

# Research on Rap Culture from the Perspective of Visual Rhetoric Theory Take the Example of the Rap of China

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## ABSTRACT

As a kind of hip-hop culture, rap culture has become a trendsetter of Chinese pop music and has increasingly become the focus of public attention. In the network variety shows, the rap programs such as "The Rap of China" on iQIYI platform and "Rap for Youth" on bilibili have been widely sought after by the audiences. This paper aims to explore how rap culture, as a hip-hop culture rooted in subculture, can go from underground to the stage, and extends to whether rap culture can give full play to its subjective initiative under the traditional fate of being incorporated. This research puts forward three innovative ways: combining with mainstream media, matching with regional culture and harmonizing with feminism. Spreading positive energy in order to effectively integrate subculture and mainstream culture, is the final aim to contribute to China's cultural undertakings.

**Keywords:** Subculture, Rap culture, Visual rhetoric theory, The Rap of China.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Rap culture has been active in the international music world since the 1980s and still plays an important role. It is deeply loved by young audiences with its strong audience expansion, and the audience group is gradually sinking. However, tracing back to its origin, rap culture is a "grass-root" pop music form born in African ethnic groups in the United States [1]. This is a poor way of entertainment, which expresses its psychological identity of anti "upper class" in the form of battle. This form of expression, with a little flaunt and ridicule in the rhythm, constantly expresses the voice of young people through underground rap events, and gradually becomes the mainstream of youth subculture.

China's localized rap culture started relatively late, and it was introduced into China by Jay Chou and other Chinese singers only when rap has been declining in the international music world [2]. In recent years, with the innovation of music variety shows, the marketization of rap music variety shows is becoming larger and larger, and traditional music variety shows are gradually transformed into production focusing on rap culture programs. No matter "The Rap of China", "Rap for Youth" or "Listen Up", rap music variety shows have

formed a unique style, which has been sought after by the majority of audiences and has a considerable audience rating. The large-scale production of rap variety shows encourages rap culture to form a unique artistic style in the process of localization in China, highlighting the unique aesthetic connotation of Chinese rap music.

"The Rap of China" is a music talent show made by iQIYI. It is also a reality show of Chinese youth rap music. This program uses the voice of young people to carry the mainstream values and spread the positive energy with the characteristics of youth culture. The global audition has been officially launched since April 2018 and spread overseas one after another. Then the overall events of "The Rap of China" across Asia, the United States and Australia have been launched one after another. In terms of competition system, "The Rap of China" adheres to the concept of annual innovation. In addition to the regular competition systems such as 60s promotion competition, 1v1 battle, transposition competition, producer public performance and mutual selection between rappers and producers, the program also adds characteristic interactive links such as producer basketball game to improve audience participation. Technically, it is also a variety show produced and operated by AI technology. Intelligent technologies

including AI player selection, AI voice recognition and focus map production have been applied to program development. Through the display of contestants' music attitude and music works, iQIYI records the characteristics of the younger generation, making the program popular with young people and hip-hop lovers of all ages.

Visual rhetoric theory focuses on the meaning behavior of visual symbols and their deep grammatical system. The visual rhetoric means the symbolic practice of "persuasive discourse" production by means of visualization[3]. Since the "visual turn" of contemporary culture, the traditional rhetoric research began to pay attention to the rhetoric of visual symbols. Therefore, visual rhetoric has become another rhetoric paradigm different from language rhetoric. The function of rhetoric is persuasion, which emphasizes the strategic use of signifier symbols; The connotation of rhetoric is a function that can find out possible persuasion methods on any problem; The purpose of rhetoric is to arouse recognition from the reader and listener. Charles Hill and Margaret Holmes defined the field of visual rhetoric as "how images act on the viewer in a rhetorical way". Different from linguistic rhetoric, the biggest characteristics of visual construction are reflected in two aspects: the first is to take drama and force as a dimension of dispute in the visual sense, and the second is to emphasize the activation or practice of some persuasive rhetoric or cognitive intention [4]. Starting from the theoretical perspective of visual rhetoric, this research takes the case of The Rap of China as an example to analyze the rap culture, sort out and summarize the visual symbols and visual rhetorical devices presented by the rap culture, analyze the increasing "on stage" behavior of the rap culture with Chinese characteristics, and explore how to give full play to its positive significance.

## **2. VISUAL RHETORIC ANALYSIS OF THE RAP OF CHINA**

### **2.1. Rhetorical object**

The basis of visual rhetoric is the combination of symbols. Visual symbols are highly concentrated on reality, which can be narrated and persuaded in a limited time; Visual symbols mainly include verbal symbols and nonverbal symbols. Verbal symbols refer to character dialogue, screen and scene text, etc; Nonverbal symbols refer to the composition of painting surface, character modeling, picture color, etc.

The direct expression of verbal symbols is mainly reflected in the display of stage lyrics. The application of Chinese style flow and lyrics by the participating rappers in the program makes the program more Chinese style in verbal symbols. Therefore, this rap program with Chinese characteristics is deeply loved by everyone. The program director also repeatedly stressed in the program that "The

Rap of China" should create a rap culture with Chinese characteristics which is different from overseas rap culture. In the "The Rap of China" program, rappers have achieved the ultimate "localization" in the content and form of their works. There is a large number of references to the essence of culture such as Tang Shi, Song Ci and Yuan Qu in the lyrics, pursuing the faith of hard work and upward life. The typical Changsha chant appeared in the rapper Damnshine's song "Long River". The melodious opening music stirred the cultural genes of Changsha people for thousands of years and the memory of water town that will never be erased. "The long river of life, I take wine as a song. Life is proud to be thoroughly enjoyed, don't let the gold cup empty to the moon...", There is little English in the whole song, but the lofty aspirations of the ancients are still used today, and the proud sense of mission of the Chinese people are impressively presented. Lyrics using Chinese poems not only form the rhyme and punchline of Chinese characters, but also sing the long river of Chinese culture and history to the world, directly showing the charm of Chinese style from language symbols.

In addition to verbal symbols, nonverbal symbols such as overseas element symbols and hip-hop element symbols are also reflected in the program, retaining some of the original flavor of hip-hop culture. For example, the program group takes the "golden chain" with hip-hop culture as the "key" for the contestants to be successful in promotion, which is distributed by the tutor. If the promotion fails, the gold chain will be thrown into the stove to show departure, which shows the use of hip-hop element symbols in program design and enhances the street style and competitive sense of rap culture. At the same time, the competition system of 1v1 battle is different from the previous stage performance, in which the singer is on the stage while the audience and producer are off the stage. Instead, all rappers and producers form a circle and conduct "street duels" in the form of independent selection of opponents. It is very old school style, and it is the reproduction of nonverbal symbols of overseas elements in the program form.

### **2.2. Rhetorical goal**

As the construction and production of image meaning, visual rhetoric makes images act on the viewer in a rhetorical way. The image behavior of visual rhetoric produces complex social significance, which can be understood from three levels: firstly, Roland Barthes's "secondary signifier system" emphasizes that symbols are implanted with implicit meaning. In the above discussion, the verbal symbols and nonverbal symbolic elements in the rap program are implanted into the style and connotation of the original rap culture; secondly, the cultural significance of pointing to history and society emphasize in the image hierarchy theory, whether the design of the arena outfield or the street competition area

surrounded by 1v1 battle, reflects the historical study of rap culture derived from overseas street culture with strong subculture characteristics; thirdly, the symbolic meaning based on the metaphor driven mechanism emphasized in the symbolic form theory, that is, the rap program aims to clarify the theme of the program and innovate the rap culture with Chinese characteristics through the packaging of Chinese style rap songs.

### **2.3. Rhetorical device**

As one of the narrative devices of artistic expression, rhetoric emphasizes or dispels the author's intention, it is an operation strategy to create effect. After Roland Barthes put forward the concept of visual rhetoric, he predicted that the same rhetorical devices as classical rhetoric would appear in this field. Then his disciple Durand inherited and developed the research of visual rhetoric and sorted out the common figures of visual rhetoric according to the principle of structuralist semiotics [5]. In *The Rap of China*, it is mainly reflected in the use of contrastive rhetoric and metaphorical rhetoric.

In the rhetorical devices put forward by Durand, the rhetorical devices is divided into four basic parts: "identity", "similarity", "difference" and "opposition", while the rhetorical device of "comparison" in the device of "similarity" is reflected in the program "The Rap of China". From the perspective of combination axis, Gai and Jay Park were invited as tutors at the beginning of the program, and the MV was produced, which highlighted the comparison and combination of rap cultures in different countries, and also showed the new style and cohesion of Asian rap. From the perspective of aggregation axis, Gai won the highest popularity and centered lens with a Chinese style rap during the premiere, which is enough to show that the rap program attempts to show the uniqueness with a more Chinese style rap culture, so as to echo the original intention of the program.

In language and literature, "metaphor rhetoric" can be divided into simile and metaphor. In the field of visual communication, visual metaphor is the most widely used and effective rhetoric method. In visual metaphor, there is physical similarity or psychological similarity between the image as ontology and the concept as metaphor. Physical similarity can be similarity in shape, appearance or function; Psychological similarity is due to culture, legend or other psychological factors that make the transmitter and receiver think that two things are similar in some ways. As for the stage design of the program, the competition venue is divided into internal and external games. The outdoor venue is designed like a boxing ring for rappers to freely carry out freestyle battle when waiting outside the field, implying the competitive and alliance attributes of rap culture. This is also implied by the queue design of forming two camps between

different music labels. At the same time, choosing a gold chain instead of a trophy or medal also implies that the rap champion matches and echoes with the low-key and powerful "block OG" in rap culture.

## **3. INNOVATIVE ANALYSIS OF RAP CULTURE**

### **3.1. From underground negative culture to mainstream positive energy transmission**

With the new media society entering the consumption era, subculture also needs to obtain its own economic and cultural interests in the process of deconstructing the mainstream culture and constructing its own identity, which determines that the resistance of subculture is only reflected in the aesthetic perspective and life concept, and then presents a relatively mild resistance. Dick Hebdige, the representative of Birmingham School, pointed out in his book *<Subculture: the meaning of style>* that subculture will not escape the planning of mainstream culture and interest groups in the initial stage of development, and will eventually be incorporated and become a member of popular culture on the basis of retaining its style. However, when subculture is incorporated as an ideological communication medium, rather than for the purpose of "meeting the requirements", it is transformed into a "voluntary and active" voice. The ingenious combination between subculture and the mainstream culture of patriotism provides a new idea for rap culture to go from the underground to the stage.

At the beginning of the program, the broadcast volume of "The Rap of China" on Weibo short video was as high as 8 billions, and nearly 400 times occupied the top of hot topic lists. The rapper "Kindergarten Killer" entered the public's vision with a patriotic rap song *<Red>* and was reprinted by the People's Daily and other major official media. This song is full of positive patriotism in terms of lyrics and rhythm. It expresses the enthusiasm of the young generation for the motherland in the form of subculture, reverses the stereotype of the public on the underground "negative culture", and successfully opens the precedent for subculture to give full play to its subjective initiative.

The development of many subcultures has taken "being incorporated" as the established outcome, breaking barriers, creating their own advantages, and realizing "anti negative for positive" have become the new development goal of rap culture. As an S + level network program of Chinese youth rap music, the purpose is to lead youth culture and spread the positive energy of rap. The rapper aims to show his thinking on rap culture in terms of lyrics and songs. At the same time, there is no lack of active praise for patriotism, rather than simply catering to the program form of "anti negative for positive", which actually reflects the intentional "incorporation" of rap culture. It is undeniable that the

rap culture incorporated in the online variety show can realize "localization" faster and better, and then give full play to its "on stage" characteristic and acceptance. However, regardless of the effect of the online variety show and the art of poetry, it is slightly weaker than the rap creation that actively expresses patriotism such as "Red" mentioned above. This kind of positive expression, which really applies personalized subculture to the expression of real emotion, does provide a prospect for the development of rap culture, which is unyielding to the fate of "being incorporated", but actively realizes the transmission of positive energy.

### ***3.2. From underground grass-roots to on-stage localization***

If rap culture wants to break through its underground grass-roots limitation and go on the stage, it is an inevitable result to realize localization. The remarkable class characteristics behind rap culture make the "group" and "attribute" in rap music performance particularly obvious. Therefore, dialect rap has become one of the typical manifestations of rap culture, and closely linked the rap groups represented by regions. Behind these local tones and dialect words, what they publicize is a kind of "strengthened and expanded" self-identity and pride, a unique regional cultural personality. In this sense, China's "grassroots" dialect rap actually absorbs the artistic spirit of rap in the form of "grassroots" of black Americans. Both Chinese and American rap cultures have the morphological commonality of "grassroots", but there are still qualitative differences between them, that is, the historical background and psychological identity of the birth of Chinese dialect rap culture and American black rap culture. From the perspective of historical inheritance, by comparing Chinese and American rap culture, the concept opposite to Chinese dialect rap is American slang rap. There are also differences between traditional and old rap labels on the east and west coasts of the United States due to different regions, gangs and genres. Rap culture has appeared in black neighborhoods in New York since the middle of the 20th century, and rap music was introduced into China from Japan and South Korea in the late 1990s.

From the perspective of psychological identity, the dialect rap culture in various parts of China reflects the Jianghu spirit with unique Chinese characteristics. The "Jianghu style" in rap culture represents the combination of grassroots and localization. The word "Jianghu" is translated as "wandering along the river", which originates from the ancient Chinese literary work "History as a Mirror". Jianghu is known as the "bottom society", which has aroused deep-rooted resonance in Chinese traditional culture and formed a flexible cultural framework in rap culture [6]. For example, <Chongqing Soul> and <Immortals> by Chongqing dialect rapper Gai embodied Chongqing culture and Jianghu spirit of " the

fog city"; The works <Changsha Hood> and <Street Story>, represented by Hunan dialect rapper Liu Cong, reflect the sassy and spicy style of Hunan, and mostly use Jianghu flow to show Changsha culture... These all reflect a strong sense of regional pride and regional identity. The lyrics and posters convey the representativeness and pride of local rappers to a region or hometown. This kind of Jianghu atmosphere reflects the ideological meaning of rap culture in the Chinese environment, conveys the authenticity with Chinese characteristics, represents the national character and regional style of different regions, and helps to localize rap culture within the region. From the perspective of psychological identity, American rap culture more represents the opposition between the grass-roots class and the bourgeoisie of "ghetto hood". The content conveyed by the lyrics often satirizes the hatred of the capitalist market through the description of the life with "cash, luxury house and car", but less shows the confrontation and competition between different regions. On the contrary, it is more like an alliance of the bottom class. Even if the strength of different gangs on the east and west coasts compete for the king of rap, in front of the powerful rich class, all gangs will clear the class gap and carry out purposeful music output. Therefore, the connotation of "grassroots" of rap culture under different cultural backgrounds is different. It is a little one-sided to simply include grassroots as the same "group" and "attribute". Only by combining with national conditions, cultural environment and cultural characteristics can rap culture take root and realize localization.

### ***3.3. Struggle and reconciliation between rap culture and Feminism***

Historically, men have listened to and participated in the creation of rap music more than women, which will also affect the way the audience appreciates rap music. It can also be seen from the rap variety shows in recent years that in the rap culture that advocates masculinity, women are relatively weak. Most of the images in the rap culture appear as men's "spoils of war", showing the same side attributes as money. Many female rappers choose to "return back" in the talent variety show, but it has been controversial due to the collision of circles. The first reason for this phenomenon is that many cutting-edge styles in rap culture come from Europe and the United States. Therefore, we would take the initiative to contact the original culture, such as revealing body dress, bold and decisive expression, etc. Especially when the local rap culture has not yet taken shape, this imitation would be more obvious. From Wan Nida and Vava in China, CL and Kim Hyun A in South Korea, to YAYOI in Japan, European and American makeup, hourglass figure and sexy dress seem to be the standard configuration of female rappers. People's attention to female rappers has also deviated from the center of gravity. They pay much more attention to her appearance,

figure or private life than to her own ability and rap works.

With the development of popular mainstream market, female rapper has received more attention. Rap feminism is the latest form of black feminism in the 21st century. It evolved and grew in the soil of black feminism. It not only inherited the tradition of black feminism, but also developed its own ideas, emphasizing woman's sexual autonomy and sexual liberation [7]. The emergence of more and more female rappers has reversed the subordinate status of women as money in rap culture to a certain extent. In the creation of lyrics, the expression of some "queen spirit" expressions also expanded the audience of rap culture. More and more women joined the ranks of appreciation and creation, and rap culture gradually transformed into "reconciliation" in the "struggle" with feminism.

In view of the fact that it is not easy to stand out in the male dominated rap industry, under the influence of the post feminist trend of thought, they began to think about how to make use of their natural advantages, so more and more female rappers began to "sell" their sexy. They are very feminine in terms of lyrics, song creation and stage display, which has injected diversified vitality into the rap culture. With the rise of male sex consumption, female musicians will become more difficult in terms of focus and economic benefits. Although visual and artistic are not mutually exclusive, the opposite of female rap aesthetics, which is regarded as a stereotype, has not been equally emphasized. Therefore, if rap culture wants to achieve a complete reconciliation with feminism, it can neither be without the participation of female voices, nor be confined to the overall overthrow of traditional rap forms and male perspective rap forms. It is best to realize the value orientation of rap culture and artistry without the influence of gender trend.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Under the influence of postmodernism and global economic integration, subculture is playing an important role in new media industry, cultural industry and other fields. Through the inevitable ideological and commercial incorporation, subculture can enable marginal social groups to release cultural values with new significance, so as to breed dynamic and innovative subculture styles with characteristics of the times. From the underground negative culture to the mainstream positive energy communication, from the underground grass-root style to the localization on stage, and then to the reconciliation trend with feminism, rap culture has been recognized by more and more audiences with its positive figure. The integration of online variety shows and mainstream media reports, paying more attention to content and forms rather than classification, and combining regional characteristics with China's excellent

traditional culture to promote the derivative innovation of rap, will inject new vitality into the development of rap culture.

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