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Cultural Synchronization: Hip Hop with Chinese Characteristics?

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Oppose the dissemination of Capitalism. Resist spiritual pollution!”

Propaganda slogan Chinese Communist Party

The West is the Best?

These words of Jim Morrison echo in my mind when reflecting upon popular music practices in China. The words do not point at an evaluative judgement on my site – on the contrary, for more than ten years, I keep on listening to Chinese rock and pop music. They do point at the position of Chinese musicians who have to face the constant danger of being labelled mere copycats as the perceived origin and authenticator of popular music is located in the West, at least in popular (and, unfortunately so, also academic) discourse. There are sufficient philosophical reasons to mistrust the Western claim to be the origin of rock, as Foucault reminds us, “what is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity.” (Foucault 1984, p. 79)

Elsewhere I have shown how Chinese musicians, under the scrutinizing eyes of both Western and Chinese journalists and academics, must bear the authenticating proof for their music, a burden that is often translated into an eager Sinification, by invoking in sound and image references to either “ancient China” or “Communist China” (De Kloet 2005a). In this paper I aim to show how, under the accelerated forces of globalization, such localizing aspirations become increasingly polluted. In this paper will analyze the rise of

Chinese hip hop culture since 2000 - a culture that provides a case in point to analyze the pollution of cultural forms.

It has become by now a truism that globalization involves processes of localization. Different authors have coined different terms, Hannerz (1986) speaks of creolisation, Appadurai (1996) of indiginization, Robertson has invented the rather ugly neologism glocalisation (Robertson 1995), and Bhabha (1994) speaks of hybridity. I will interpret the Chinese appropriation of hip hop as an act of cultural translation, an act that involves a *betrayal* of both the original, as well as of the cultural context in which rock is appropriated. This betrayal turns out to be most conspicuous for Chinese hip hop – polluting, as I will argue, both the adjective “Chinese” as well as the noun “hip hop.” It is in particular this proliferation of sonic dirt that is important, as it directs me, following Regev (2003), to read Chinese rock in general, and Chinese hip hop in particular, as a showcase of *banal cosmopolitanism* (Beck 2003).

In my attempt to unpack contemporary sonic translations, this paper will thus reflect upon the changes in Chinese rock culture since the late 1990s. After briefly introducing some guiding concepts of this paper, globalization, translation, betrayal and pollution, I will move on to discuss the emergence of Hip Hop in mainland China. Despite their celebrations of Chineseness, I interpret Chinese Hip Hop as a culture that renders any essentialized idea of Chineseness inherently impossible, and can be read as a possible counterforce of (Chinese) nationalisms that are currently very much *en vogue*.¹ Due to a constant synchronization with the West, Chinese hip hop is not only intrinsically cosmopolitan - it can also be read as an act of sonic betrayal of both assumed origin and of the context in which it is appropriated. I will argue that the subsequent proliferation of dirt puts both the adjective Chinese as well as the noun hip hop into an ontological crisis.

Notes on Translation

Globalization involves a constant dialectics of the global and the local. Global cultural forms are reworked, localized or indigenized (Appadurai 1996). In particular music seems to globalize well, considering the worldwide popularity of acts like Madonna, U2 and genres like Hip Hop. The flow of sounds is anything but even, instead, global power imbalances make Western sounds travel much easier when compared to non-Western sounds, contemporary non-Western music is often lumped together under the generic label ‘world music’. When employing the notion of translation I wish to include both the assumed ‘origin’ as well as the alleged ‘copy’ in the analysis. Drawing on Walter Benjamin, cultural theorist Rey Chow warns us against the danger of reifying the origin as the real, most truthful source when analyzing cultural translations. Translation not only refers, etymologically, to “tradition”, it also refers to betrayal (Chow 1995, p. 182). To insist on interpreting Chinese rock as translation is to insist on the question of betrayal and, in my interpretation, pollution.

This requires, however, further reflection on the relationship between the “original” and its translation. “It is assumed that the value of translation is derived solely from the ‘original’, which is the authenticator of itself and of its subsequent versions” (Chow 1995, p. 184). Inspired by Benjamin’s essay on translation, Chow argues instead to interpret translation as “primarily a process of *putting together* (...) a real translation is not only that which translates word by word but also that which translates literally, depthlessly, naively” (Chow 1995, pp. 185-186).

Consequently, translations may produce meanings that remain invisible or unspeakable in the ‘original’. “Translation is a process in which the “native” [here: “Western rock music”] should let the foreign affect, or infect, itself, and vice versa” (Chow

1995, p. 189). The native is infected by the foreign, just like the foreign is infected by the native – thereby polluting the ‘origin’ that has never been pure in itself. A translation consequently transforms and infects, contaminates as it were - rather than copies - an already and necessarily impure original. In the words of Benjamin: “a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux” (Benjamin 1969, p. 81).

This idea of translation involves a betrayal of both the ‘origin’ and the ‘foreign’. It pollutes, in other words, neat and tidy categories that structure reality. This leads me to the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas who, in her book *Purity and Danger*, explains how societies are structured around specific notions of dirt and cleanliness. A proliferation of dirt is unsettling as it is disruptive of the moral order of society (Tavener 2000), or, as Douglas writes, “dirt offends against order” (Douglas 1966, p. 2). This makes an analysis of the dirt that emerges in the act of sonic translation all the more urgent. “We should now force ourselves to focus on dirt. Defined in this way it appears as a residual category, rejected from our normal schemes of classifications. In trying to focus on it we run against our strongest mental habit. For it seems that whatever we perceive is organised into patterns for which we, the perceivers, are largely responsible. (...) Uncomfortable facts which refuse to be fitted in, we find ourselves ignoring or distorting so that they do not disturb these established assumptions. (...) But it is not always an unpleasant experience to confront ambiguity. There is a whole gradient in which laughter, revulsion, and shock belong at different points and intensities. The experience can be stimulating. (...) Aesthetic pleasure arises from the perceiving of inarticulate forms.” (Douglas 1966, pp. 45-46) In using the notion of pollution to grasp the translation of sounds towards different cultural

contexts, I wish to circumvent the somehow celebratory connotations attached to the idea of hybridity (Bhabha 1994), and point to the ambiguities and ambivalences occurring in acts of cultural translation.

2008 – Welcome to China?

Chinese Hip Hop marks a significant break with the New Sound Movement that set the scene of Chinese rock in the late 1990s (see De Kloet 2005a and 2005b), a break caused by the intensified pollution of in particular the spatial dimension of rock culture. Hip Hop is a sound that seems to globalize particularly smoothly, for example, South-African youth appropriates it to criticize life in the ghetto, just as Dutch Moroccan youth use it to criticize the governments' ethnic integration policies (Mitchell 2001). It is surprising that Chinese Hip Hop only emerged, roughly, around 2000 – at least 15 years after the rise of rock in China and more or less twenty years since the perceived birth of Hip Hop in the U.S. Most famous – and still forbidden in the Mainland – is the Hong Kong collective *LazyMuthaFucka*, whose filthy, Cantonese lyrics are full of anger and societal critique (Ma, 2002). Hip Hop has gradually gained more ground in Mainland China. According to a report in Channel V magazine, “If the youth of the 80s were obsessed with heavy metal, the youth of the 90s with punk, then from end 90s up to the present moment, it is hip hop that dominates the aesthetics and even life attitudes of contemporary youth. They wear hip hop clothes, they choose hip hop records, and they spend every weekend at hip hop parties.”¹ [p.100]

In 2004, Scream Records released the first albums of Yin T'sang and Sketch Krime, and New Bees the album by Kungfoo. In April of the same year, a third Hip Hop

¹ [V] Magazine, number 324, 15 July 2004 article called ‘The power of Hip Hop’ [p.100-101]

battle was organised in Shanghai, the final of which staged MC Black Bubble from Shanghai against MC Webber from Beijing – one of Yin T'sang members. Resembling the power imbalance when it comes to non-mainstream music, DJ Webber from Beijing won the battle. The atmosphere during the battle was bewildering, the crowd – mostly dressed in oversized hip hop outfits – sang along during the performance of Kungfoo (*er ling ling ba, welcome to China*) and encouraged the female rappers from Wuhan that joined the battle. The long hair, black shirts, piercings and tattoos that I come across when attending a rock gig were all strikingly absent here. Hip Hop culture in China operates rather remotely from the rock circle. Although the releases come from 'indie' labels that also publish rock albums, there is little interaction between rock and hip hop in China.

Chinese hip hop, even more so than rock, pushes the question of cultural globalization to the limelight. Hip hop has its perceived origin in the Bronx of New York, an origin that is moreover quintessentially ethnic. What happens when such a sound travels to a place like China? Chinese Hip Hop provides an important case in point to unpack the dialectics between localization and, what I would like to call, synchronization of popular cultures. With synchronization I refer to the increased *speed* with which Chinese musicians link up with their most conspicuous constitutive outside: The West. Several characteristics of the Beijing Hip Hop scene attest to the importance of cultural synchronization, and its dialectics with localization. I would like to single out four elements: the involvement of non-Chinese, the lyrics of the bands, the role of the Internet and the intricate link between the Hip Hop subculture and mainstream popular Chinese culture.

First, more so than in rock culture, foreigners play a conspicuous role in Chinese hip hop. Yin T'Sang provides a good example, only one out of its four members is Chinese: MC Webber is a Beijing resident, two members are white Americans, one is an

overseas Chinese from Canada. Sketch Krime, who moved from Yunnan to Beijing, works with four MCs from France, Britain, Japan and the U.S. The mixture of nationalities is negotiated in different ways: whereas in Yin Ts'ang band members seem eager to perform a Chinese identity by using a Chinese name and rapping in Chinese, the guest MCs on Sketch Krime's CD rap in English, French (*Beijing, mon territoire!*) and Japanese.

Second, the lyrics of both bands are focusing on everyday life in Beijing, yet, whereas the Chinese lyrics of Yin Ts'ang obscure whether this concerns a "foreign" view or "inside" views, the language choice on Sketch Krime's CD underscores this is an outside view. The drive to localization is clear in several songs of Yin Ts'ang – that carry titles such as "Welcome to Beijing", "Beijing Bad boy", "SARS" and "Yellow Road." In their song S.A.R.S., Yin Ts'ang reflects upon the days that the virus controlled Beijing, they rap:

"Frequently wash your hands. Wear a mask, stay away from me, wear gloves, stay physically fit, don't use your hands to touch your face, I have come to invade, call me SARS, I was born in Guangzhou, in that climate I developed a vicious demeanor, who would have guessed, that it would go this far, little old me could make everyone so scared."

The reflection upon everyday life in Beijing localizes the sound of hip hop, along with the language of the lyrics. In Kungfoo's lyrics, mainly teenage problems are being discussed. To some, this is merely a tactic as to ensure airplay on radio and TV, at the same time it shows how hip hop is localized: in China it does not make much sense for Han Chinese to rap about ethnic discrimination (it is remarkable that until now, the ethnic pull of the rock

culture as discussed in Baranovich (2003) does not exist for hip hop), nor about the problems of drug use. Gangstarap – with its references to violence in urban ghettos – is strikingly absent in Chinese Hip Hop culture, just as the sexism and materialism of Western Hip Hop is far less conspicuous. Consequently, the choice of topics in Chinese Hip Hop is more mundane, closer linked to the street, rather than street life in the getto's.

Third, the Internet plays a decisive role in the proliferation of Chinese hip hop culture. Through several websites, Hip Hoppers get in touch with one another and exchange their latest homemade raps. Peer to peer software enables them to download the latest tracks from the West.

Fourth, urban magazines present the latest images in fashion, the new bands from the U.S. along with images of graffiti in Guangzhou. Compared to Japan and South Korea, China's Hip Hop culture is still considered to be minimal, according to Dana Burton, but its size is increasing rapidly. A large part of the culture represents a fashion statement more than a "real" Hip Hop identity. In the words of editor Himm Wong from urban magazine:

"It's hard to say now, because most Chinese youth are just seeking the superficial kind of culture, and real people, those who study the spirit of hip hop, are quite few. Also there is a certain relationship between hip hop and politics, like rock and roll, it can exist in Beijing but may not be the mainstream."

Due to the speed of new technologies and the mobility of people, synchronization plays a constitutive role in Chinese Hip Hop. The result of such synchronization is what I like to call cultural pollution.

Banal Cosmopolitans

The case of Chinese hip hop shows that it becomes increasingly unclear what nationality lies behind a production, what cultural influences have been most decisive and what role the floating signifier “Chineseness” has played – if any. It is my contention that such practices of cultural pollution challenge nationalistic longings. I consider the increased pollution in Chinese rock culture, in particular in Hip Hop, a challenging, creative force. Its influence increased significantly with the rise of *dakou* culture, and continued to do so with even increased (and digitized) speed afterwards. The West is not anymore out there, instead, it has become part and parcel of Chinese rock culture – a predicament that mirrors contemporary urban Chinese culture, in which China and its Others are synchronized day after day – propelling a dialectics of localization and synchronization.

The translation of Hip Hop from its assumed origin, the West, to China, signifies a moment in which both the assumed origin is polluted as well as the “Chinese” context in which hip hop is appropriated. The origin, as Chinese hip hop dislodges key elements of hip hop culture - ethnicity, rebellion and class - from the musical genre, thereby showing that Hip Hop is anything but a univocal genre. The Chineseness is put into an ontological crisis given, most dominantly, the cosmopolitan aura of Hip Hop, as well as the empirical observations made in this paper: the West is deeply implicated in the making and promotion of Hip Hop in China. Chinese hip hoppers can be considered banal cosmopolitans, an identity position described by Beck as one in which “everyday nationalism is circumvented and undermined and we experience ourselves integrated into global processes and phenomena.” (Beck, 2002) When read as an act of translation that necessarily - following Benjamin and Chow - involves an act of betrayal, and thereby a moment in which dirt will proliferate - Chinese Hip Hop challenges both what constitutes

Hip Hop culture as well as what constitutes Chineseness. Chinese Hip Hop deserves to be heard by Chinese audiences to challenge their sense of Chineseness, but for the same token by Western audiences, to challenge their colonial gaze on China when it comes to popular music, in particular rock.

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ⁱ A distinction can be made between official nationalism, as propagated by the Chinese Communist Party to secure national unity, and resulting in policies and propaganda campaigns, and an unofficial nationalism. The latter involves more spontaneous emotional outbursts of Chinese vis-à-vis, for example, Japan or the U.S. often following specific incidents like the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999 (Rose 2001). The two are not necessarily mutually exclusive; yet, the Party for sure does not welcome strong patriotic outbursts of its citizens as they may disturb the harmony so much cherished by the CCP. For this paper, it suffices to observe that in China, nationalism has very much replaced Communism as the binding ideology of the Chinese nation-state, but it remains a contested ideology, ridden with contradictions and ambiguities.