYI online website, which brought with its substantial benefits for the young media company. The RoC garnered a record of 3.5 billion views and achieved profits of £15 million. This feat was calculated by online viewers to comprise the core base of RoC's market. Tao (2017) foresaw that in the near future in which China's post-1990s generation will dominate decisions made in cultural productions.

Hip-hop music is a type of street culture which subsequently developed into a means by which hip-hop artists could critically comment on society, which included the problems of drug abuse in slums, violent law enforcement, social injustice, and racial discrimination. Such a critical form of music is clearly inconsistent with traditional Chinese culture (Fung, 2007). The appeal of hip-hop lies in its lyrics, as well as the motivation behind those lyrics which differs from "soft" and "graceful" traditional Chinese music. Also, hip-hop is a form of music that evokes a potent political force which is considered controversial to the Chinese government, which typically prefers to promote traditional mainstream culture (Lin, 2008).

Nevertheless, the identity of current Chinese hip-hop fans is different from that of its proponents in the New York of the 1970s (both in terms of the level of education and upbringing). According to a survey by the China Internet Network Information Centre (2018), Chinese hip-hop fans are well-educated young people and often come from wealthy families. The current hip-hop fans in China are a young generation with dreams and professional aspirations, they do not like the narratives conveyed in reality music shows which tend to focus on emotional appeals. In contrast, they prefer lyrics along the lines of: "I'm the best," "I want to be rich," and "I want to be famous." "Keeping it real," as hip-hop artists like to say, is what most of the post-90s fans deeply care about. A beneficiary of RoC, such as the Chinese rapper GAI, spent more energy transforming his image from an underground rapper to a more widely accepted performer in order to promote his commercial value. Other rappers were busy mingling with popular celebrities and raising their profiles. This was the case of VAVA, a female Chinese rapper who participated in the RoC. With the genre itself becoming popular with China's youth in a country changing at a fast pace, VAVA represented an image of an empowering female artist. It is iQIYI's strategy to package VAVA as a powerful female rapper and attempted to embrace the "power" of female fans. Therefore, from an industry rather than an artistic perspective, this is the expression that hip-hop music transcending moralism. This can be seen as a sign of hip hop finally entering China's mainstream culture.

BACKGROUND

"Fandom" is a term that describes a community built around the shared enjoyment of an aspect of popular culture, such as books, movies, television shows, bands, sports, or sports teams (Duffett, 2013). Fan culture is considered by Jenkins (2009) as part of participatory culture which involves fans not only as consumers but also as producers and creators of some form of creative media. Jenkins (2009) defined participatory culture more specifically as a culture containing relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic participation. Other theorists, such as Milestone & Meyer (2012) consider that popular culture holds the corporate "culture industry" which prioritizes profit at the expense of quality, while

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