From Trap to "Chou Xiang": The Transformation of Chinese Trap after 2010s

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Abstract. At present, there are not many studies on Chinese rap music. Research on the development of trap music in China, among its subgenres, is even scarcer. Although rap music has developed rapidly in China in recent years, due to cultural differences, it still has not occupied the mainstream market. Fortunately, some rap singers in certain regions have had great influence and even entered the international arena, especially the rappers from the Sichuan-Chongqing and Xinjiang regions. In recent years, they have gained the most popularity on the internet. They have also created numerous excellent songs, which have further expanded the potential of Chinese rap music. This article takes trap music from the Sichuan-Chongqing and Xinjiang regions as the research object. By tracing the representative artists and works, this paper explores the cultural acceptance and transformation of trap music in the Chinese cultural context. The development of this music genre in China showcases exchanges among different cultures.

Keywords: China, Trap music, Hip-hop music.

1 Introduction

The current research situation of Chinese rap is limited. At present, there are few studies on the development of trap music in China. But there is only one study on Chinese trap music, which focuses on the language of rap music and the translation of texts [1]. This article takes trap music from the Sichuan-Chongqing and Xinjiang regions as the research subject and explores the cultural acceptance and transformation of trap within the Chinese cultural context by analyzing representative artists and works.

2 A Brief History of Chinese Rap

According to the latest survey data on the consumption behavior of the Chinese rap music market, released by iiMedia Research, the data shows that in the survey conducted in 2025 regarding the familiarity with or fondness for rap music among Chinese people, the highest proportion was "like," reaching 47.35%. This indicates that rap music enjoys relatively high popularity among the general public. The second highest proportion was "average," accounting for 21.03%, suggesting that a certain proportion of

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people hold a neutral attitude toward rap music. "Very like" accounted for 16.96%, indicating that some people have a strong preference for rap music. The proportions of "very dislike" and "dislike" were 7.77% and 6.89%, respectively, which were relatively low. Overall, the acceptance of rap music by the general public was relatively high [2]. However, how rap music, or Hip-Hop music, gained such high acceptance in China as a foreign culture is a complex issue. It is actually due to the background of Hip-Hop music and its cultural diffusion into China.

In the 1970s, Hip-Hop music originated in the Bronx, New York. It initially recorded the daily life of the streets and gradually became a fashion and underground culture among young people. In the 1980s and 1990s, Hip-Hop turned into a way of expressing social issues, inequality, and poverty, and had a more profound influence. From the 1990s to the 2000s, it entered the mainstream market in the U.S., with more rappers from both the East Coast and West Coast, as well as more podcasts and media outlets. This marked the first flourishing of Hip-Hop music. From the 2000s to the present, Hip-Hop has evolved into many different styles. Trap is one of the most popular sub-genres and has also branched out into various sub-genres. It has a long history that is worth studying. The process of transformation is also complicated, with many factors contributing to the formation and evolution of trap music. Along with economic growth, trap music began to commercialize rapidly and expand its influence. It transforms to a mixture of hedonism and nihilism from the expression of "thug life" and "American dream." Jernej Kaluža explained the reason: "It argues that this is not a coincidence; the two-fold reality—the cruel reality of living 'in a trap' on the one hand, and the idealized, dreamy reality full of gold and diamonds on the other hand—is the main allegory of 'real' life in late capitalism [3]. "The cooperation between rappers and companies gradually formed into a business that generates huge profits. It also diffused to different countries and cultures due to the rise of social media. Chinese Hip-Hop music now accounts for a large part of young people's music choices, as more young people in China have become interested in fashionable cultures and trends.

In 2017, a reality show *Rap of China* had massive success. This show invited famous rappers and popular idols to be the mentors, which attracted lots of attention. Most Chinese listeners hadn't listened to music like Hip-Hop before; due to the sense of novelty and the celebrity effect, trap music soon became popular among young people. After the huge success of the show, merchants smelled the opportunity. Big music companies signed these rappers, not only helping them make music but also sending them to other shows and helping them take part in advertisements. Due to cultural factors, there were still some differences in topics between Chinese trap and US trap. The topic of Chinese trap at that time was mostly about a special "Jianghu flow" with loyalty, struggle, and compromise [4]. Additionally, Chinese listeners preferred to listen to more peaceful topics instead of violence and crime. The article by Yehan Wang presents a research result on Chinese listeners' preferences: "However, even the most open-minded individuals draw thematic hierarchies within hip-hop through the unanimous rejection of vulgar and violent themes in favor of more serious and wholesome music" [5]. This also highlighted the cultural differences between Chinese trap music and American trap music. During that period, trap music gained extensive exposure in China, which laid the foundation for its subsequent development. Trap music exploded

at that time, with lots of well-produced music continuing to be produced until today. There are also plenty of genres of trap music in China, which usually prevail in different regions and time periods.

3 The Genre of Trap

Trap music, which is a subgenre of Hip-Hop music, is one of the most popular styles of music in the 2010s. It had 350 major core artists, 3,500 relevant artists, 10 million serious listeners, and 40 million casual listeners in 2018 on Spotify (according to the data from Spotify). The number of trap music albums released during the 2010s reached an astonishing 170, which occupied 21% of the Hip-Hop music albums released during the 2010s (according to albums of the year). The trap music in recent years commercialize rapidly. There are plenty of phenomenon rappers who make trap music, such as Travis Scott, Drake, Lil Uzi Vert, XXXTentacion, and so on. The trap music industry has huge streaming on the internet and also a long duration. For instance, the trap album "ASTROWORLD" released in 2018 by Travis Scott is one of the most successful trap albums of all time. Its streams surpassed 8 billion on Spotify and Youtube (according to the data from Chart Masters). "ASTROWORLD" is also the 5th most-streamed Hip-Hop album on Spotify (according to American song writer). Other albums by Travis, such as "Orphan", which has 4 billion streams on Spotify, "JackBoys", which has 3 billion streams on Spotify, and "Birds in the Trap Sing McKnight", which has 5 billion streams on Spotify, are also top-streaming albums in the Hip-Hop industry (according to data from Chart Masters).

The trap music industry has kept its vitality at the end of the 2010s due to the flourishing of social media and streaming music platforms. For instance, in the past two years, *Vultures 1*, released in 2024 by Ye and Ty Dolla $ign, has 1.67 billion streams, and *We Don't Trust You*, released in 2024 by Future and Metro Boomin, has 1.88 billion streams. Trap music still occupies most of the Hip-Hop music industry (according to Rap TV). Trap music has a high popularity nowadays, and its history and development are very interesting as well.

4 The Origin of Trap

The original meaning of trap is dark and grim. "In slang, a trap is a house commonly in a poor African-American neighborhood where drugs are cooked and distributed, drug deals are made, and other illegal business takes place [6]." In addition, the first appearance of the word "trap" was earlier than we thought. "In 1995, Atlanta-based hip-hop group Goodie Mob was one of the first on record to use the term 'trap.' In rapper Khujo's verse on 'Thought Process' he says: 'In Statesboro and my little cuz Mark Twain, all my folks that hang with me when I was out in the trap or when I was goin' thru one of our episodes, only God knows, what I go thru so I get down on my knees.' The beat of trap music is distinct. "While working on this project, Redd developed what he called 'booty-shakin' hi-hats,' the busy hi-hat sound combined with bass and heavy beats that would take over the world of hip-hop and what would later be named trap." [6]

There were plenty of trap albums that promoted the revolution of trap. In 2005, the album Trap House by Gucci Mane started a new era. He blended lots of new elements in this album, for example, the 808 drum kit and electronic sounds. We can hardly see these elements in previous Hip-Hop albums, but they are essential elements in trap music in recent years. Therefore, this album did create some great changes. In 2008, Kanye West released his album *808s & Heartbreak*. Based on the 808 drum kit, he used auto-tune to process his voice throughout the entire album. He also used a talk box to create a kind of robot sound, which hadn't appeared before. The song *Heartless* in this album is still considered one of the best songs of Kanye West by fans; it showed the foresight of Kanye West and the timelessness of his songs. This album opened the era of auto-tune, since many rappers preferred to use auto-tune in their songs after this album. In the 2010s, trap music took advantage of websites and the internet to attract a bunch of young listeners. The production of trap music turned to EDM and Pop music, which helped trap music enter the mainstream. In 2012, Future released his album *Pluto*. He emphasized the melody and used Auto-Tune frequently in his album. It indicated a trend in the utilization of Auto-Tune and the profound impact of its use. Ben Duinker illustrated his opinions in his article: "Second, I argue that Auto-Tune's recent importance as a creative tool in trap recasts it as an instrument. Third, I suggest that understanding Auto-Tune's repurposing as an instrument begets its situation in a lineage of technologies repurposed, adapted, and embraced by the hip-hop community, including the turntable, digital sampler, and analogue mixer. And fourth, I propose that this repurposing surfaces in Auto-Tune's ability to facilitate emotiveness in trap vocals." [7] In this album. His special smoky sound with auto-tune gave all the trap music listeners an unprecedented experience. In 2015, Migos released *Yung Rich Nation*. They invented the popular "triplet flow," which was copied by numerous rappers. In the same year, Travis Scott dropped his album *Rodeo*. He blended trap music with atmospheric music together, which is called "trap soul." These rappers opened a new era for trap music, and more and more new musicians and styles appeared. In addition, more subgenres of trap music became popular, for example, Drill, Jersey Club, Memphis, Pluggnb, Rage, and so on.

5 The Trap Music in Chuan-Yu Region

In 2015, a documentary *Trap of ChuanYu* was published. The title basically refers to trap music in the Chengdu and Chongqing areas. The documentary introduced the two biggest trap music cities in China: Chengdu and Chongqing. Actually, in recent years, the music industry in Chengdu has gradually become one of the top in China. In 2023, Chengdu's music industry output reached 56.853 billion yuan, surpassing the 50 billion yuan mark for the fourth consecutive year, with more than 3,500 music enterprises. This environment also promoted trap music [8]. However, in the early 2010s, many Chengdu rappers made huge efforts, led by Higher Brothers.

Higher Brothers is one of the most popular Chinese Hip-Hop group in the past 10 years. They originated in Chengdu, China. After their rise to fame, the Hip-Hop music

industry in Chengdu has been growing rapidly in recent years. The group has 1.7 million followers on NetEase Music and 900 thousand listeners per month on Spotify (according to the follower count on NetEase Music and Spotify). The group consists of members Masiwei, KnowKnow, Psy.P, and Melo. Masiwei, who has 3.6 million followers on NetEase Music and 232 thousand listeners per month on Spotify (according to the follower count on NetEase Music and monthly listeners on Spotify), is the leader of the group and one of the rap stars in China. His voice is very unique; his pitch is a little bit high, which sounds similar to Drake. He was initially a Boom Bap rapper and battle MC. His Boom Bap single "Taoist in Mountain Lao," which combines Hip-Hop music with traditional Chinese culture, has maintained its popularity on social media since its release. He also has some exposure overseas. His masterpiece *Coco Elva Tia* has 27 thousand comments on NetEase Music and 2 million streams on Spotify (according to the streams on Spotify). KnowKnow, who has 1 million followers on NetEase Music and 235 thousand listeners per month on Spotify (according to the follower count on NetEase Music and monthly listeners on Spotify), is not only a rapper but also an R&B singer. His versatile abilities can be discovered in his songs. There are contrasts in his album *Mr. Enjoy Da Money*. It features trap songs like *Mr. Bentley and Power*, which showcase his aggressive side, as well as R&B songs like *Love You 3000 III* and *R&B All Night* that let listeners experience his gentler side. He has also gained some exposure overseas. His masterpiece *R&B All Night* has 13 million streams on Spotify (according to the streams on Spotify). Due to his vocal ability, the hook of Higher Brothers' songs is usually handled by him.

In 2016, they released their first mixtape *HIGHER BROTHERS*, which included 19 songs. This mixtape surprised Chinese Hip-Hop listeners a lot, since it was rare to hear trap music like this album before. In the early 2010s, Chinese rappers were making Boom-Bap and old-school rap, in contrast to Higher Brothers, who were mimicking Atlanta Hip-Hop musicians. They used the 808 drum kit in their beats and even employed a sound that was very similar to US rappers. In the brief introduction of the mixtape, Masiwei said: "Why do we turn to Trap from Old school? You can dislike it, but you can't prevent the development of Chinese Hip-Hop." [6] In other words, Higher Brothers are the pioneers of Chinese trap music. This mixtape had lots of classic songs, for example, *Without You*, which was the hit on this mixtape. It has 25 thousand comments on NetEase Music (according to the comment count on NetEase Music). This song is more like a combination of trap and R&B; KnowKnow sang the melody, which had the vibe of an African-American singer, and Psy.P's verse also sounded original. They add plenty of melody and some unusual tunes in their songs, which were uncommon in Chinese rap but subsequently prevailed. Jin Liu also discusses this trend in his research: "Integrating analytic findings with qualitative interviews of five national award-winning Chinese rappers, we conclude that the restriction of linguistic tones in Mandarin Chinese rap has gradually weakened over time and that there is a decreasing correlation between tone and rap with the emergence of new rap styles such as mumble rap and melodic rap." [9]

However, the mixtape *HIGHER BROTHERS* seemed just a little warm-up for Higher Brothers. After a year, they dropped their first official album, *Black Ca*b. *Black Cab*

can be defined as the first international Chinese trap album. The production of the album is basically the same as US trap; the beat makers of each song are mostly from the US, and the 808 drum kit and sound effects are very original. There are lots of features with famous international rappers on this album, such as Jay Park, Keith Ape, J Mag, and so on. The number 1 hit on this album, *Made In China*, has 26 million streams, 15 million of which are from Spotify (according to the streams on YouTube and Spotify). It's still the most influential Chinese Hip-Hop song since its release 8 years ago. It was the first time Chinese trap music gained such exposure in the international Hip-Hop industry. After Higher Brothers signed with 88rising, an American mass media company, they had better resources, such as the opportunity to collaborate with famous musicians like Jackson Wang, Rich Brian, NIKI, Joji, and so on. This helped them gain more international exposure and promote Chinese trap music. The single *Midsummer Madness* from the album *Head In The Clouds* by the artists in 88rising has 330 million streams on Spotify, making it the most-streamed single that Higher Brothers have been involved with.

6 The Trap Music in Uyghur Region

In Xinjiang, China, a trap music crew named Wolf Gang expanded their influence in recent years. In 2020, the leader of the crew, Narchy Wolf, joined a Hip-Hop reality show, *Rap of Youth*. His first song on the show trended on the internet, and the music video has 600 thousand streams on QQ Music (according to the streaming data on QQ Music). After that, Narchy Wolf and his crew began to dig into the Chinese Hip-Hop industry and try out new styles that gained a lot of exposure in China. They are one of the first groups to start specializing in Drill music in China. 2022 was the year of the rise of Chinese drill music. The member kkluv started making drill music in 2021 and subsequently released his mixtape *Luv Murder* in February 2022. It includes 6 drill songs. Interestingly, the drill songs from kkluv are different from New York drill or UK drill. He didn't write lyrics about crimes or showing off; instead, he preferred to sing and add a lot of melody to his songs. Additionally, the topics of the songs focus on love and relationships. This special style of CN drill is more acceptable to Chinese listeners. The songs *ALL IN MY HEAD* and *EUPHORIA* were the most popular tracks on this mixtape. They both have comments exceeding one thousand on NetEase Music. Indeed, the streaming of this mixtape isn't as high as it should be. However, it brought drill music into the eyes of Chinese trap music listeners.

In May 2022, Narchy Wolf released his drill single *Infinite Tsukuyomi*, which sampled the Billie Eilish song *Ocean Eyes*. Narchy's drill is more like UK drill; he doesn't sing melodies but raps at a very fast pace. This song had 3 thousand comments on NetEase Music, which increased the number of drill music listeners in China (according to the comment count on NetEase Music). In August 2022, kkluv released his second drill mixtape *21KTIME*. The exposure of this album was far better than *LUV MURDER*. There were 10 thousand comments in total on NetEase Music (according to the comment count on NetEase Music). The album includes 10 songs, and the song *RUTHLESS* featuring Masiwei is the number one hit on the album, which seemed like the passing

of the Chinese Hip-Hop torch. After that, he collaborated with Narchy Wolf to release an advertising song, *Wild West*, which became the most popular rap advertising song in 2022, with 200 million streams on NetEase Music (according to the streaming count on NetEase Music). Besides its commercial success, this song is also a cultural output. The production of the song was handled by the producer Yu, who is also a member of Wolf Gang. He used sampling that truly reflected Xinjiang's cultural characteristics. It was also the first time they used the Uyghur language in their drill song. Additionally, they filmed their music video in a small town in Xinjiang, allowing listeners to see the town and daily life in Xinjiang. The lyric "CN drill in the West" also implied that they are the cornerstone of Chinese drill. At the end of 2022, kkluv released his jersey-club mixtape *LUVMURDER 2*. Although there were only 5 songs, each song went viral on TikTok. Especially *FRIDAY9 2*, which is a Uyghur language jersey-club song. It not only has 15 thousand comments on NetEase Music, but the hashtag about the song *FRIDAY9 2* also has 430 million views on TikTok (according to the hashtag views). The rappers in Wolf Gang combine their culture from Xinjiang with the music style that originated in the US, creating a new style of music that is generally accepted by Chinese listeners.

7 The Sub-Genre of "Chou Xiang"

Chou Xiang is a term originated in Chinese internet culture. It means quirky, absurd, but funny. After Covid-19, the economic environment hasn't recovered yet, and the pressures in people's lives haven't become lighter. Therefore, people seem to have less interest in music that is serious. Accordingly, a new form of music started growing fast in these 2 years, called *Amusing Trap Music*. This kind of music is not required to have fine production, meaningful topics, fabulous musical skills, and so on. It is more like a kind of amusement that is not taken too seriously.

This kind of music originated in Chengdu; their main strategy is using TikTok to attract streams. Back in 2020, Megan Thee Stallion and Cardi B had already taken advantage of TikTok to promote their song *WAP*. "*WAP* debuted as No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart and hit a billion views across TikTok in just two weeks. The song's virality was accelerated due to the platform." [10] A streamer named Ash-1 on TikTok made lots of interview videos for rappers to promote their music since 2022. However, the style of his videos is pretty quirky and funny; he usually starts his video with "3 questions for you: degree, school, income." These somewhat rude questions helped Ash-1 gain a proportion of fans. Gradually, he became a meme on TikTok. He released the song *Car Remix* after gaining exposure. He uses a very weird tune in this song, and the lyrics are humorous and informal: "She doesn't love me, but she loves my car." The hashtag *Car Remix* has 240 million streams on TikTok.

Also, it can be regarded as the first amusing trap song in China. Many rappers and streamers started copying Ash-1 to make amusing music or videos on TikTok. Some of them, who have similar appearances to famous rappers, are likely to dress like them and give themselves similar names. For example, Bsen mimics Asen, and Niuswei mimics Masiwei. They mimic not only their appearance but also their style of music.

These funny videos and songs went viral on TikTok. The funny thing is, one of the most likable imitators is Bsh-1, who mimics Ash-1. He released a song named *Tang Dynasty - Shi Su*. The hashtag for this song has nearly 100 million streams on TikTok (according to the streaming data on TikTok). Many listeners found this song extremely quirky but funny. Since Shi Su was one of the most famous poets in ancient China, it struck a chord with Chinese listeners and also amused them.After his success, the streamers in Chengdu assembled together and established the "Weirdo Studio," which includes many rappers who make amusing trap music. This account has about 800 thousand followers on TikTok, and they post videos and also live stream on TikTok (according to the streaming data on TikTok). It gradually became a new form of amusement for trap music listeners that is exclusive to China.

8 Conclusion

This article, by tracing the development of trap music in China, reveals that one of the outcomes of cross-cultural communication is that Chinese musicians not only imitate and learn some of the original musical styles of hip-hop but also incorporate many local characteristics, such as regional dialects and cultures, into it. Meanwhile, hip-hop music has been occupying an increasingly larger share of the Chinese market and influencing more and more young people. In the future, hip-hop music may shine and thrive in the mainstream market of China.

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