Brotherhood and Hip-Hop: The Case of Chinese Hip-Hop Club Triple H

Xi Chen¹, Yazhou Tong², and Jinsheng Zhang¹

Abstract
After hip-hop increased in popularity in Chinese entertainment programs, different perceptions of hip-hop in China reflected a clash of various thinking patterns among audiences, with hip-hop club Triple H on the cusp of controversy. Taking Triple H as a case study, this paper aims to explore how emotional attachments influence the development of Chinese hip-hop clubs in post-subculture. The findings indicated that the brotherhood rooted in hip-hop culture has been reshaped by the hybridity of Chinese hip-hop featuring fraternity mixed with sensitivity, loyalty filled with controversy, and heroism heightened by diversity. This paper argues that the recurring theme of “brotherhood” contributing to the charisma of Chinese hip-hop clubs cannot be partially interpreted as either gangster love or an underground bond, which gives rise to a new approach to the notion of authenticity, with hip-hop interpreted as a distinctive lifestyle.

Keywords
Chinese hip-hop club, brotherhood, authenticity, post-subculture

Introduction
Ever since China’s reforms began, the collision of cultures has inspired many young Chinese who are excited to familiarize themselves with the otherness and to experience a new era of exotic strangeness. An increasing number of hip-hop clubs began to release singles and albums, such as Yincang and Bad Blood from Beijing, Triple H (Hong Hua Hui) from Xi’an, and ChillGun from Guangzhou. However, there has been a general lack of coverage of this music style until very recently. The Internet has easily broken down geographic barriers and now serves as an international platform for Chinese hip-hop musicians to showcase their talents and for hip-hop fans to share their passion. After 2017, the popularity of Chinese hip-hop culture increased in response to the launch of a successful hip-hop program, Rap of China, on the Internet. Many rapper idols, followed by a great many fans across the country, were successfully promoted by this reality show, with members from Triple H constantly changing the fate of Chinese hip-hop.

On the stage of Rap of China, PG One and BrAnT.B’s impressive performances defeated strong opponents, and subsequently their club “Triple H,” with talent displayed in their stylish melodies and lyrics, received praise, and achieved fame from young people. Along with the unprecedented enthusiasm for hip-hop in China’s music market, Triple H experienced dramatic ups and downs in a short period of time. Soon after his victory as one of the co-winners of Rap of China, PG One was officially denounced for scandals relating to infidelity and drugs, as well as his insulting lyrics, which dragged the entire club down with him. All of their songs were removed from online music websites.

This paper aims to explore how emotional attachment influences the development of Chinese hip-hop clubs in the sense of post-subculture, during which the authenticity of Chinese hip-hop is analyzed in terms of language and events that are linked to changes in hip-hop brotherhood. The research question guiding this project is: how is Chinese hip-hop brotherhood reconstructed in the post-subcultural context in China?

Authenticity Within the Hybridity of Chinese Hip-hop
Hip-hop music has captivated the interest of an ever-increasing number of music lovers since the 1970s. Hip-hop singles constantly appear on Billboard top-10 singles charts and are constantly downloaded from iTunes. As a result of its popularity among the US audience, hip-hop targets at a wide range of consumers within a global market, where more diversified and commercialized products are offered to

¹College of Foreign Studies, and School of Journalism and Communication, Jinan University, Guangzhou, China
²Marxism College, Shanghai Normal University, Shanghai, China

Corresponding Author:
Jinsheng Zhang, School of Journalism and Communication, Jinan University, No. 601, West Huangpu Avenue, Guangzhou 510632, China. Email: profzjs@163.com
integrate a foreign music genre with disparate musical elements.

While American hip-hop culture consists of rap, graffiti, DJing, and b-boy/b-girls, China’s perception of hip-hop mainly relates to rap and unorthodox fashion styles. This is not to say that other hip-hop elements are not involved in Chinese hip-hop culture, but only a minority of artists has applied these factors to their performances, and thus, there are not enough creative productions or fashion styles in this area.

Although many Western scholars are intrigued by hip-hop culture, Chinese hip-hop has remained unnoticed by scholars in China for years, and only a small group of researchers have thus far attempted to explore this youth subculture. Insufficient analysis in this area of study is mainly a result of the oversimplified interpretation of Chinese hip-hop as a branch of rebellious foreign culture, which does not fit well into the ideological frame underlying Chinese popular culture. Nevertheless, with more idols and young people following this music trend, Chinese hip-hop has proved its own vitality with distinct features. Apart from the perspective of cultural identity (Chen, 2014; Liang, 2017; Zhang & Tang, 2019) and musical style (Meng, 2017), what draws the attention of scholars is the hybridity of Chinese hip-hop. For example, Fung (2008, p.79) discusses the strategies that hip-hop as a cultural product needs to employ to survive in China without losing its fighting spirit, and states that the music produced, then, is not only a Sino-Western fusion that carries a Chinese signature, it is also a form of pop culture that recognizes the growing dissent of society as a consequence of social and economic reforms, yet is safe, compromising, and non-confrontational to the state.

Juggling disturbing expressions and social norms, Chinese hip-hop music is built upon its deconstruction of and hybridity with native Chinese popular music, nurturing a new understanding of the authenticity of hip-hop driven by changes in social and economic structure.

With the global information flow—despite unbalance, inequalities, and biases—authenticity could be comprehended in a dynamic way, rather than from a binary perspective to separate globalization and localization. “The theoretical recognition of the split space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity.” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 56) When hip-hop re-rooted itself in China, authenticity should be taken into a new flowing and hybrid context. “As another order of authenticity, the local context is multilayered and polycentric, characterized by marginality in multiple senses of the word, as mentioned earlier” (Wang, 2015, p. 236). In this new historical context, American hip-hop music has been constantly hybridized with Chinese features and lifestyles, and “any understanding of Chineseness should be ascertained by way of local efforts to recruit, inspect, and constantly reformulate the array of available emblematic figures of identity circulating within Chinese hip-hop domains” (Barrett, 2012, p. 259). Chinese rap is often interspersed with English words. As English is widely learned as a language skill for passing school exams and completing certain assessments in China for better international communication, it is no surprise that English expressions appear in Chinese hip-hop songs every now and then, which is both in line with some singers’ manner of speaking and a way to enhance the emotional impact of their lyrics, using words such as “suffer,” “haters go die,” and “show time” in Beibei’s “Talking Shit Freestyle.” In addition, the new hybrid language “is a language that is the result of a hegemonic struggle between two language cultures, a dominant language culture and subordinate language cultures, which involves both ‘resistance’ and ‘incorporation’” (Storey, 2004, p. 104). Chinese hip-hop songs have just recently made their presence felt worldwide, not only featuring Chinese characters and unique rhymes in different regional dialects to convey their ideas through music to an audience more accustomed to English hip-hop but also songs that are often mixed with commonly used hip-hop phrases, such as “homie,” “bro,” and “skr,” to introduce a new means of communication to Chinese youth as well.

Therefore, “the rapper’s use of English can also be seen as a design for articulating another kind of authenticity, one that is affiliated to his locality, as its rendering of features of local accents indicates a process not of reproduction, but an appropriation of English that orients towards the local scale-level.” (Wang, 2015, p.238)

The combination of languages is not supposed to raise doubt about a rapper’s loyalty to the local culture, and the globalization of this US youth culture can endow the local subculture with new values. “The underlying technical knowledge of American styles is recruited not to disrupt local language practices around hip-hop, but as an asset to advance them” (Barrett, 2012, p. 252). It is rather demanding and innovative for many Chinese hip-hop producers to choose freestyle over well-prepared lyrics when they develop as a set of rhymes for rapping in Chinese, using a sophisticated array of performance skills in many cases as the trigger for the excitement of their audience. For example, in Beibei’s “Talking Shit Freestyle”:

所谓前辈被我打烂半个老脸，(“The so-called master was punched in the face by me.”)

那些烂歌让我吃不下晚饭和早点，(“his shit-talking made me so sick that I can’t eat.”)

下三滥的表演，他慢慢的逃远，(“So lousy was his performance, run away has he.”)

想要跟我过招请先麻烦办个保险，(“get insurance before challenging me.”)

想要跟我过招请先麻烦办个保险，(“get insurance before challenging me.”)
In these verses, “烂半个老脸” (lan ban ge lao lian), “晚饭和早点” (wan fan he zao dian), “三滥的表演” (san lan de biao yan), “慢慢的逃远” (man man de tao yuan), and “办个保险” (ban ge bao xian) employ the same combination of rhyme patterns with “(an-)ian-e-ao-an,” rhymes of two or more words in a set of bars (bar: a line of lyrics in hip-hop songs). Beibei is one of the leading members of Triple H, and is renowned for his dazzling use of rhyme. In this song, he shows absolute confidence in his rapping ability and contempt for so-called “masters.”

Furthermore, authenticity in Chinese hip-hop has been correlated with its cultural hybridity. “The commodification of language and identity in a globalized new economy” enables us to “negotiate” what it means to be authentic locally in terms of language status and cultural affiliation, as this transition redefines the role of language in relation to local identity claims while reorganizing the normative systems of producing, distributing, and recognizing language resources for identity practices. (Wang, 2015, p. 227)

After experiencing a feudal society for most of Chinese history, culturally speaking, Chinese people tend to stay in the middle of the road to avoid the risks and dangers of extremes, which developed into traditional Chinese wisdom instilled for generations. Hip-hop, on the other hand, represents a different and aggressive culture. The “keep it real” attitude upheld by the hip-hop spirit, which can be conceived as a fight against social injustice and a symbol of subcultural resistance, has been typical of hip-hop culture since its very beginning. One of its fundamental principles, which are prevalent among juveniles, includes staying true to yourself: “be your real self, and express yourself freely,” like Tizzy T said (Modernsky Magazine, 2017, p. 43). Although Perry (2004, p. 10) insists that hip-hop “even with its hybridity, consistent contributions from nonblack artists, and borrowings from cultural forms of other communities, is nevertheless a black American music,” this paper agrees with Fink (2006), who states that “as authenticity is globalized, genuineness will become relative to each ‘true site’ in the hip hop diaspora” (p. 206), which indicates the production of flowing authenticity. There may be not a standard answer to what is “real” or “authentic,” and meanwhile, “China Wind has been credited with the attempt (but not the achievement) of reinserting and reasserting sanctioned, sinocentric versions of culture and history for a younger generation” (Chow & de Kloet, 2011, p. 62).

Ushering in the 21st century, Chinese musicians are endowed with more creative spaces due to the relatively tolerant cultural policy and flexible commercial activities today. This can partially be attributed to the better access of the audience to different music genres thanks to varied investments and distribution channels. In addition to lyrics, a “classical style” is also adapted by Chinese hip-hop music. A prominent example is Zhuge Cunfu and Wang Situ’s rapping in classical Chinese, the inspiration of which is derived from the Romance of the Three Kingdoms (San Guo Yan Yi). Jay Zhou also enthusiastically integrates Chinese factors into hip-hop rhythm, and he has swept the musical world with many prevalent songs such as “Blue and White Porcelain” (Qing Hua Ci) and “Nunchaku.” A Chinese idiom, “dry weather, fire danger,” is exemplified in Gai’s famous punchline of “Dry Weather” (Tian Gan Wu Zao), which is a warning phrase originating from ancient night watchmen. New creations featuring literary allusions to Chinese classics and customs were widely appreciated not only by fashionable youths who were enchanted by historical stories, but also by many adults of different ages, whose musical memory was reawakened and resonated with new melodies. “To dwell in the beyond is . . . to be part of a revisionary time, a return to the present to redescribe our cultural contemporaneity; to reinscribe our human, historic commonality. . . .” (Bhabha, 1994, p.10). The historical similarities between art forms derived from the underclass can be drawn when Chinese hip-hop is compared with its American counterpart. American hip-hop needs to be understood “within such contexts as social protest, entertainment, and identity formation, and also as a response to dominant structures, such as race, gender inequality, and capitalism” (Brooks & Conroy, 2011, p. 3). To a certain extent, hip-hop equipped African Americans with powerful lyrics as their most effective weapon against governmentally enforced silence and white supremacy. As Cornel West (1998, p.391) points out, “rap is . . .” part and parcel of the subversive energies of black underclass youth, energies that are forced to take a cultural mode of articulation because of the political lethargy of American society.” This kind of rebellion against oppression with vocal arts could also be found in working people in ancient China, which can be traced back as far as The Book of Songs, a collection of poems from 11 to 6 BCE. Traditional poems were imbued with rhymes, making them easy to sing. A number of these poems, “Regional Songs” in particular, were written with flexible beats and words when following the basic rules of rhyming. For instance, in “Large Rats,” people laboring under tyranny compared nobles to hateful rats, boldly criticizing slave owners for their shameless exploitation using explicit cursing language: “Why not go to die? Why not go to hell?” Oppression-driven social pursuits still serve as an important part in the construction of brotherhood in Chinese hip-hop groups today, but the focus is on different types of requests to a certain extent. “The era seems long gone of working-class youth subcultures ‘heroically’ resisting subordination through ‘semiotic guerrilla warfare’” (Weinzierl & Muggleton, 2003, p. 4). Along with this subcultural turn, Chinese subculture gets renovated when it incorporates Western hip-hop elements as a supplemental approach to reengaging the Chinese audience in a cultural past, and authenticity in hip-hop is reinterpreted along with the changing connotations in hip-hop brotherhood.
Brotherhood With Post-Subcultural Authenticity in Triple H

Triple H is one of the most famous hip-hop clubs in China. Taking inspiration from Jin Yong’s *The Book and the Sword*, a work of martial arts fiction with *jianghu* stories, a young man called Dan Ke (K9999) founded Triple H in 2011 with the hope of uniting kindred spirits in the name of Chinese hip-hop. In this paper, the data were mainly collected using the hip-hop lyrics of Triple H, online news, and formally published works. According to a fan’s private collection from Baidu Cloud, there are more than 300 songs or battle recordings created by this club. However, now, most of these are not able to be downloaded online due to scandals obsessing its members, the vulgar expression of their opinions, and the outrageous depiction of their suspicious behaviors, which are against the positive energy promoted by mainstream media. Therefore, lyrics from 113 songs composed by Triple H, which are currently available from an app called “扛扛” (Ju Xing) developed by the club itself, were classified thematically, and analyzed through critical discourse analysis. Information related to this club from reliable sources (such as official websites and blogs) was also analyzed in terms of issues in relation to brotherhood.

Our findings demonstrate that Chinese hip-hop clubs, Triple H in particular, take pride in their brotherhood, which has a profound impact on their music career. However, this spiritual bond is fragile, mainly because of the fluid and commodity-oriented authenticity central to Chinese hip-hop as an emerging post-subculture.

Originating from the subcultural theory of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), post-subcultural studies aim to explore new and less-political orientation evident in contemporary subculture. According to Weinzierl and Muggleton (2003, pp. 5–6), there are two main strands in the post-subcultures field, and “if this first strand of post-subcultural studies presents an effective challenge to the theoretical orthodoxies of the CCCS, the second goes even further in rejecting outright any possibility of the continuing usefulness of the subculture terminus itself.” Chinese hip-hop is developed in the dynamic context of globalization with the aid of new media. Regarding the theoretical shifts in cultural studies, this paper attempts to reveal some post-subcultural knight-errant features identified in brotherhood vital to Chinese hip-hop clubs.

Fraternity mixed with sensitivity. Some researchers elaborate on the tensions underlining rap and hip-hop in China when this “foreign cultural form is adapted and modified in a distinctive political, cultural and media context” (Flew et al., 2019). It is natural that hip-hop has to make changes in the face of censorship in different countries, but “keep it real” is still considered a benchmark for respected rappers. Zhao and Lin (2020, p. 1) reinterpret “real” as a globalized hybrid hip-hop core value modified with “distinct Chinese notions of conflicting authenticity, centered around the representation of ‘jianghu flow’ with loyalty, struggle, and compromise.” Nonofficial heroes from *jianghu* fighting for beliefs have always been appealing to young people. Traditionally *jianghu* means the “bottom society” (Li, 2011, p.39), while in this new era, this notion has been comprehended in a more interpersonal sense, and the code of brotherhood advocated by *jianghu* is cherished by both the grassroots community and elites. As followers of originally marginalized music, many Chinese rappers and hip-hop clubs emphasize brotherhood in their lyrics with recurring words such as “homie” and “bro,” borrowed from their American counterparts, while enriching this notion with local features.

In traditional Chinese culture, brotherhood could be interpreted as backing up allies and striking back when challenged, which displays authentic fraternity. For instance, Beibei’s “Talking Shit Freestyle” was re-shared more than 10,000 times within half an hour after its release, which was immediately bragged about by the club leader Dan Ke on his Weibo. Although Beibei did not participate in *Rap of China*, his song “So Fresh” was performed by PG One with his original recording heard by the audience, a design to show PG One’s respect. “The fact that PG One picked Beibei’s song rather than his own songs during the competition could be regarded as a gift to welcome Beibei’s return, which echoed the saying: without brothers, no hip-hop” (Xi, 2017). Other members also attempted to help him improve his songs during the contest, as Ding Fei claimed in his Weibo.

This fraternity is a prevalent concept in Triple H’s lyrics, as manifested in the distain for opponents, emotional attachment to friends, and willingness to share fortunes according to this research. Like in “Talking Shit Freestyle,” the ambition and aggressiveness are ostentatiously revealed in this club’s songs to “diss” enemies, such as “我的兄弟随时能围着你, 好好承担你下的这步棋” (“My brothers can be there at any time, be ready to live with the consequences of your scheme”—“Copy Cat”), “尝尝我的威力, 承认你的卑鄙” (“Let me teach you a lesson, just admit you are despicable men”—“Copy Cat”), and “不过你说你是hiphop, 我觉得你不配” (“You call yourself a hip-hop man, but I’ll say you don’t deserve the name”—“I Don’t Understand Your Swag”). They also spare no effort to praise their partnership and encourage each other, as shown in songs such as “we were in the competition could be regarded as a gift to welcome Beibei’s return, which echoed the saying: without brothers, no hip-hop” (Xi, 2017). Other members also attempted to help him improve his songs during the contest, as Ding Fei claimed in his Weibo.

This fraternity is a prevalent concept in Triple H’s lyrics, as manifested in the distain for opponents, emotional attachment to friends, and willingness to share fortunes according to this research. Like in “Talking Shit Freestyle,” the ambition and aggressiveness are ostentatiously revealed in this club’s songs to “diss” enemies, such as “我的兄弟随时能围着你, 好好承担你下的这步棋” (“My brothers can be there at any time, be ready to live with the consequences of your scheme”—“Copy Cat”), “尝尝我的威力, 承认你的卑鄙” (“Let me teach you a lesson, just admit you are despicable men”—“Copy Cat”), and “不过你说你是hiphop, 我觉得你不配” (“You call yourself a hip-hop man, but I’ll say you don’t deserve the name”—“I Don’t Understand Your Swag”). They also spare no effort to praise their partnership and encourage each other, as shown in songs such as “we were in the competition could be regarded as a gift to welcome Beibei’s return, which echoed the saying: without brothers, no hip-hop” (Xi, 2017). Other members also attempted to help him improve his songs during the contest, as Ding Fei claimed in his Weibo.

This fraternity is a prevalent concept in Triple H’s lyrics, as manifested in the distain for opponents, emotional attachment to friends, and willingness to share fortunes according to this research. Like in “Talking Shit Freestyle,” the ambition and aggressiveness are ostentatiously revealed in this club’s songs to “diss” enemies, such as “我的兄弟随时能围着你, 好好承担你下的这步棋” (“My brothers can be there at any time, be ready to live with the consequences of your scheme”—“Copy Cat”), “尝尝我的威力, 承认你的卑鄙” (“Let me teach you a lesson, just admit you are despicable men”—“Copy Cat”), and “不过你说你是hiphop, 我觉得你不配” (“You call yourself a hip-hop man, but I’ll say you don’t deserve the name”—“I Don’t Understand Your Swag”). They also spare no effort to praise their partnership and encourage each other, as shown in songs such as “we were in the competition could be regarded as a gift to welcome Beibei’s return, which echoed the saying: without brothers, no hip-hop” (Xi, 2017). Other members also attempted to help him improve his songs during the contest, as Ding Fei claimed in his Weibo.
The reason that Chinese rappers, especially Chinese hip-hop club members, keep reasserting the strong bond among them is mainly because of the need to stick together as a marginalized cultural group, which does not have strong political appeal. While early American hip-hop is typical of the gangster styles both in lyrics and in reality—with drugs, sex, violence, and crime being recurring themes—many Chinese hip-hop singers just join together in their efforts to speak out for this music genre as a youthful lifestyle. Chinese hip-hop music provides impetuous people an outlet for violent impulses, offers the grassroots community an opportunity for their voices to be heard, and initiates a sense of belonging. Like the heroes in Luo Guanzhong’s “Romance of the Three Kingdoms” and Shi Naian’s “Water Margin,” two of the “Four Classic Novels” of Chinese literature, some Chinese rappers gathered in hip-hop clubs to draw strength from their shared faith.

However, doubts and dissatisfaction are as common in hip-hop clubs as they are in many other groups, especially when friendship is constantly tested by temptation which is difficult to resist for young singers. There are also disputes over how to reach out to a wider audience when rappers have found themselves suddenly famous and more economic benefits are presented to them.

**Loyalty filled with controversy.** When creating its own brotherhood, “there is a constant struggle between authenticity and commodification” (Hare & Baker, 2017, p. 1) in the development of hip-hop as well as hip-hop clubs. With increasing involvement in music promotion, social media attracts more capital to flow in and reproduce hip-hop music by removing geographic barriers and creating an imagined community powered by networks. When ever-increasing company capital flows flood this music industry, Chinese hip-hop creations gradually become more commercialized and consumer-centered to maximize the economic benefits, and entertainment is made priority of many Chinese hip-hop songs. Consequently, “the concept of the underground (thus read as ‘real’) is continuously challenged, established, and negotiated” (Song, 2019, p. 54). Like Triple H, most Chinese hip-hop clubs began their careers from underground battles, and their original audiences are usually hip-hop fans. In these battles, there is more room for intelligent improvisation, and rappers’ freestyle is usually bolder and more thrilling, with less consideration given to commercial and political factors. For example, when PG One and Beibei competed at “Iron Mic” and “Underground 8 Miles,” their lyrics could be very fierce and merciless. However, given the fact that an increasing number of rappers have entered the vanity fair of fame and money, with their performances sponsored by companies, what “authenticity” is has become a debatable notion, because the purity of creation and brotherhood could be contaminated by the desire for something outside hip-hop itself, and the desire for commercial success as well as mainstream promotion, could lead to betrayal of the traditional understanding of “real.” As in the case of Gai, one of Triple H’s most well-known adversaries, who has been widely recognized outside the underground, he is satirized “as ‘socialist Gai’ rather than jianghu Gai” for his alignment with “the positive energy policy,” and his performance on CCTV was criticized by some fans and rappers for being “inauthentic, seeking to frame ‘authenticity’ in relation to showing allegiance to—or betraying—the underground brotherhood” (Zhao & Lin, 2020, pp.9–10). It is common that rappers despise those hypocrites who prioritize personal interests and social status rather than underground authenticity, just as what is written in Triple H’s “Fake Friend”: “他昨天还称兄弟，但心里放不下的还是名与利” (“Yesterday he call you bro, but fame and wealth is let to grow”). In fact, when Triple H terminated the agreement with MDSK, an innovative and noted company in the Chinese music industry, BrAnT.B quit the team and chose to continue cooperating with it. There are economic disputes involved in the decision, but there are some PG One’s fans (Yue, 2020) claiming with it. There are economic disputes involved in the decision, but there are some PG One’s fans (Yue, 2020) claiming on ZhiHu (a forum similar to Quora) that PG One and BrAnT.B were actually inclined to get closer to mainstream with the assistance of this company and their fame obtained in Rap of China. This club’s early attitude toward “being mainstreamed” is evident in their lyrics, such as Beibei’s “Talking Shit Freestyle”:

“你为当焦点，早被主流消遣，还在因为节目播出成名大笑。我依然混迹街头，represent my ghetto bro.在地下土地横行霸道” (“All eyes are on you, you laugh aloud because of the show, but man you are just a joke in the eye of the mainstream. I still enjoy music in the street, represent my ghetto bro. and become an underground king supported by my team”).

After PG One’s private video containing the woman involved in his scandal was made public, which caused public outrage, a war inside Triple H began with Ding Fei’s accusation of PG One’s disloyalty to brothers on Weibo. With more singers expressing their disappointment with PG One’s behavior, PG One began to fight back by saying there was a conspiracy theory against him, and doubting his team members’ faithfulness to him, while Dan Ke refuted his claim and responded with “the brotherhood of rebels is no match for money”(Xi, 2019). When the pursuit of the hip-hop dream diverges due to a conflict of interests or ideas, authenticity may become a weapon used for attacking loyalty to brothers and the ideal of hip-hop. For outsiders, it is difficult to tell the entire story of this club, but it could be argued that contemporary hip-hop culture in China is more like an esthetic attitude rather than “the simple dichotomy of ‘monolithic mainstream’–‘resistant subcultures’” (Weinzierl & Muggleton, 2003, p. 7), and the symbolic consumption of this music style is not confined to the traditional hip-hop community but could be found in different markets. Therefore, putting aside personal animosities, it will be too
arbitrary to accuse a hip-hop singer of being disloyal to this career just because he claims allegiance to the government or capital’s power, because the lines between underground tastes and the mainstream lifestyle have largely been blurred.

**Heroism heightened by diversity.** To work its way into the Chinese music industry, hip-hop music must posit itself not only beyond the present and the past but also beyond the home and the new world. It is necessary to be aware of the remorseless attempts of those singers to create a distinctive Chinese hip-hop style coupled with hybridized and unique lyrics. The idea of hybridization “prompts a reexamination of what is invested in positioning the self and other as dialectically essentialized cultures in the postcolonial context” (Amoamo, 2011, p. 1255), which nurtures a new perception of power relations in Chinese hip-hop music. In a globalized world, “hybridity has become a marketing term, a way of identifying, commodifying, and selling what on the surface is a new form of difference, but one that reproduces old prejudices and hegemonies” (Taylor, 2007, p. 143). Chinese hip-hop draws on the combination of foreign music forms and local cultural awareness as a means of expression of “distinction,” in Bourdieu’s words, which de-emphasizes its originally rebellious nature in the process of incorporating commodity-oriented production and mainstreamed music themes into its dialog with various cultural practices. “This attempt at demonstrating ‘distinction’ occurs through the construction of a commercialized subcultural or mainstream ‘Other’ as a symbolic marker against which to define one’s own tastes as ‘authentic’” (Weinzierl & Muggleton, 2003, p. 10).

The boundaries distinguishing subculture and dominant culture in the symbolic consumption of Chinese hip-hop are becoming more mobile in the post-subcultural context, leaving a flexible environment for Chinese rappers to make diversified responses when chasing their music dreams and to become more open-minded to alternative options. Some official online accounts such as People’s Daily, have introduced some hip-hop songs to promote the positive energy to society. In the past few months, Triple H has come back to the music market with new albums and a changed name, 404 RAPPER. Its leader, Dan Ke, has joined a variety show, Rap Star, recently, where he is a tutor working with Gai, stating that now he has no problem sitting down and having a cup of tea with Gai (Xiao, 2020).

Underlying Chinese rappers’ more harmonious relations within their hip-hop community, as well as the mainstream moral value, heroism remains essential to exalt brotherhood in post-subcultural discourse. The courage to overcome adversities and to rise to the top is repeatedly stressed in Triple H’s lyrics, such as “come to all things and the only I was邮箱, can’t even make me stronger” (“By going through all tribulations we’ll get better, what doesn’t defeat me makes me stronger”—“Born to Be the Strongest”) and “must run below also must be the king” (“I must keep going and claim the throne”—“Running”). Among those songs, “QTDS” provides a unique window into the heroism innate to brotherhood and diversified in this hip-hop club.

The Monkey King is a mythical figure in “Journey to the West,” one of the “Four Classic Novels” of Chinese literature, and he is often known by his initials, QTDS (Qi Tian Da Sheng). He is depicted as a brave hero not fearing any challengers, be they evil monsters, or other immortal beings. Full of admiration for this great fighter, Triple H gave a shout out in the song “QTDS,”: “the enemy is my supernatural beings,待我来扭转乾坤” (“All supernatural beings trying to get me provoked, watch me change the world”) The Monkey King was an audacious rebel when he confronted authorities from heaven for the first time, and he did not lose his independent thinking ability, even after he agreed to become a religious monk’s disciple for freedom. His bravery and fidelity finally earned him the title of Victorious Fighting Buddha, which seems to be his surrender to Buddha but, in fact, is also a result of his enlightenment during his journey to the West. Likewise, Chinese rappers’ employing some mainstream or commercial factors in their songs does not necessarily equal a loss of authenticity of hip-hop identity but is a result of its natural evolution and a part of identity construction. Evans (1997, p. 181) once related performativity to subcultural identity and asserted that “such identities are not ontologically distinct or pre-existent, but are bought into being, constructed and replayed through every day actions, dress, adornment and other cultural practices.” The fighting spirit can still exist in Chinese rappers’ blood but may be demonstrated in a way less annoying for the officials. For example, Triple H’s fighting slogan aims at a global audience, “离开世外桃源只因不愿再普通, 让全世界都记住齐天大圣悟空” (“Leave the field of dreams to do something splendid, let the name QTDS Wukong be heard by the world”—“QTDS”). When there is no fundamental ideological conflict involved in its development, Chinese hip-hop acquires more industrial space to announce its identity as a heroic character, embracing individual personality, and widely accepted principles at the same time.

**Conclusion**

In the context of official regulations governing music creation and the increase in the power of capital, Chinese hip-hop brotherhood has been seriously tested when dealing with new social status, and the ambition to rebrand Chinese hip-hop to the world may gradually change in the way to fulfill it. For example, Triple H suffered from internal conflict and then managed to survive with some members leaving. While PG One has been officially expelled from many music platforms, Gai, the co-winner in Rap of China, has achieved great success with his career in the mainstream.

The controversial issue here is: is it necessary to keep underground so as to remain loyal to bros and hip-hop dreams? In other words, does “underground” equal “authentic” for Chinese rappers? In fact, the recurring theme of
“brotherhood” contributing to the charisma of Chinese hip-hop clubs cannot be partially interpreted as either gangster love or an underground bond. From the very beginning, Chinese hip-hop musicians have had different backgrounds. Some are well educated or professionally trained, and some are from rich families. They endeavor to develop this music genre in China, and most grassroots rappers are united due to the identification with hip-hop culture, with “keep it real” as a unique lifestyle and a distinction from other social stratifications, rather than in opposition to mainstream ideology. The hybridity of singers’ identities allows for the career goals set by and brotherhood principles held in Chinese hip-hop clubs being comprehended differently, both from those preached by their American counterparts and inside the club. Moreover, in recent years, the gradually improving cultural tolerance in hip-hop has attracted more people of different races and classes to this post-subcultural music genre, because it deals with universal themes as various as victimization and injustice, the struggle of human nature, reflections on negative emotions, and the expression of deep love, which share a lot in common with the mainstream pop music industry and achieved a strong and favorable response from Chinese youngsters.

Therefore, the dualist approach to authenticity in brotherhood in terms of winning favor from the mainstream media and being underground to keep it real may not be applicable to current Chinese hip-hop clubs in a post-subcultural sense, which can be demonstrated by the dramatic changes in the fate of Triple H and the hip-hop music behind it. It is interesting to notice that the line between hip-hop and mainstream music is becoming blurred, and rappers can still support each other in the pursuit of hip-hop dreams when they move from the underground to the ground without sacrificing authenticity. The expansion of hip-hop music into the mainstream is not necessarily a kind of ingratiating characterized by submission to power, but a multilayered cultural flow into different spaces, fostering diversified forms of authenticity in the music market, which contributes to the reconstruction of brotherhood inside and outside the underground. Despite the fact that hip-hop music still has a long way to go to become appreciated by mainstream media and scholars in China, it has formed a new hybrid space where cultural identity and social relations are fluid under the influence of this post-subculture, and it may play a more active role in molding the Chinese spirit and in rejuvenating “authenticity” in brotherhood.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Jinsheng Zhang https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4532-8857

References

Amoamo, M. (2011). Tourism and hybridity: Revisiting Bhabha’s third space. Annals of Tourism Research, 38(4), 1254–1273. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2011.04.002

Barrett, C. (2012). Hip-hopping across China: Intercultural formulations of local identities. Journal of Language Identity & Education, 11(4), 247–260. https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2012.706172

Bhabha, H. K. (1994). The location of culture. Routledge.

Brooks, S., & Conroy, T. (2011). Hip-Hop culture in a global context: Interdisciplinary and cross-categorical investigation. American Behavioral Scientist, 55(1), 3–8. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764210381723

Chen, M. (2014). The postmodernist characteristics of contemporary youth’s discourse power. Forum of Chinese Culture, 12, 120–125.

Chow, Y. F., & de Kloet, J. (2011). Blowing in the China wind: Engagements with Chineseness in Hong Kong’s Zhongguofeng music videos. Visual Anthropology, 24(1–2), 59–76. https://doi.org/10.1080/08949468.2011.525492

Evans, C. (1997). Dreams that only money Can buy. . . or, the shy tribe in flight from discourse. Fashion Theory The Journal of Dress Body & Culture, 1(2), 169–188. https://doi.org/10.2752/13627049779592048

Fink, R. (2006). Negotiating ethnicity and authenticity in Tokyo’s club Harlem. In D. Basu & S. J. Lemelle (Eds.), The vinyl ain’t final: Hip hop and the globalization of black popular culture (pp. 200–207). Pluto Press.

Flew, T., Ryan, M., & Su, C. (2019). Culture, communication and hybridity: The case of The Rap of China. Journal of Multicultural Discourses, 14(2), 93–106. https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2019.1621322

Fung, A. Y. H. (2008). Western style, Chinese pop: Jay Chou’s Rap and hip-hop in China. Asian Music, 39(1), 69–80. https://doi.org/10.1353/amu.2007.0047

Hare, S., & Baker, A. (2017). Keepin’ it real: Authenticity, commercialization, and the media in Korean hip hop. Sage Open, 7(2), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017710294

Li, G. Z. (2011). Jianghu: An alternative window for Chinese sociology and culture. Academic Monthly, 43(11), 30–37.

Meng, Y. (2017). The localization of hip-hop music with reference to Rap China. West China Broadcasting TV, 24, 109–110.

Modernsky Magazine. (2017). The Rap of China? CITIC Press.

Perry, I. (2004). Prophets of the hood: Politics and poetics in hip hop. Duke University Press.

Song, M. S. (2019). Hanguk Hip Hop: Global Rap in South Korea. Palgrave Macmillan.

Storey, J. (2004). Neo-Gramscian cultural studies. Cultural theory and popular culture: An introduction (3rd ed.). Peking University Press.

Taylor, T. (2007). Beyond exoticism: Western music and the world. Duke University Press.

Wang, X. (2015). Inauthentic authenticity: Semiotic design and globalization in the margins of China. Semiotica, 2015(203), 227–248. https://doi.org/10.1515/sem-2014-0068
Weinzierl, R., & Muggleton, D. (2003). What is ‘Post-subcultural Studies’ anyway? In D. Muggleton & R. Weinzierl (Eds.), *The post-subcultural reader* (1st ed.). Berg.

West, C. (1998). Black postmodernist practices. In J. Storey (Ed.), *Cultural theory and popular culture: A reader* (2nd ed.). Prentice Hall.

Xiao, B. S. Y. X. (2020, June 16). *After so many years, dan ke is still the same person*. SINA. http://k.sina.com.cn/article_6521191905_184b17de100100n2o4.html.

Xi, S. Y. (2017, August 16). *Beibei from Triple H returned with a newly released song to diss Hip-Hop community*. Jam. https://www.jammyfm.com/p/144009.html

Xi, X. T. (2019, October 30). *PG One Responded to the video with an announcement*. Weibo. https://weibo.com/1163858357/IdVah91fG?type=comment

Yue, Y. (2020, October 9). *Should PG One say sorry to Triple H?*. ZhiHu. https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/263424520

Zhang, N., & Tang, J. Y. (2019). Business logic and the production of youth subculture: Critical discourse analysis of Internet Variety Show. *Modern Communication*, 271(2), 138–142.

Zhao, Y., & Lin, Z. (2020). ‘Jianghu flow’: Examining cultural resonance in the Rap of China. *Continuum, 34*(4), 601–614.