

# **Language, identity and unintelligibility: A case study of the rap group Higher Brothers**

East Asian Journal of Popular Culture EAJPC 7.1. (1 April 2021), pp. 43-59 (preprint)

[https://doi.org/10.1386/eapc\\_00038\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/eapc_00038_1)

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Chengdu-based quartet Higher Brothers recently became the first China-born hip hop group to gain global fame. As rap music – originally a local, ethnic African American culture in the United States – has been continually relocalized all over the world and thus globalized, the Higher Brothers have undergone another process of glocalization. This presents a new case study to further examine the dynamics between the global and the local. Because rap is an intensely verbal art, this article explores how the Higher Brothers construct and negotiate their complicated and multiple (local, national and global) identities from the perspective of language. It analyses the language used in their songs – Sichuan Chengdu Mandarin, Standard Mandarin (Putonghua) and English – before and after they signed with 88rising, the media company that brought the group to the West. Due to the rappers' distinctive ways of vocal production, many of their trap-style songs prove hard to understand not only for global audiences but also for most Chinese national audiences and even for the quartet's local audiences. Drawing on recent studies of mumble rap, this article explores the politics and sonic aesthetics of unintelligibility of the Chinese trap music.

## **KEYWORDS**

Chinese rap, Higher Brothers, trap music, glocalization, language and dialect, unintelligibility, mumble rap

## **INTRODUCTION**

Higher Brothers is a rap group of four members, MaSiWei (Ma Siwei), DZKknow (Ding Zhen), Psy.P (Yang Junyi) and Melo (Xie Yujie), which was formed in December 2015. The quartet met and began producing music together through Chengdu City Rap House (CDC). All of them are native to Chengdu, the capital city of Sichuan province, except DZKknow, who is from Nanjing, the capital city of Jiangsu province. On 1 December 2015, DZKknow, MaSiwei and Psy.P created a trap-style track called 'Hai'er Brothers', inspired by and named after their favourite childhood television show, the longest

running cartoon in China in the 1990s. After the song met with success, they adopted its title as the name of their newly formed group and used the similar-sounding phrase ‘Higher Brothers’ for their English name. The group released their first mixtape in March 2016, and in August signed with the New York-based 88rising, a media company and recording label that promotes Chigga culture and features Asian and Asian American rappers and artists. 88rising played a major role in bringing the group to the world, particularly to the United States. The label released the video for their track ‘Black Cab’ in September 2016 and uploaded the song ‘Made in China’ on YouTube in March 2017; by August, it had attracted over four million hits and reached eighteen million by December 2019. So far the Higher Brothers have produced two albums, two EPs and two mixtapes and toured in Asia and across the United States and Canada.

Compared with other musical genres, rap is an intensely verbal art and highly depends on language. In my previous study of the burgeoning Chinese rap scene in the 2000s in the age of the internet (Liu 2013, 2014), I find that the distinctive linguistic feature of the localization of rap music in China is not so much that it is rendered in the official national language, Standard Mandarin (putonghua, literally ‘common speech’), but rather that the rhythmic vernacular transforms into distinct colloquial, non-standard dialects (fangyan, literally ‘regional speech’). Rendered in regional dialects, those rap songs articulate a distinct collective local identity for urban youth by mobilizing the generic conventions of hip hop to represent one’s hood. Consistent with this generic feature, the Higher Brothers articulate a strong sense of place and locality. The group was nurtured in the CDC, which strongly promotes Chengdu rap with a distinctive local flavour. Moreover, the Atlanta-based Migos proved to be a source of inspiration not only for the group’s trap music style but also for its embrace of their local tongue. After watching Vice Video’s ten-part series ‘Noisey Atlanta’ (2015), which includes an episode titled ‘Meeting the Migos’, MaSiwei, the leader of the group, realized that ‘[using Sichuanese] is an advantage’. Ma continues, ‘there are a lot of words in Sichuanese that have a sound and flavor that just don’t exist in the standard Mandarin’ (Hulme 2017). This is reminiscent of what earlier Chinese rappers in the 2000s said about the use of local dialect in their songs. For example, one Chinese rap pioneer, Little Lion of the Shanghai Rap duo Hi-Bomb (Heibang), said that their native tongue, Shanghai Wu, is more musical and can better help them achieve flow than Standard Mandarin (hereafter Putonghua) (Qian 2005).

However, as the very first, native-born mainland group to break into the West, the Higher Brothers quickly moved to perform for a global audience, not (just) for the local audience in Chengdu or the national audience in China. This is a major difference between Higher Brothers and the earlier Chinese rappers in the 2000s, who mainly

targeted local audiences in their home cities who spoke the same dialect. It is true that young Chinese rappers have always cited American rappers as their source of inspiration and aspiration, but the Higher Brothers had a more global ambition from the very beginning. Their group name was inspired by the cartoon show produced by China's largest home appliance manufacturer, and the members wished to emulate the global success of the Hai'er company. Even before forming the group, MaSiwei, or OG Skippy as he was then known, rapped in his single 'Yao Ming' (2014): '[t]hey discuss me just like discussing Yao Ming; both are excellent [...] my *flow so international*'. Before signing with 88rising, the group members had already collaborated multiple times with rappers from other countries. For example, MaSiwei made several songs, including 'Worldwide' (2015), with J.Mag, who was born in Sudan and grew up in Oman. MaSiwei and Melo also collaborated with two Korean rappers in 'Zhongguo hanguo' ('China and South Korea' 2016).

Nevertheless, it was 88rising that truly made the Higher Brothers a global sensation. The media company was founded in 2015 by Sean Miyashiro, a Japanese American who was previously employed by Vice, a prominent media brand in the United States. The music label features primarily Asian artists and aims to tap into the huge market of Asian Americans, especially millennials, who have been marginalized by mainstream culture. Other artists of Asian descent signed by the company include Keith Ape (South Korean), Rich Brian (Indonesian), Joji (Japanese) and NIKI (Indonesian). By May 2017, 88rising had accumulated over 80 million total video views on Facebook and YouTube; more than half of their 16–34-year-old viewers are in the Asia Pacific region (WPP 2017). The rise of 88rising in the music arena parallels the box office success of the films *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) and *The Farewell* (2019), signalling a new trend in popular culture targeting the Asian and Asian American markets.

The field of popular music and hip hop music has experienced strong growth in scholarship on globalization and localization. More and more scholars draw on Robertson's term 'glocalization' and recognize the dialectical relationship between the global and the local, which are not cultural polarities but are interpenetrating, interacting and mutually signifying (Bennett 2000; Mitchell 2001; Alim 2009; Liu 2013, 2014; Flew et al. 2019). However, the local appears to be interchangeable with the national in many studies. In the case study of the rap competition show 'The Rap of China', Flew et al. (2019) fail to recognize the further localization of rap within China and make a simplistic statement about the linguistic reality in China: 'in Chinese hip-hop, the dominant language for rap is Mandarin, although some rappers will occasionally rap in English and a combination of both' (2019: 99). My study pushes the term 'local' further down to the local communities that are contained within the

nation-state. After examining the tension between the local and the national in the media productions rendered in regional dialects in contemporary China, I argue that ‘the function of the nation-state seems more and more aligned with globalization and its concomitant homogenization and centralization’ (Liu 2013: 8). Nevertheless, many previous studies on the glocalization of rap music, such as Mitchell (2001) and mine, tended to focus more on its localization and to explore how local communities were empowered, influenced or affected by this global musical form.

Into the late 2010s, the emergence of Higher Brothers on the global hip hop scene presents a particularly interesting opportunity to further examine the dialectic relationship between the global and the local. If we view rap music and hip hop as a local African American culture originating in the South Bronx area of New York City, as usually assumed, they have been continually relocalized and thus globalized by youth speaking different languages all over the world. In China, after about two decades of glocalizing rap music mainly from the global to the local, the younger generation of Chinese rappers are undertaking a round trip from the local back to the global. Hailing from Chengdu and defining their style of music as ‘Chinese trap’, the Higher Brothers have received positive reactions from the musicians in the United States, the genre’s assumed place of origin, as evidenced in 88rising’s YouTube video titled ‘Rappers react to Higher Brothers’ for their song ‘Made in China’ in 2017.

How do the Higher Brothers construct and negotiate their complex and multiple (local, national and global) identities in this new round of the glocalization process? In particular, how does the national or Chineseness play a role in mediating between the local and the global? Based on a case study of the Yin-Tsang band, de Kloet (2007) argues that Chinese hip hop culture renders the notion of Chineseness ‘highly problematic’ (2007: 133) and, therefore, subverts ‘any longing for cultural essentialism and nationalism’ (2007: 138). Yet, drawing from the rich data of rap songs in Chinese dialects, I argue that the real scenario is too complicated to fit neatly into a theoretical paradigm (Liu 2013: 171–85). Moreover, from the linguistic perspective, the Chineseness of rap music probably lies in the peculiarity of the Chinese as a tonal language. Cui Jian, the veteran musician and the Chinese rock pioneer, has long believed that the four tones of the Mandarin Chinese impose an undue restriction on the rhythmization of the language (‘yuyan jiezouhua’). In many of his songs, both rock and rap, the original tones of Mandarin Chinese were distorted or minimized to subordinate the words to the strong drumbeat. His experimental rapping that tries to break away from the tonal constraints sounds more like a northern Chinese dialect, which Cui rather views as ‘accent liberation’. He said in an interview, ‘[o]nce the problem of the Chinese language [intonation] is solved, the Chineseness of my music will come out naturally’ (Li 2003). As for the younger generation of musicians, the Higher Brothers told

*Billboard* magazine that their music was criticized at home for distorting the pronunciation and intonation of the Chinese language and thus not sounding like Chinese (Diep 2019).

In the following sections, I will first trace the group's origin in the CDC and show how Chengdu Rap conveys a strong sense of local identity, which is hardly reducible to a unified and homogeneous national identity transmitted in Putonghua. Then I will provide a detailed linguistic and musical analysis of four of their songs in chronological order – 'Gai'ai' (2016), 'Black Cab' (2016), 'Made in China' (2017) and 'Wechat' (2017) – and track how the group's style changed after they signed with 88rising. As they move to target a global market, they incorporate local slang and references less frequently and use more and more English, but their so-called global audience may turn out to be a niche ethnic audience of Asian Americans. The negotiation of the local, national and global is best illustrated in the group's most famous track so far – 'Made in China'. I will examine how the song presents an ambivalent attitude towards both the national and the global, how the national is presented in the local and how its gendering of the West as 'she' is a reversal of the stereotypical Orientalist discourse. Finally, drawing on recent studies of mumble rap, I will explore the politics and aesthetics of (partial) unintelligibility of the Chinese trap music, which has both global and local implications. Globally, it joins a new trend of emotive sound in popular music; locally, it is a response to the state censorship in China.

## **THE CDC AND CHENGDU RAP**

In contemporary China, the government has been promoting Putonghua as the official language for school education and mass media, and the various local dialects and regional vernaculars have been suppressed, marginalized and characterized as speech of the uneducated, vulgar slang, unofficial subcultural lingo and so on. However, the aesthetic, entertainment and commercial value of regional vernaculars has been (re)discovered particularly in the post-socialist reform period. Sichuan and Chongqing in southwest China have been leading the country in dialect media productions since the 1990s. Between 2000 and 2005 alone, over 40 television series and dramas were produced in Sichuan, of which Chengdu dialect is the hegemonic regional variety of this southwestern Mandarin language group. The Sichuan-Mandarin dubbing of the American cartoon classic *Tom and Jerry* in 2004 unleashed a national trend of dubbing foreign films into more than twenty dialects (Liu 2013: 71–75, 83–103). The economic factor also makes Chengdu more conducive to hip hop and helps develop a stronger sense of community for local rappers. Compared to other traditional powerhouse cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, Chengdu has a relatively lower cost of living and higher affordability in housing so 'artists can live here purely off making music and

performing, and not have to worry about getting a second job’ (Hulme 2017). This is the bigger context for the emergence of Chengdu Rap as the leading variety of Chinese hip hop in the 2010s, although Shanghai Rap was probably the most prolific in the 2000s. Around 2005, when the SHN website ([www.shanghainig.com](http://www.shanghainig.com) 2004–11) – which avidly promoted Shanghai Rap – co-produced with Sony-BMG the first Shanghai rap album, *Say What You Gotta Say*, Mow, one of the rap pioneers in Chengdu, formed the local hip hop group Big Zoo. Mow allegedly founded the Chengdu City Rap House, or CDC, in 2010. Another veteran member of the CDC and a mentor of the Higher Brothers is Cai Zhenhong, better known as Xiedi or Fat Shady, who became nationally famous after performing a defiant track called ‘Laozi mingtian bu sangban’ (‘I Ain’t Going to Work Tomorrow’) in Chengdu dialect on the popular singing competition show *The Voice of China* in 2014.<sup>1</sup>

CDC played a key role in promoting Chengdu Rap, using Chengdu dialect as the rhythmic patois. Earlier in the Big Zoo group, Mow and his teammates defended their mother tongue in the song ‘Xiatian de gushi’ (‘Summer Time’ 2008): ‘who said Sichuan dialect cannot be used for rapping?’ In Mow and Sleepycat’s ‘Ai Cendu’ (‘Love Chengdu’ 2009) about hometown pride, the lyrics are replete with distinctive Chengdu local words and idioms, such as ‘bai nongmenzen’ 摆龙门阵 (chat) and ‘da duidui’ 打堆堆 (hang out together). By the end of the song, Sleepycat raps in a self-mocking way: ‘all of those who can’t enunciate Putonghua well are Chengduese’ 普通话吞儿不圆的都是成都人. MaSiwei used to rap in Putonghua, as in his hit song ‘Laoshan daoshi’ (‘The Daoist Priest in Lao Mountain’ 2014). However, after he joined the CDC in the same year, he soon switched to rapping in dialect. For example, in the song ‘Chengdu Rappers’ (2014), Ma delivered the following line in his native tongue: ‘I am happy to be a rapper in the Chengdu City; it doesn’t matter if it’s in Putonghua or not, as long as it’s fun’. Together with Melo and Psy.P, who joined the CDC earlier in 2011, Ma and other CDC members produced many songs with a distinct Chengdu flavour. This can be discerned from song titles using local street slang, such as ‘Nan ier’ (‘Hooligan’ 烂眼儿 2014), ‘Jianbude muder’ (‘No Pussies’ 见不得母豆儿 2015) and ‘Anyi buhao sua’ (‘No Hard Work, No Fun’ 安逸不好耍 2015). In Masiwei, Psy.P, Melo and Ty’s ‘What?!’ (2015), both the song title and the hook use a local idiom, ‘what are you trying to do?’ (‘yao nenge ma’ 要冷格嘛). In the second verse, Psy.P proudly raps, ‘the ones that fall behind are forced out, dialect is occupying China. Who’s gonna represent East Asia, even though we don’t speak Putonghua?’ While DZKnow was the last to join the CDC in 2015 and the only one in the group who is not native to Sichuan, his pre-CDC experience in his home city Nanjing demonstrates his espousal of the local dialect. Following in the footsteps of local pioneers such as D-

Evil, DZKnow rapped in Nanjing Mandarin in ‘Dengke’r’ (‘Wait a Minute’ 等刻儿 2015) about the local slang term that gives the song its title.

Many Chengdu rappers indicate that Chengdu dialect ‘has better “flow” than [Putonghua] Mandarin’ and ‘allows for greater lyrical experimentation’ (Liu 2018). If we compare the four tones in Chengdu dialect and Putonghua, the former has two tones with falling contours, the second tone (21, ˩) and the third tone (52, ˩), while the latter only has one falling tone, the fourth tone (51, ˩).<sup>2</sup> Link (2013: 94–96) observes that the falling tone in Putonghua (the fourth tone) sometimes suggests ‘authority or finality’. Similarly, Manabe (2006: 28) notes that ‘Cui Jian increases his use of the fourth tone at the end of a line toward the end of his rap on “Slackers”, making the rap sound increasing[ly] aggressive and driving it effectively to its conclusion’. Moreover, based on Hein’s (2016) visual analysis of rap melodies, the falling contour occurs with a high frequency to steadily build intensity in hip hop. In this sense, Chengdu dialect provides the local rappers with more resources to better replicate the aesthetics of hip hop.

Nevertheless, the Higher Brothers do not rely on a single language. As MaSiwei said, ‘I use the dialect as a tool when I write verses. If I want to achieve a certain flow, I can use Chengdu dialect in one sentence, then English in the next and then standard Mandarin’ (Qin 2017). The mixed use and fluid transition of three languages – Chengdu dialect, Putonghua and English – is further complicated by each member’s distinctive vocal production: MaSiwei’s reedy voice, DZKnow’s booming delivery, Psy.P’s vocal fry register and Melo’s rapid-fire style. The Higher Brothers use various languages and voice textures, coupled with distorted tones, blurred pronunciation and unique vocals, as well as the idiosyncratic use of emotional onomatopoeia to construct a rich and sophisticated multiaccentual and polyvocal soundscape with much hyped emotional energy.

### **‘GAI AI’ (‘DESERVE A BEATING’ 2016)**

This song was distributed by the CDC in January 2016 and was included in the Higher Brothers’ debut mixtape before the group signed with 88rising. It is a remix of the American hip hop artist Max P’s hit song ‘Gang’ (2016), which was creatively glocalized. The English word ‘gang’ in the original hook was changed to a semi-homophonic word ‘gai’ai’ in Chinese. ‘gai’ not only means ‘to deserve (a beating)’ but also is the name of their rival that this song disses, the Chongqing-based rapper Gai, who later won the ‘Rap of China’ championship in 2017. The most celebrated lyric in this diss song is ‘you’re from the underworld, and I’m from the military’. This explicitly responds to Gai’s lyrics ‘laozi shehuishang de’ (‘I’m from the underworld’) in his ‘Chaoshehui’ (‘Gangsta’ 2015). So the gangster theme in the original song is still very present and relevant in this remix, in which the four members launch a furious,

aggressive verbal attack in their own distinctive styles. In the first verse, MaSiwei raps in the everyday Chengdu dialect with its identifiable intonation, and he predominantly uses the ending rhyme words with falling contours to achieve intensity and aggressiveness. In the second verse, DZknow mainly pronounces the words in Putonghua, but some words are broken down and restructured to fit the beat. For example, the lyric ‘biexiangge liulanghan zuochidengsi kuaipakaipakai’ becomes ‘biexiangge liulanghanzuo chidengsikuai pakaipakai’ (‘don’t act like a vagabond waiting to starve without doing anything; go away quickly’). As the underlined passages indicate, the word ‘zuochi’ (‘lazy, not working’) is split across two musical bars; and ‘kuai’ (‘quickly’), which is supposed to modify the verb ‘pakaipakai’ (‘go away’), is now grouped in the previous bar, thus deconstructing the original word order and hindering comprehension to a certain degree. Though DZknow is not a Chengdu native, his lyrics reinforce the strong local flavour of the song by including two local words, ‘meide’ 没得 (don’t have) and ‘naoko’ 脑壳 (head). In the third verse, Psy.P delivers the words in his idiosyncratic way, which makes it hard to tell whether this is typical Chengdu dialect or not. He also likes to insert onomatopoeia – here ‘pia pia pia’ is the sound of a face being slapped. In the fourth verse, Melo unleashes a rapid torrent of harsh words, with a syllabic density of about 8–10 Chinese characters per second. He makes extensive use of local expletives, slang and distinctive words such as ‘cuizi’ 锤子 (‘fuck’), ‘fangnaoko’ 方脑壳 (‘idiot, geek’) and ‘gonaoguan’ 哥老倌 (‘big bro’). Infused with distinctive knowledge and sensibilities that originated from the particular place in which the dialect is spoken, the song draws on a keen sense of what Forman calls the ‘extreme local’ (2002: xvii). Appreciation of the song equally requires an ‘extreme’ intimate familiarity with everyday life in the local hip hop community.

### ‘BLACK CAB’ (2016)

The song, together with ‘Gai’ai’, was included on Higher Brothers’ first mixtape in 2016. But as the group gradually moved out of the local Chengdu market and targeted a broader audience, ‘Black Cab’, instead of ‘Gai’ai’, was selected for release by 88rising in September 2016 and later became the title song of their debut album, released in May 2017. On the one hand, the song is still infused with a certain degree of local Chengdu flavour. The music video shows that the song’s Chinese title is 野猪儿, which is a local argot term meaning ‘illegal taxi’. MaSiwei also keeps rapping in dialect in the first verse, beginning with the lines:

搞快点儿犹豫不得 ‘Hurry up, hesitation is a no-no’

最讨厌犹豫不决 ‘I hate hesitation the most’

我们的行程是绝对地机密 ‘Our itinerary is absolutely confidential’

Oh 车牌号已经涂黑 ‘Oh, the license plate is already blacked out’<sup>3</sup>

Here, the three words 得 in 犹豫不得, 决 in 犹豫不决 and 黑 in 涂黑 in Putonghua neither have the same tone values nor are rhymed (respectively as /de35/, /juε35/, /hei55/), but in Chengdu dialect, they are perfectly rhymed and share the same tone value (respectively /te21/, /tɛye21/, /he21/). However, on the other hand, this song is less local and more national, especially when compared with ‘Gai’ai’. Distinctive local words and slang are much less frequent in the lyrics, except for a brief mention of a local bus stop, ‘Shuangliu’. Moreover, although the song is said to depict the shady taxi business in Chengdu, exemplified by the shout of ‘cayiwēi’ 差一位 (‘still short one person’) in the hook, unlicensed taxis that hustle under the radar are a common phenomenon throughout China. The word ‘heiche’, the literal translation of the song’s English title, is commonly used in other regions in China as well. While lacking local references, DZKnow’s lyrics – ‘if Takumi Fujiwara didn’t have to deliver tofu every day, then he would proudly drift, drift, drift the car as he dares not to brake’ – is clearly a reference to the nationwide hit film *Touwenzi Di (Initial D)* (2005), starring the Taiwan pop star Jay Chou, and the theme song ‘Piaoyi’ (‘Drifting’) sung by Chou. Manabe (2006: 28) observes that Jay Chou often distorts tones and ‘makes the song difficult to understand without a lyric sheet’. Indeed, in the rapping part of his ‘Piaoyi’, almost all of the ending words (rhymed with -i) are realized as a fourth tone, a falling contour, regardless of the original tone, such as yí移, lǐ里 and bǐ笔. A similar case of tone distortion occurs in the Higher Brothers’ song. For example, in DZknow’s verse, all the four ending words (rhymed with -ing) become the falling contour, regardless of the original tones: líng零, xíng行, tīng听, jìng镜. In Psy.P’s verse, which follows a tonal fluctuation pattern alternating between a rising contour and a falling contour, each of the last eight rhyming syllables has the same original tone value, but he delivers the first four as a high-falling tone (速度 sudù, 瀑布 pubù, 无助 wuzhù and 熟路 shulù) and the last four as a low-dipping tone (风度 fengdǔ, 温度 wendǔ, 公路 gonglǔ and 胸部 xiongbǔ). As the fourth tone (213) in Chengdu dialect is largely the third tone (214) in Putonghua, it is hard to say whether he is distorting Chengdu dialect or he is using the Putonghua tones, or vice versa. In other words, the boundary between the national language and the local language is dissolved, blurred and in flux; one can transform into the other. Accordingly, the text is not fixed and is open to various interpretations. The topic of illegal cab drivers in China can well be read as a self-reflective metaphor for underground rapping in China, which is also unrecognized, unlicensed and unofficial; the taxi drivers trying to drum up business in the lyrics are very much like the Higher Brothers, who endeavour to build a future for Chinese hip hop. The song perfectly serves as the title song for their first album released by 88rising, and the rappers positively describe themselves in the lyrics as hardworking (‘qizaotanhei’), responsible (‘yao ba ni anquan songdaojia’), conscientious (‘you

liangxin’) and skilled (‘qingcheshulu’), yet nonetheless cool (‘ku’) and handsome (‘shuai’).

### **‘MADE IN CHINA’ (2017)**

If ‘Black Cab’ conveys a subtle message about rap music’s undesirable status in China, the group ambitiously tries to get world recognition for their music in ‘Made in China’. It starts with a voice in English asking, ‘Rap music? China? What are they even saying? Is this Chinese rap music? Sounds like they’re just saying “ching chang chong”’. The prelude clearly sets the tone for the group’s response, with MaSiwei starting in the hook: ‘she said she didn’t love me. She lied, she lied. She all made in China’. If ‘she’ here refers to global hip hop and how Chinese rap is not globally known or favoured, Ma and his teammates try to dispel the doubt that ‘Chinese isn’t really suitable for rap’ (Teixeira 2018). Throughout the song, English words are rhymed with Chinese words. For example, ‘lianhua’ (‘lotus flower’), ‘yanba’ (‘salt’), ‘quanja’ (‘whole family’) and ‘made in China’; ‘hello’, ‘tuihou’ (‘step back’), ‘jiezou’ (‘rhythm’) and ‘K.O.’; ‘malatang’ (‘a common type of a Sichuan street food’) and ‘Chinatown’; ‘know me’ and ‘xiuxi’ (‘rest’). The creative juxtaposition of the English and Chinese rhymes also speaks to a conscious transnational aesthetic for Asian American audiences who are assumed to know both Chinese and English. Moreover, the pejorative slurs ‘ching chang chong’ in the intro are based on the perceived stereotype of the Chinese language, as ‘ch’ reflects the relative abundance of retroflex consonants such as ‘zh ch sh’, which are absent in English, and ‘ng’ reflects the greater frequency of nasals in syllable codas in Chinese. Interestingly, there are no retroflex consonants in Chengdu dialect, and as for the -ng ending, at least ‘ing’ and ‘eng’ are pronounced as ‘in’ and ‘en’ in the dialect. Therefore, the rappers employ their native local language to challenge a linguistic stereotype about the national language. Just as this line illustrates, ‘Chinese 入侵 local 口音’ (‘Chinese invasion, local accent’), the rappers’ unique musicalized identity is mediated by the use of multiple languages, which creates a dynamic negotiation between the local, the national and the global.

To some degree, the local seems to align with and accord with the national. The rappers proudly relate the rise of Chinese hip hop to the global rise of China’s material power. In MaSiwei’s verse, ‘the alarm that wakes you, made in China, squeeze one toothpaste on your toothbrush, made in China’ and even ‘Arizona teaches Chinese’. In Melo’s verse, the rapper lists characteristic Chinese cultural concepts and landmarks, such as yinyang and the Forbidden City. In DZKnow’s verse, a rapper’s fame is compared with ‘the Chinese national team winning in swimming’. This song has often been read as touting Chinese pride and subtly promoting nationalism (Lu 2018). However, I would argue that its attitude towards the national is rather ambivalent. In

the case of DZKnow, although he has to follow the Putonghua pronunciation, since he does not speak Chengdu dialect, he tries to liberate himself from the constraint of the official standard tones. For example, 棚 péng, 泳 yǒng, 梦 mèng and 同 tóng are all rendered as the fourth tone to convey assertiveness and aggressiveness. From the perspective of tone, the national is no longer uniaccentual, unified or centripetal, but has become multivocal, plural and centrifugal. In the cases of Ma and Melo, who pronounce Chinese keywords in the Chengdu dialect, ‘changcheng’ (the Great Wall) becomes /ts’əŋ ts’ən/, ‘fengshui’ becomes /fən suei/, and even ‘zhongguo’ (China) becomes /tsoŋ kue/. As regional speech usually serves a mimetic function, the use of Chengdu pronunciation seems to specify China and the national as a particular and localized entity. In other words, the national has to be presented in the local. (As a matter of fact, the music video showcasing Chinese culture was shot in Jinli, a famous cultural attraction in Chengdu.) This is also explicit in Psy.P’s verse, in which he raps about the ancient poet Li Bai, the game of mahjong and the Laoganma brand of chili sauce. Despite their nationwide fame, these cultural signifiers are specifically linked with Sichuan and the broader region of southwestern China. Moreover, Psy.P’s use of the word ‘waidiren’ (outsiders) instead of ‘waiguoren’ (foreigners) in the line ‘[the chili sauce is] so spicy that the outsiders can’t handle it’ sets up a boundary between Sichuan/Chengdu and the rest of China and the world.

Paralleling the song’s ambivalence towards the national, its attitude towards the global is equally ambiguous. It is interesting that the West is depicted as a female ‘she’ who depends on China for her daily life. By contrast, the Orient is now actively represented by the group’s male voices. The twenty-first century seems to witness a gender reversal of the stereotypical Orientalist discourse that can be traced to the nineteenth century, in which the Orient – including Asian American men – is often feminized, silenced, inferiorized and objectivized to serve the western White male’s gaze (Chen 1996). Moreover, the gender-ambiguous voice in the intro was actually supplied by Lana Larkin, a female White American who worked as the group’s interpreter and videographer at that time. The western female’s doubtful questions are furiously refuted by the Oriental males, whose aggressive and confident lyrics convey a strong sense of masculinity and superiority. However, this upset of the West–East power relationship is far from thorough, and the gender reversal is far from stable.

China and Chinese rap rely greatly on the recognition of the West to leverage their global status. The positive and surprised comments of American hip hop staples like Migos and Lil Yachty about ‘Made in China’ have been a big boost for their fame. Even in terms of the song’s production, the Orient still depends on the West: without the beat provided by the Atlanta producer Richie Souf, the group members could not start writing the lyrics (Chan 2017). As the Orientalist discourse is closely related with

racism, here the West is represented by African American rappers. This may be read in a positive way as ‘hiphop’s eastern gaze’ (Banerjea 1999: 17), as evidenced by the Wu-Tang Clan and their album ‘Entering the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)’ in the 1990s, which was heavily influenced by Hong Kong Kungfu movies. But Marchetti (2001) details the strong yet uneasy Black connection in Jackie Chan’s films. In discussing the presence of a Black female role in *Mr. Nice Guy* (1997), she concludes that Chan’s simultaneous hardness and softness ambivalently either ‘embodies a remasculinization of castrated, marginalized, colonial/postcolonial subjects’ or ‘represents a postfeminist androgyny that transcends traditional gender binaries’ (1997: 150). The tension involving questions of race and gender gains new complexity in hip hop, as the genre is notoriously charged with sexism and misogyny. ‘Made in China’ features a guest verse by Famous Dex, a male African American rapper. In his line, ‘I got a bitch up in China [...] shit I signed her’, the Chinese rap group seems to be restored back to the submissive female gender. The song both destabilizes and reinforces the power relationship between the West and China, which is complicated by racism, sexism and Orientalism.

Released after the group signed with 88rising, ‘Made in China’ clearly targets a global audience. The title is in English only, the hook is mainly in English, and there is an increasing use of English in the lyrics. By contrast, the song uses fewer distinctive local words and slang terms than their earlier songs such as ‘Gai ai’ and ‘Black Cab’, except for a couple of colloquial words such as ‘meide’ and ‘yanba’ (‘salt’). The intention to cater to a global audience is more noticeable in the song ‘Wechat’, which was released two months later and was included on their first album as well.

### **‘WECHAT’ (2017)**

This song is probably the Higher Brothers’ second most successful song overseas after ‘Made in China’; by November 2019, it had garnered over 8.5 million views on YouTube. An earlier version of the song was included on their first mixtape in 2016, before they signed with 88rising. A comparison of the two versions will clearly demonstrate the group’s adaptation to a new market. First, the song’s title was reduced from a long sentence in Chinese, ‘wo dakai weixin bushi lai tingni bibi zhaxiede’ (‘I don’t open WeChat to see your bullshit’), to a single English word. MaSiwei added a new prelude in English to set up a context that a western audience can easily relate to: ‘there’s no Skype, no Facebook, no Twitter, no Instagram /We use WeChat’. Although the title refers to the ubiquitous Chinese social media application, the lyrics evoke familiar motifs of rap, namely flaunting one’s wealth, fame and women. The new version also omitted those lyrics with specific local references, such as their rival Gai ‘chao’ and ‘Chongqing de saoponiang’ (‘bitches from Chongqing’), and added more

global references, such as the names of pop stars Mariah Carey and Coco Lee. The only exception is that the new version added a local slang phrase in Chengdu dialect, 跑得脱马脑壳 (the horse cannot escape once it is haltered), in Psy.P's verse, but the phrase is used here to emphasize how hard it is to resist so many girls' offers of dating, a typical trope of braggadocio in rap. Moreover, the new version added a visually effective music video shot inside the WeChat user interface. The messages pop up only in English, and even the message exchanges among the members of Higher Brothers are intentionally crafted in English. Many English street words and examples of hip hop argot are sprinkled in these messages, such as 'lit', 'hickey', 'dope', 'fam' and 'slay me'. Finally, the song features a guest verse by Keith Ape, a Korean rapper and their 88rising labelmate, who had gained global fame earlier with his hit single 'IT G MA' in 2015. His verse is mainly in Korean, interspersed with some English words such as 'Mortal Kombat' and 'valium'. The new version clearly targets a global audience, particularly Asians and Asian Americans.

Nevertheless, the issue of (partial) unintelligibility arises again. This song not only incorporates three mutually unintelligible languages (Chinese, English and Korean), but also two Mandarin varieties, not to mention internet slang and hip hop terms such as 'BB' in Chinese and 'lit' in English. It is likely that listeners who are fluent in all four language varieties and also versed in hip hop culture in each of these languages make up an incredibly small segment of the group's audience. Most audience members, whether they belong to a global, national or local audience, would only understand parts of the lyrics here and there, resulting in an incoherent, disruptive and fragmentary experience. This is similar to the use of multiple languages and styles (spoken, written and voiceover) in Hou Hsiaohsien's film *Beiqing chengshi* (*City of Sadness*) (1989). As Lupke observes, '[a]ll of these various modes of discourse are viewed as incomplete parcels of a cacophony of voices, understood in piecemeal fashion but not comprehended in entirety [...] by the spectator' (2004: 17). So the song seems to expose the limitations of all listeners and their inability to understand the words and – beyond them – the world, especially in the era of social media. Moreover, aural unintelligibility is matched with visual blurriness in the music video of the song, particularly in Keith Ape's part, as he recorded his rapping and movement with a handheld cell phone. The video clips are edited as jump cuts and shown in fast-forward, paralleling his rapid-fire rapping style. Sometimes the small screen of the cell phone is further split into nine smaller windows, while at other times the rapper's image is abstracted like an overexposed x-ray. Thus, the visual effect is remarkably shaky, disjointed and difficult to follow, too. The lack of aural intelligibility and visual readability may capture the zeitgeist of this generation and indicate a new acoustic trend in popular music, namely 'mumble rap'.

## **‘MUMBLE RAP’ AND THE AESTHETICS OF UNINTELLIGIBILITY**

In terms of style, the music of Higher Brothers is synchronized with the most dominant rap style in the United States in the past decade – trap music; the earlier boom bap-influenced rap style has been labelled ‘old school’. Trap is a subgenre of hip hop music that originated in the southern United States and features ‘deep sub-bass lines and 808 beats’ (Duinker 2019: 435). Duinker argues that two musical characteristics of trap beats in particular, ‘slower tempos and inconsistent hi-hat patterns’, have contributed to the popularity of the triplet flow in recent hip hop music, which in turn has become a signature feature of southern hip hop music represented by Atlanta trap rappers like Young Thug, the Migos and Future (2019: 435). As Duinker notes, with the slower tempo (ranging approximately 60–75 bpm or, construed differently, 120–150 bpm), triplet flow is ‘perhaps faster than the average rap speed of most MCs’, and the syllabic densities in English can be 6–7.5 syllables per second (2019: 437). Although he suggests that the faster rap speed may not ‘compromise clean and intelligible vocal delivery’, he recognizes that the lyrics of some trap rappers such as Young Thug are ‘partially incomprehensible’ (2019: 436). According to Abraham (2018), these southern rap artists challenge the very notion of lyricism and feature ‘vocals that were allegedly either too fast or too warbled to decipher’ (2018: 6), in addition to the use of southern dialects that are unintelligible to some audiences (2018: 25). Therefore, the term ‘mumble rap’ was coined in 2016 to refer to this new rap style. The Higher Brothers are often considered the Chinese Migos, with their frequent use of triplet flow. The tempo of ‘Made in China’ is 75/150 bmp and of ‘Wechat’ is 73/146 bmp. In addition to the four songs analysed above, the issue of partial unintelligibility can already be discerned in their first trap song, ‘Hai’er Brothers’. In the hook, while DZKknow’s part is clearly enunciated, MaSiwei utters 21 syllables, or seven three-syllable words, in about four seconds: ‘madebi dianbinxiang diansiji zesuiqi weibolu quanzidong xiyiji’ (‘fuck refrigerator, television, water heater, microwave oven and full-automatic washing machine’). In MaSiwei’s Sichuan Mandarin pronunciation and his woozy, slurred vocal delivery, the tones are diminished and words are truncated or omitted, and it is hard to understand what he is rapping about without referring to the lyric sheet.

As mumble rap is a relatively new phenomenon, it has attracted only a few academic studies. Abraham (2018) provides a careful phonetic and sociocultural analysis of so-called mumble rap and argues that the term is in fact a stigmatization of AAVE (African American Vernacular English) variants, which feature phonetic reduction and relaxations and are considered as inferior and intolerable by speakers of Mainstream American English (MAE). At the same time, Abraham’s statistical study

supports the existence of the ‘obvious trend’ of ‘the increase of reduction and ambiguity in mainstream hip-hop’ (2018: 31). He notices that many mainstream hip hop artists focus more on how they say something rather than on what they say. He argues that ‘the semantic value of lyrics has moved from the lyrics themselves to their manner of vocal production’ (2018: 13). But this value change or added value should be better viewed on the emotive-affective level, rather than the semantic-referential level. In analysing Young Thug’s warble rap, Locke (2015) comments that the rapper ‘expresses his feelings more purely through sounds’, rather than articulating social commentary through lyrics. Together with the use of emotional onomatopoeia, the voice is instrumentalized (including its augmentation and adjustment using autotune technology) to deliver emotions and feelings that are beyond verbal description. Moreover, Heffernan’s (2010) study suggests that phonetic distinctiveness regardless of utterance content can index aspects of one’s identity such as masculinity. Building upon Abraham’s and Heffernan’s work and drawing on Volosinov (1973), Omrow (2018) provides a socio-ideological analysis of linguistic struggle between AAVE and MAE in mumble rap. He further argues that ‘the slurring of words and indecipherable vocal delivery of mumble rappers’ signifies a liberation from uniaccentuality and an embrace of multiaccentuality and polyvocality (2018: 50). While both Abraham and Omrow emphasize the sociopolitical significance of mumble rap for its emancipatory power and symbolic resistance, Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky’s theory of defamiliarization sheds light on the aesthetic perception evoked by such vocal delivery. In her study of Jay Chou’s language style, which features slurred enunciation of lyrics, Chen (2006) draws on Shklovsky’s theory and examines how the familiar practical language is distorted, broken down, resembled, deformed or deautomatized in Chou’s lyrics, thus creating dynamics between the familiar and the unfamiliar, prolonging the process of listeners’ comprehension and eventually enhancing the aesthetic perception of the familiar. For Chou’s fans, the harder it is for them to understand what he sings, the more intrigued they are to learn the lyrics. Indeed, the poetic lyrics composed by Chou’s lyricist Fang Wenshan is very much appreciated by Chou’s fans.

Nevertheless, aesthetics and politics are inseparable and inextricably intertwined. In the context of neo-liberal humanism, Burton (2017) argues that the sonic aesthetics of the trap music are exactly its politics. He similarly identifies the ‘mushmouth rapping’ as one of the sonic aesthetics of trap (2017: 80). With a close musicological listening to the vocal and instrumental features of trap music by artists such as Desiigner, Future and Young Thug, Burton finds that the trap genre amplifies sounds that signify blackness and digs further into the negative stereotypes of blackness such as crack, criminality and misogyny. He argues that this ‘sonic blackness’ does not align with mainstream conceptions of neo-liberal humanist politics, which privilege

multiracial diversity over purified blackness (2017: 71). The lyrical content of trap is often rendered as politically illegible, unserious, ‘empty’ and ‘worthless’, particularly when compared with the ‘politically engaged’, legible and thus meaningful lyrics such as Kendrick Lamar’s (2017: 89). In terms of soundscape, trap’s sonic blackness makes ‘its politics inaudible in mainstream political discourse’ (2017: 90) and ‘undermines post-race ideology without directly addressing it’ (2017: 72). Besides vocals and instrumentals, Burton also discusses the diffusive and centrifugal role played by polyphonic background vocals such as echo, ablibs, interjections, which are unconsolidated, unpredictable and not easily locatable. As he concludes, ‘instead of a fixed, static blackness’, trap occupies ‘a sonic and political space that is received as apolitical’ (2017: 100).

While Burton analyses American mumble rap in the context of race, the politics of unintelligibility of Chinese trap music has to take the power of state into consideration. With the official crackdown of rappers including PG One and Gai in January 2018, a news story ran the title asking ‘Why Higher Brothers wasn’t censored by China’s government’ (Lu 2018). Part of the answer may be related to the trap genre that the group adopts. If we compare Higher Brothers’ songs and the older boom bap-influenced rap songs in the 2000s, it is easy to find that the latter tended to deliver stronger social messages with clearly enunciated lyrics, such as condemnation of school education and criticism of mainstream media (Liu 2014: 271). Many of these songs with explicit, provocative opinions are likely to arouse controversy and become censored or self-censored (2014: 279–80). This was the case for Melo’s solo ‘Uber’ (2015), a furious response to the local government’s crackdown on the ride-sharing app, which was wiped from the internet (Sheehan 2015). The four members of Higher Brothers are highly aware of what they can and cannot write and rap about. Leaving enunciation as optional, they employ the style of mumble rap as a way to be ‘apolitical’, outside the boundaries of sociopolitical discourse. Many of their popular songs, such as ‘7/11’, ‘Young Master’ and ‘Wudidong’ (‘Bottomless Hole’), are not about social issues but about everyday experiences, delivered in a playful and non-serious tone. Without an articulated and unifying theme, the songs are imbued with ambiguity, nuance and indeterminacy. Just as my analysis of ‘Made in China’ demonstrates, the song cannot be read simply as a nationalistic work but is embedded with layers of complex identities.

If we view the function of language as to produce difference and perception, the negotiation of the local, national and global is well illustrated in the Higher Brothers’ use of Chengdu dialect, Putonghua and English. Similar to southern rappers’ use of southern dialects or the AAVE variant, the Higher Brothers make use of similarly stigmatized, non-institutional, subnational dialect variants. Celebrating

multiaccentuality and polyvocality, their songs are hardly reducible to a unified, monolithic, national culture or a homogeneous global culture. Moreover, languages are used as a source of interjections and emotional intensifiers to construct an emotive and affective soundscape, coupled with frequent insertion of exclamations in their songs. For example, in ‘Black Cab’, they use interjections such as ‘Yeah’, ‘Whooh!’, ‘Ay’, ‘yihei’ and onomatopoeic ad-libs such as ‘skrr’ (mimicking the speedy movement of a car), ‘pong’ (sound of a car crash), ‘didi’ (sound of beeping) and ‘fengfeng’ (the sound of an exhaust pipe). Semantically empty and without any fixed or defined meaning, these non-words are elusive to ideological and political control yet exhibit great elasticity for expressing emotions. The indecipherability of ‘mumble rap’ thus become a way to rap about nothing in particular while being abundant in sonic aesthetics, emotional delivery and politics of being apolitical. On the border between the defamiliarized and the familiar, the non-verbal and the verbal, the sensible and the intelligible and the speakable and unspeakable, the Higher Brothers join this new global trend of mumble rap and emotive sound while exhibiting its uniqueness as a local response to the state censorship in China.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments for the revisions. I would also like to thank my students, especially Hoang Tran and Carl Liu, for their research assistance.

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Received 23 July 2020; Accepted 8 December 2020

## Notes

1. In this article, I use ‘ ’ and // respectively to indicate the use of modified pinyin and the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to represent the pronunciations of Chengdu dialect, which are based on Liang et al. (1998).
2. The format here is tone number (tone numerals, tone letter).
3. The English translation in parentheses is largely based on the Genius lyrics website.