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IN THE CIPHER

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‘Know the ropes, learn the ropes’: Hip hop, knowledge and Wang Yitai

ABSTRACT

王以太 Wang Yitai is a 29-year-old Chinese rapper from the city of Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan, located in the western region of China. From his self-released debut mixtape *Ready to Flow* (2015), recorded while he was studying in the United States, to his latest albums 演说家 (‘Perform, Speak, Family’) (2019) and 幸存者的负罪感 (‘Survivor’s Guilt’ – feat AIR) (2021), Wang Yitai quickly rose to success to become one of the most famous and appreciated rappers nationwide. Anchoring his practice in one of the most eminent cities for rap in China, he actively integrated the historical landscape of the local rap crew, 成都说唱会馆 (CDC Rap House), and developed his own poetic music style featuring very local, cultural elements. Eventually, he reached national fame after participating in the second season of the hit show *The Rap of China* (2018). Discussing the role of knowledge in hip hop with Wang Yitai means thus questioning knowledge of the culture and American hip hop and its histories. However, such conversations necessarily double up with reflections on the knowledge of the self, which implies in our case how practising rap music is being translated in a Chinese context.

KEYWORDS

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1. The term 打口 *dakou*, that can refer to both CDs and cassettes, are music devices sent to China by western companies with the intention of recycling them but which finally ended up being illegally sold on the markets of Chinese cities. *Dakou* had a major role in the dissemination of western music in China during the 1990s.

Grégoire Bienvenu (GB): *To start with and to introduce yourself to the readers, maybe you can tell us a bit about who you are and how everything started in hip hop for you?*

Wang Yitai (WY): My name is 王以太 Wang Yitai, that's my real name. People here also know me as 闪火 3Ho. I'm obviously a rapper, from Chengdu. I started listening to hip hop when I was very young. I was influenced by Jay Chou, who's considered to be the first pop singer in China to use rap music as an element in his works. He put a lot of seeds in our generation, he gave us interest in hip hop. In elementary school, I found out rap music is the only thing that seems different from other pop songs in China: it's cool, it's fresh, it's detailed and the content can be really deep. Besides, you must have skills to perform music, you must know how to rhyme, write bars and not only sing the high notes.

GB: *You grew up in Chengdu, a city which is surrounded by mountains and that has remained for long a remote area from the main Chinese centres like Beijing and Shanghai. Scholars analysed how western music navigated to China through dakou¹ (De Kloet 2005) and circuit listening (Jones 2020). From your personal experience, how did you get in touch with American rap music in the first place? And how did American rappers influence your music?*

WY: The first time I've seen an American rapper it was Eminem, in a CD shop. I don't think it was an official record, maybe a live show they recorded out. Earlier in China there were *dakou* but not many in my era. We had the internet to get access to the music and the information we need. I remember the first time I listened to 'Stan' (2000). I heard this pencil scratching the paper in the background, I was stunned. Even though my English was not good at that time and I couldn't understand all the lyrics, I've never heard this kind of sound before in Chinese music or wherever. From then on, I listened to more and more American artists: 50 Cent, Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg and Jay-Z. And I found out this culture requires a strong personality. It's not like a standard art. It's not about how high you can sing, how good you can sing, it's more about inner digging. In high school, I had a roommate who was also interested in hip hop and a lot of our friends started to do street dance and DJing. They gave me a lot of music that I've never heard of: Wiz Khalifa, Tech N9ne and others.

I started to find out that you don't have to have a particular background to rap. KRS-One was no one before a social worker that was DJing in a local club gave him a chance to prove his talent. You don't need to be that rich, you don't need to be that powerful, you don't need to be that experienced. You don't need to be worried about who you are. If you want to be a rapper you don't need to go to the US, smoke weed, gang bang or whatever. You just need to focus on your own life, your own personality. We're all on the same stage.

Later I had the opportunity to go to the US for studying, in California. My major was music recording and engineering but that was too technical, that was not for me. So, I started to skip classes, go to the library, find a corner and work on my lyrics. I released the *Ready to Flow* mixtape online and rapper Ty., from the CDC Rap House reached out to me and invited me to join the crew. The crew is strong, they have been holding the place for six or seven years, so I said hell yeah, let's do it. I quit school, came back to China and became a full-time rapper.

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My parents didn't understand at first. Quitting school is a risky move, you know. They are just worried about me. But I explained to them, hip hop is a job, it's not only a hobby, it's a job. It's the same as fire fighter, same as officer. I came back and struggled one year or two, but the crew always brought me up. Other rappers invited me to their shows, gave me money to make it through the hard times. Not that much, but enough to show my parents that I can earn and can improve.

GB: *Elloit Cardozo drew an interesting parallel between hip hop and society. For him, Gandhi would have sampled Henry David Thoreau, and Martin Luther King would have sampled Gandhi until American rappers themselves eventually sampled Martin Luther King. KRS-One was sometimes nicknamed the 'Teacha', do you consider rap music to bear a lesson aiming to instruct about society's principles and history?*

WY: I don't think it is right now because it takes time. You must remember that in your heart. It takes time, you can't go out there and teach people. You are an entertainer in many ways, you need to entertain the audience first. People are stressed, people are having hard times. You have to release them from their stress. If you want them to listen to you, you have to say something they really want to listen to. That's why a lot of rappers in China sing over melodic rap and love songs. I always wanted to be a rapper like KRS-One, but you cannot be the teacher in the first place, nobody will listen to you. Because they already have so many teachers in life. But if you keep that mission in your mind, it will go into your bars. Maybe not that straight, but under the waves, under the surface. The audience will feel it, eventually. I think I have this responsibility to let people know how hip hop saved us. How things can be better through hip hop, through all the elements.

GB: *School is considered as the official place for acquiring knowledge and just like other famous rappers (Kanye West, Jay-Z, Dr. Dre) you dropped out before graduating. Recently you said in an interview that the most important was not what is learned in school.² For you as a rapper, where does knowledge come from?*

WY: Definitely other places. The school is more about training, it's not about teaching. Training you to be a good member of the society. After school you can be whoever the society needs, find a good job. But for us rappers, I don't think the society needs us that much because we don't listen to anybody. We respect ourselves first. School's education is necessary because it inspires you, it tells you what's useful for you and what's useless. Everybody should go through this kind of stuff. But, you know, in my situation I spent a lot of time and money on school. I needed to rent a house, pay the tuition fees, spend time on homework, read books that I don't want to read, etc. It's too much, especially when you already know what you really want to do. And knowledge is everywhere. Right now, I really want to learn from others. Get knowledge from other people's music and movies. I also want to learn from people's stories and life's situations. Especially with COVID-19, I want to know how people reacted and what kind of struggle they have been through, you know.

GB: *Knowledge is the glue that holds artistic elements together within hip hop, and in the Chengdu hip hop scene there is an intense collaboration between different actors. How would you present the local scene?*

2. 我没有读完大学，但真正的知识不在这里。我更感兴趣的大多是课本上学不到的。我记得在网上看到，现在的教育就是让你跳，你别问为什么跳，要问跳多高。

(I didn't finish my studies, but the real knowledge is not there. The things that interest me the most are not tackled in the textbooks. I remember reading on the internet that today's education is to let you jump, you don't need to ask why you jump but how high can you jump.)
(Anon. 2021)

3. Chengyu is the term referring to traditional Chinese idiomatic expressions. The titles mentioned hereafter can be translated as follows: 目不转睛 (2018) ('being unable to take one's eyes off'); 四面楚歌 (2019) ('being besieged on all sides'); 童言无忌 (2015) ('children's world carry no harm').

WY: Right. It's because the place is really chill. Everybody wants to have fun and has respect for each other. People accept new things better than anywhere else in China. I don't know, it's like Atlanta. It's a city thing. It's a vibe. It's been here for a long time. I cannot say why, but I can feel it all the time. Around me, first of all, there's our crew, CDC Rap House. They have been in this business for long, they gave me inspiration. I really respect them; I talk to them and listen to their advice. And then there's Fansack, the street artist. I think he is really talented, he spends a lot of time on his paintings. He has his style and that's the most important thing in hip hop. He's giving all the new people opportunities to work with him and when he made my first album cover, the magazines and the companies started to pay attention to his work. Harikiri is bringing other sounds, other perspectives, as an English music producer. He's trying to help us to be better, to develop more international projects. And there's also a new crew called Digi Ghetto. They're in position right now, they're going up. We are all seniors for them. So we help them – when they face situations they don't know. They always ask us questions, not only about music, about life. We are not selfish. I think that's how Chengdu's hip hop environment goes up, all the time. Because we know that if they do better, we'll do better too.

GB: *You once told me that you started rhyming in English in your first projects but switched to Mandarin after rapper 马思唯 Masiwei advised you to let your people understand what you're singing. There's something closely related to Bambaataa's idea of a Knowledge of the Self (KoS) in localizing elements of a global practice to elevate your local audience. How do you integrate your music production in the Chinese environment?*

WY: First, you have to be around. You have to let the people know that you're a rapper and that you sing for them. Also, that you are willing to listen to them and to pay attention to them. You know human life is limited. I won't say 'sky's the limit', but human life is very basic: for 80 years you'll be around the same people, speaking the same language, seeing the same things. You cannot put yourself higher than anyone. Once you set that kind of thought, you're being respectful, and you see the real people's struggles. And you can try to organize your thoughts around them. So, when they listen to the track, they would be: 'Okay he's talking about my situation, he mentioned my street, my school, my whatever'. It brings people closer. When you keep making this kind of tracks, you are getting a position in your hood and in your city. There's only a very small chance that you become Michael Jackson. But you can always be the Michael Jackson of your hood, you know. And your people will listen. It's not even about your rap skills, it's about perspective. If you are the same as the local people, then you'll be successful. Hip hop is about the street. It's not about being fancy and all that, it's only about your family, your brothers, your struggles, your hustle. How and where you live. And that's it. That's hip hop.

GB: *You also write in a very poetic way, bringing knowledge of traditional Chinese culture through the use of chengyu in your song titles: '目不转睛', '四面楚歌', '童言无忌' etc.³*

WY: (laughs) I don't push myself to do that. 成语 *chengyu* are strong and can encapsulate so much content in only four characters. That's kind of hip hop to me. It says the least but means the most, it can even convey a whole story.

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I think that's why I love hip hop, because you can say a few things but people hear more you know.

GB: One of the main vehicles to the success of rap music in China was The Rap of China, an entertainment show broadcasted online and starring Chinese rappers. Through the years it met an incredibly wide audience but also raised criticism for lacking authenticity. You were part of the second season and reached the final six. According to you, how did this show contribute to spreading awareness and knowledge about rap music in China?

WY: Well... it's hard to say. Because it's only a show, the producers don't bear the responsibility to spread hip hop knowledge to the public. They try to make money for their own. And they try to make money for the industry, maybe for us somehow. But not the knowledge, because they don't understand it fully.



Figure 1: 以太福音 (Gospel of Ether) (2019) by Fansack.

4. In 2018, only a few months after the broadcast of *The Rap of China*, rappers were suddenly removed from Chinese media due to an unwritten directive from the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT). The so-called ‘hip-hop ban’ caused an intense restructuration of the mediatization of Chinese rap music that still impacts the genre today. For more about the censorship, read Amar (2018).

In entertainment shows they only see the surface. And we don’t need to ask them to have this kind of responsibility – it’s not their mission!

On the other hand, at least they make everybody know that hip hop is not a joke, that we’re not a bunch of losers playing around with ourselves. It brings curiosity to everybody, to the audience, to the rappers. It brings passion. I love this show, because I consider that’s where I come from, I consider it as my home. You know, when your parents give you birth, they give you everything, but they don’t really need to understand everything you do fully. As a rapper, you don’t ask your parents to rap. Same for the show.

Hip hop as a culture doesn’t require individuals to keep it alive. So that’s why I don’t think that, because you’re a rapper, you have a specific responsibility and you can’t make specific songs. I think you can make whatever, sing whatever, sing over whatever and I’ll have respect for you as long as you’re skilful and interested in this culture. It doesn’t require an individual or a show to keep it alive. We’re growing with it, growing with the culture. That’s what KRS-One said and I agree with it.

GB: *What about the intensive commodification the show brought to hip hop culture in China? Is it diluting the intellectual and spiritual growth of the music?*

WY: The show is just like parents for us. Parents give you money, when you’re hungry they give you food, give you relationships. But you don’t ask them to be who you are. You don’t ask them to rap. You don’t ask them to know what you know. You just thank them. But lately the show is not that powerful anymore. It’s not like what it was in the first and second years, when it was very original. The first season was so successful because everybody had its own personality and the producers were willing to show it out. But due to the policy and everything that happened,⁴ the show can’t broadcast that anymore. I continue, everybody continues, rookies see new opportunities and still want to join. I think that’s okay. But I always say that if you only do rap for the show, then you won’t make it. It’s not about a show, it’s about you.

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Bienvenu's Ph.D. research draws on cultural studies and sociology of culture's theories to question the processes of localization, mediatization and the ideological negotiations at stake within Chinese rap music production. He mostly focuses on the Chengdu rap scene and its creative environment, where he lived and conducted ethnography research before integrating a more digital approach due to the pandemic. His articles have been published in international journals such as *China Perspectives*, *Popular Music History*, etc.

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