



## Analysis of Popularity of Hip-Hop Culture Among Chinese Young People

ZHANG Zhihua<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>Foreign Languages Department, Institute of Disaster Prevention, Sanhe, China.

\*Corresponding author.

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### Abstract

Nowadays, hip-hop culture is becoming more and more popular among Chinese young people. This paper analyzes its popularity from four aspects: the background of epoch and the cyber space in life; the localization of hip-hop culture; meeting the demand of young people; cultural industry. Based on these, it offers some suggestions for the Chinese youth's pursuit of hip-hop culture, thus directing them to treat the influence of hip-hop culture rationally.

**Key words:** Hip-hop culture; Popularity; Chinese young people

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### INTRODUCTION

Hip-hop is a form of musical expression and artistic culture that originated in African-American communities during the late 1970s in New York City. The four basic pillars of hip hop culture are: Mcing, DJing, breaking and graffiti writing. Having emerged in the South Bronx, hip-hop culture has spread around the world gradually.

The "hip-hop culture" has permeated popular culture in an unprecedented fashion. Due to its enormous cross-over appeal, the hip-hop culture is a potentially great unifier of diverse populations. Although created by black youth

on the street, hip-hop influence has become worldwide. Approximately 75 percent of the rap and hip-hop audience is non-black. It has gone from the fringes, to the suburbs, and into the corporate boardrooms. Indeed, McDonald, Coca Cola, Sprite, Nike, and other corporate giants have capitalized on this phenomenon.

There are several papers talking about hip-hop culture. Ding Shicong's "The Origin and Development of Hip-hop Culture" described hip-hop culture in detail. Also, "Theory of Cultural Conflict and Cultural Control in Hip-hop Culture" pointed out that we should implement the control of hip-hop culture with the efforts of school, family and society. And it also points out that in the background of globalization, the hip-hop culture will nationalize in our country.

However, this paper mainly analyzes the popularity of hip-hop culture among Chinese young people from four aspects: the background of epoch and cyber space in life; the process of becoming a local culture; the inner demand of psychology of the youth which including fashion, performance and characteristics of adolescence; cultural industry. Based on the analysis, this paper offers some suggestions about how to treat hip-hop culture entering into China. It advocates that the young people should absorb the essence of western culture while at the same time maintaining our Chinese culture.

### 1. GENERAL UNDERSTANDING OF HIP-HOP CULTURE

Seen from the origin, "hip" means "pygal", "hop" means "jump on one foot", then hip-hop implies swaying slightly and wagging one's hip. So we can see the origin and features of hip-hop (Waters, 2005, 2006, p.4).

In the 1970s, those black people living in America led a miserable living and possessed low position in society. The white people took control of the mainstream culture

and speech authority, while the black people were ignored as speechless, who became much more cooperated in order to gain self-esteem and the interaction in colonial race. They made full play of black's pace of rhythm and their performance peculiarity known as their traditional culture with which called American street culture mixing together, the "hip-hop culture" came into being (Herick, 2005, p.6). In the 1990s hip-hop is not only the music that exists in slums, but also the newly-emerging music style. What's more, it has become the pronoun of rising life style of youth.

At the beginning, four elements are included in hip-hop culture; they are Dj, rap, break dancing, and graffiti (Luo, p.5). However, with the development of multi-culture and the inner demand of hip-hop culture containing the fashionable character and identification of individualism, hip-hop soon adopted street ball, skateboard, clothing and so on. In this way, hip-hop culture originates from music, prevails in dance, and becomes popular all over the world.

### 1.1 Djing

One of the few first hip-hop DJs was Kool DJ Herc, who created hip hop through the isolation of "breaks".

Traditionally, a DJ will use two turntables simultaneously. These are connected to a DJ mixer, an amplifier, speakers, and other various pieces of electronic music equipment. The DJ will then perform various tricks between the two albums currently in rotation using the above listed methods. The result is a unique sound created by the seemingly combined sound of two separate songs into one song. Although there is considerable overlap between the two roles, a DJ is not the same as a producer of a music track.

### 1.2 Mcing

Rapping refers to "spoken or chanted rhyming lyrics with a strong rhythmic accompaniment". It can be broken down into different components, such as "content", "flow" (rhythm and rhyme), and "delivery". Rapping is distinct from spoken poetry in its performance to the beat of the music. The word "rap" is to describe quick and slangy speech or repartee long predates the musical form.

### 1.3 Graffiti

Graffiti is the name for images or lettering scratched, scrawled, painted or marked in any manner on property. Graffiti is any type of public markings that may appear in the forms of simple written words to elaborate wall paintings. Graffiti has existed since ancient times, with examples dating back to Ancient Greece and Roman Empire.

In America around the late 1960s, graffiti was used as a form of expression by political activists, and also by gangs such as the Savage Skulls and Savage Nomads to mark territory.

## 1.4 Breaking

Breaking, an early form of hip-hop culture, often involves battles, showing off technical skills as well as displaying tongue-in-cheek bravado.

Breaking, also called B-boying or breakdancing, is a dynamic style of dance which developed as part of the hip-hop culture. In an article written by Kennedy Center Earl tucker earned the nickname "Human Boa Constrictor". Breaking began to take form in the South Bronx alongside the other elements of hip-hop. The "B" in B-boy stands for break, as in break-boy (or girl). According to the documentary film *The Freshest Kids: A History of the B-boy*, DJ Kool Herc describes the "B" in B-boy as short for breaking which at the time was slang for "going off", also one of the original names for the dance.

## 2. POPULARITY OF HIP-HOP CULTURE

Hip-hop culture is popular among youth as the young people are always the forerunners and the most powerful supporters in the world. Our Chinese young people are also involved in the cultural trend. The causes are as followings.

Hip-hop culture becomes popular in an epoch of globalization, the isolation of the youth in county and regions is broken, the connection, communication and interactions become much more strengthened, therefore, the youth become the most active group in enjoying the fruits of globalization (Bertice, 2002, p.26). Max has predicted this inevitability, when the psychological products of each nation become the properties of the public, then it's impossible to see the one-side of nation and restriction of nation. Hip-hop culture and their descending forms all rely on the media to become popular. It spreads so fast that all the concrete geographical barriers have been swept. Unless the transportation and corresponding ways offered by technological development to make the communication of global culture come true, all these cannot be imagined.

The fast spreading of hip-hop culture also benefits from the Internet that exists everywhere in our life. The network epoch possess these characteristics as openness, equality, collective possessions and individualism. Under the influence, the youth group them as non-authority and non-degree, and hip-pop just meets the demand. Members connect each other with wholly interest, and compete with others. Meanwhile, they make full use of the Internet to establish the website and pages to exchange views such as "Skateboard Alliance", "Free Soul", "Kicker Club" and "China Limit Sports" and so on. Through these websites and pages, they can study together, publish sport news and introduce the development in foreign countries. All the information

of hip-pop culture can be searched in the Internet (Zhu, 2000, p.7). Therefore, the network contributes the development of hip-hop culture a lot in China.

Any external culture, no matter tangible equipment or tangible thoughts, when they are transferred into another culture, they are all likely to be involved in the process of indigenization, in turn, the process also contributes to their popularity. Such as McDonald, the typical American culture, it becomes the representative of indigenization and Chinese edition of American culture through its transmission and development in China. In America, McDonald, is famous for “good and cheap”, however in China, it has different meanings with its “fatherland” America. In the 1980s, customers in Beijing went to McDonald for entertainment, while in America, it stands for convenience; in America, the food is considered to be cheap, but in Beijing, only middle class go there, large amount of people who have low income seldom go there. For our Chinese people, McDonald stands for the American cultural symbols of fast-food restaurant.

Hip-hop culture is also like this. When first transmitting into Japan, it becomes “Japanese Hip-Hop Culture”; and when transmitting into Korea, it becomes “Korean Hip-hop Culture”. HOT and Super Junior are both the representatives of “Korean Hip-hop Culture”. Therefore, when it transmitted into China, a series of cultural interactions happened, and formed “Chinese Hip-hop Culture” that cleared the misunderstanding of cultural difference among Chinese young people and set the base of its popularity. Hip-hop in Taiwan seems to be distinct. As the special relationship between America and Taiwan, many young people in Taiwan went to study in America, these students brought hip-hop music back home in 1980s when they came back to Taiwan, then hip-hop began to set root in Taiwan and became more and more popular. Now, a batch of famous hip-hop musicians has emerged, such as Song Yueyang, Jay Chou, Maggi Brother and so on.

Integrating with Chinese culture, hip-hop music is not only just simply changing English lyrics into Chinese, but also conveying our traditional culture and national emotion. Here is one case named with *Niangzi* by Jay Chou.

A wife breaks a branch of willow every day,  
Beside the small river of the village,  
Waiting for me silently.  
I owe you too much, my darling,  
Only bean tree does express my longing.  
My darling waiting there,  
Tearfully but silently.

This song expresses the ‘longing for homeland’, and there is obvious trace of tone culture. However, it put across in rap, which can be the specimen of the indigenization of hip-hop culture. This kind of hip-hop music can be accepted by young people who have been educated in Chinese culture. Therefore, it can be easily accepted by our mainstream culture which is identified as conservatism.

The process of growth of the youth is the process of socialization. During this process, one becomes a real man through various educational methods that will teach one the social knowledge, techniques and rules. In the process of socialization, the young people are mainly under the control of the society and the adult from every aspect, they are forced to take in values and behavior mode.

Hip-hop culture’s popularity also lies in its attraction and fashionable elements. Firstly, it’s a typical youth culture, full of energy, coincides with the young people’s lively nature; secondly, its technique can arouse their exploring spirit and curiosity. Lastly, it can temper oneself. Hip-hopers can do the same reaction when confronting with the stimulation which can offer mental protection and comfort for members, in turn, the equal communication in group can spur their creativity which can form self-esteem and respectful notion to acquire the satisfying emotion, so the young people can identify with hip-hop culture (Darby, 2005, p.5).

Moreover, hip-hop culture has been a fashion, a newly exciting life style. Through the mass media, this fashion can be the mainstream life metre, which will be imitated by more and more people. In this way, who will refuse hip-hop culture? Who is willing to be the unfashionable one?

The characteristic of adolescence is also another important reason of hip-hop culture’s popularity. Adolescence is a process of the development of self-consciousness, in which, the youth’s demand for self-actualization increases a lot. They try to shake the family off and break the influence of parents to be independent in personality. In this case, the contemporaries become their emotional attachment.

At the same time, young people in this period are full of rebellion while hip-hop culture is just a revolting cultural symbol. There is no command, order, and the pressure of being repelling in it. It’s free that each one is both the actor and audience, so everyone is equal. They have the same opportunity to show themselves, and at the same time, they respect the rights of others’ performance. It means that, independence, equality and self-dominion are important for the youth.

Struggling in rigid regulations, the youth’s inner principles are constrained by the society and the adults; it seems that their development is not their own choices but the adaptation to society. Therefore, under most circumstances, they have to submit though some irrational behaviors have occurred when facing those regulations.

However, their stresses that include employment, emotion, and dissatisfaction with the “oppressors” are all the time accumulating, they are eager to unload the long time burden with the help of a kind of “decompression culture”. Hip-hop culture is just grown from the weak group with its rules and beliefs emphasizing on the revolt of mainstream culture and disagreement with the

“controller”. Consequently, there is no denying that hip-hop culture offers a break for the suppressed psychology, playing the role of “safety valve” (Zhang, 1990, p.67) for the society.

In reality, the Chinese young people have been under the restriction of family, school and society for a long time: parents and teachers want them to be good ones. However, in rap, they can express their dissatisfaction with society, family and school freely to unleash their mental stress so as to meet their dream that can not come true in public. Rap is like a justice who tries the case, denounces the inequality to welcome an equal future and shout for the silence. Those raps imitate the symbols along the street and their lyrics are desolate but full of rebellion.

Seeing from their ages, their self-consciousness is developing rapidly, from “objective” to “subjective”. They need the opportunity to express themselves as their self-cognition, judgment and self-emotion, will and individuality have all been formed. Hip-hop culture with its strong performing peculiarity just rightly meets their demand for publicizing personality and hip-hop culture offers a “proscenium”, manipulative ways and tools (basketball, music) to interact with composers and the society. In the performance and interaction, the youth create and mould themselves with their own ideas trying to break through the general frame given by society and break the system and conventions, therefore, they can expose true themselves to the public with their own abilities and methods.

At the beginning of its circulation, people transmit it only for pure favor, with few commercial elements in it. Today, with the prevailing of commodity culture and consumption doctrine, hip-hop culture is mainly produced and carried on by the cultural industry.

In the eyes of the merchant, every young man can not be ignored, their pocket money is a large sum of fortune, moreover, this sum of money is almost all used for “free” consumption. Hip-hop culture can be also a kind of consumption culture. The youth purchase hip-hop merchandise not only just for meeting their demands, but also to express their unique purposes. For example, the youth buy a pair of “and1” shoes to convey the symbolic meaning: I do not wear Nike, Adidas, because I am a streetball boy, I do not like the standard baseball, I love the “free” spirit of streetball.

At the turning of its popularity, the smart merchant forecasts the inevitability of its prosperity, thus a lot of goods connected with hip-hop culture are in large amount of production. Meanwhile, hip-hop culture website, streetball CD, hip-hop culture party, and clothing display all emerged as bamboo shoots after a spring rain; they contributed a lot to its popularity. Today, hip-hop culture has become an industry that related closely with revenue, profit and other elements that can influence

the development of an industry. Eventually, hip-hop culture becomes much more popular in the impetus of consumption.

### 3. ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE INFLUENCE OF HIP-HOP CULTURE

Western culture with its economy superiority and speech hegemony entered our culture, which has aroused some problems as some Chinese people especially those young people set western culture as their standards without noticing our own history, literature, art, language, and words. Many ambitious people have been worried and anxious about this situation; therefore, we must take it seriously.

Our social culture is changing from traditional to modern, which is like a modern movement as well as a cultural revolution. In this period, traditional cultural system is declining; on the contrary, modern culture standing in the direction of development is growing up. The old rules of behaviors have been broken, the new principles are being established, and people should adjust their own behaviors according to the change of social roles. Meanwhile, ideals, beliefs, and values are changing dramatically accordingly.

“Our understanding about hip-hop culture is accumulating year by year,” Deng Ying, a hip-hoper with five-year-experience of hip-hop once said to a reporter. “Many young people including me were fascinated by the fashionable clothing, original movement, and various new elements in the initial contact with hip-hop. However, after a while, we realized that our true love is hip-hop’s different notion with well-mannered life style. We can express ourselves at any place and at any time” (Zhao, 2002, p.23). Moreover, many hip-hopers said that they were eager to pursue the free spirit without being tied up by anything else.

Then let’s look at the society’s attitudes about hip-hop culture. Firstly, some people think that hip-hop is a new street culture, it cannot be said to be either good or bad, but we have to admit that the hip-hopers are greatly different with ordinary young people. Many parents are afraid that the hip-hopers will leave bad impressions on their kids. Secondly, some people hold that it can be beneficial to the youth as nowadays young people who are mostly the only kid in their family. They can make friends from this activity and learn to get along with others. But they can’t be too addicted to it so as to affect their study. Lastly, there are also some supporters who believe that hip-hop is inevitable just like the long-hair, bell-bottom trousers popular in 1980s.

Concerning to this situation, Professor Jiang, culture and Medium Department of Guangxi University, said in an interview,

Currently, hip-hop, skateboard, streetball, are ways of performance among young people, they want to use the street



as their stage to expose themselves to society, to express their emotion and to relax themselves. Therefore, parents do not need to be too nervous to stop it. Of course, I don't advocate this culture here, what I want to say is to guide it correctly. (Jiang, 1999, p.34)

Actually, each epoch has its own popular symbol; it's absolutely normal that young people seek after the fashion as long as they don't violate the law and influence their daily work and study (Zhao, 2002, p.23).

Education is a capable self-organizing system. It can influence the deep level of psychology of people who are educated; it can also affect the core of culture, such as beliefs, virtues, values and other important mental things. Therefore, we should scientifically establish educational policy that presses closely to our county's reality so as to put young people's education into effect.

Deng Xiaoping raised the famous "Three Orientations", which is "Orient education towards modernization, globalization and future construction", is the guiding theory in direction of educational development. Our education must gear to modernization. It's inevitable that we regard western culture education as cross-reference, but it cannot be equal to "Westernization". If we want to catch up to modernization, our education must have our Chinese characteristics. On one hand, we should absorb the essence of western cultural education; and on the other hand, we should stick to the positive elements in Chinese traditional culture, such as self-improvement, sternness, practical attitude and courtesy. When our education aims at modernization, we should combine the essence of western and Chinese culture to construct the new type of cultural system which is featured as Chinese social characteristics.

Education gearing to globalization is the object request of China. Firstly, we should widen our horizon to analyze the advanced culture all over the world, not only paying attention to the substance and style, but also comprehending the inner meaning; secondly, our culture must trend to the world and make contributions to the world. Eventually, we will be proud to say that "Civilization comes from the east".

Education gearing to future construction is to use the strategic developing viewpoint to schedule the current education so as to cultivate promising people. Nowadays, many countries are confronting various challenges in the near future, such as learning to survive, learning to study and learning to take care, which have been the mutual heartfelt wishes. Therefore, we must examine our future of education from the strategic standpoint.

Above all, "Three Orientations" deals with the relationship between culture and education from four aspects, which are "ancient", "current", "home" and "abroad". It expands our space of thought greatly.

Otherwise, family is both the earliest teaching place and the main source of young people's idea and behavior. Hip-hop culture is loved by students but

hated by most parents with more than 90% parents are against this activity. Referring to this condition, parents should communicate with their children correctly and patiently.

Mass media with speed-transmitting, large amount of information, and emphasizing on practical issues is playing a great role in life. Therefore, public opinion through media expresses the general view of society. When one idea or image is being reinforced frequently, a social trend will be formed and invisible culture power can take shape. So it's difficult for the public to agree with each other about one fashion style.

Though young people seem to be mature, their understanding about society and cultural phenomena is still plain. Lacking of accurate distinguishing capability in this period, the youth will be easily lured by any newly-emerging cultural phenomenon and they will also follow the fashion blindly. There are many wrongs in the worldwide hip-hop community, but there are also many aspects of positivity within the hip-hop community that the media or trade magazines rarely focus upon. Many people in hip-hop culture don't even listen to the rappers who are trying hard to wake people's asses up to what is going on in the bigger scale than of what people can see in their neighborhoods, their message goes in one ear and out the other. Consequently, mass media must guide people towards the public opinion correctly so as to emphasize the positive cultural elements. However, mass media should not publicize hip-hop's fashion for commercial income, which will result in the blind pursuit of cultural trend. Therefore, mass media shall not only announce the favorable aspect, but also discuss the advantages and disadvantages from cultural standpoint to let people understand the culture at a full scale and help the young people to improve their ability of distinction.

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## CONCLUSION

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Currently, the main participants of hip-hop culture are of the young born in late 1980s and early 1990s. Chinese hip-hop culture will be much more acknowledged by the public with the growth of these young people, just as rock music is never to be thought as disparate after several decades.

Hip-hop culture which originates from America has become popular all over the world, so does in China. Under the globalization, cultures from everywhere of the world will be inevitably mixing with each other, hip-hop culture is just the representative of this mixed culture. In the collision with mainstream culture, some positive messages will be saved and finally will develop into a kind of local culture that is fit for our appreciation habit. This paper talks about hip-hop culture's popularity from the outer aspect and the inner aspect. The outer ones are the globalization and the cultural industry, while the inner one mainly comes from the young people themselves.

As the youth is active, energetic, curious but not totally mature, it is easy for them to follow the fashion; therefore, they become the “leader” of hip-hop culture.

Also, based on the analysis of the popularity of hip-hop, this paper provides some attitudes towards hip-hop culture. Firstly, the inclusive social culture, in this chapter, different comments on hip-hop culture are presented. The youth is the supporters of it, while, most parents are against it. However, as the social culture is inclusive, hip-hop can be acknowledged by people, both youth and adults. Secondly, it comes to the three orientations. They can be the guiding rules of education in China. And lastly is the mass media. Through the prosperity and development of mass media, the influence and impression of hip-hop culture are being strengthened in public.

The greatest impact of hip-hop culture is perhaps its ability to bring people of all different beliefs, cultures, races, and ethnicities together as a medium for young people to express acculturation under the influence of globalization and to reflect commercial cultural features, but it also reflects our neglect of young people’s cultural

construction. Only when culture develops along the correct path of thought, can it benefit our civilization.

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