

# Authorship construction and identity negotiation: A case study of Chinese Hip-hop singer GAI

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### Abstract:

Hip-hop culture, as one of the most popular youth cultures around the world, has followed a distinct developmental trajectory within China. Due to the conditioned incorporation, authorship construction and identity negotiation of hip-hop singers became a serious topic among scholars. As a highly representative hip-hop singer in China, GAI has gone through a complex career development. When he was underground, his revolt style was controversial among the public; after winning the championship of *The Rap of China*, his transition to China Chic and Jianghu Flow gains even more controversies about the “keep it real” hip-hop tradition; when he was further incorporated by mainstream, not only his authorship but also his construction of identity became more obscure. This article conducted a case study of GAI by searching comments of his fans and audiences and the interview of himself. Using textual analysis and critical discourse analysis, this article analyzed GAI’s famous works and the key comments and interviews. This study argues that the authorship of Chinese hip-hop singers is the outcome of the continuous construction and encoding by multiple power structures. The identity of Chinese hip-hop singers is being constantly constructed through media platforms, cultural governance, and audiences.

**Keywords:** Cultural studies; Hip-hop music; Authorship; Identity; The Rap of China; GAI

## 1. Introduction

As one of the most popular global youth cultures at present, hip-hop culture has a great influence around the world. In the 1970s, when the African-American community was confronted with rising unemploy-

ment rates and urban decline crises, hip-hop culture emerged on the streets of the Bronx in New York, USA. The African-American community resolved gang conflicts by holding neighborhood parties. The forms such as street dance and rap, which were included in these neighborhood parties, have gradually

evolved into an integral part of today's hip-hop culture. With the development of economic globalization and industrialization, hip-hop culture has become a way for young people around the world to resist mainstream culture and express their personal thoughts and emotions.

After hip-hop culture was introduced to China, a series of local adaptations occurred. In terms of form, the use of language in hip-hop music lyrics has seen a phenomenon of mixed usage of Mandarin, dialects, and even Chinese and English. In terms of content, Chinese hip-hop music exhibits a "de-politicized" characteristic. It focuses more on depicting local culture, social issues, as well as issues related to the growth and education of teenagers<sup>[1]</sup>.

With the development of the Internet, online platforms have become an important channel for the dissemination of hip-hop culture. However, they have also fundamentally reshaped Chinese hip-hop culture. In 2018, the launch of the commercial variety show *The Rap of China* (中国有嘻哈) marked that Chinese hip-hop culture officially entered mainstream society from the underground realm. But it also faced more "conditional" regulation from national policies<sup>[2]</sup>, which led to changes in the power structure within hip-hop culture. In the following years, hip-hop culture remained under strict government censorship. Therefore, during this period, hip-hop singers had to compromise and negotiate, attempting to be accepted by the mainstream society through the reconfiguration of their identities. After 2020, with the change in policies, hip-hop culture gained legitimacy at the national level, but whether the "keep it real" author function still exists is a question worth exploring.

As one of the double champions of *The Rap of China* in 2017, GAI's hip-hop skills have been widely recognized. At the same time, his "Jianghu Flow" folk rap style is unique and stands out among many rappers, forming its own school. However, after GAI entered the mainstream from the underground, his work styles have varied greatly, and his identity construction on various occasions such as the internet, interviews, and live performances has also undergone a series of changes. Therefore, this article will take GAI as a case to explore the authorship of Chinese hip-hop culture under the new context of commercialization and national governance, and in this process, how hip-hop singers construct their own identities.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 From subculture to hip-hop

Early hip-hop culture was often regarded as a kind of youth subculture. However, as hip-hop culture gradually developed and became mainstream, traditional subculture

theories have been unable to fully explain its current form. The study of subcultures has gone through stages from the Chicago School, the Birmingham School, post-subculture theories, to the digital and global era. The Chicago School was the starting point for early sociological discussions on subcultures. Subcultures were regarded as a deviation from the mainstream social order, but essentially they were judgments of subcultures from the perspective of mainstream society. The formation of the Birmingham School marked a significant milestone in the study of subcultures. Its representatives, such as Stuart Hall et al.<sup>[3]</sup> and Dick Hebdige et al.<sup>[4]</sup>, regarded subcultures as a symbolic "revolt" of working-class youth to the mainstream ideology. Young subcultures negotiated their class existence through "styles" created through mediums such as music, clothing, and dance. The challenge to hegemony represented by subcultures is not directly generated by subcultures themselves. Rather, it is indirectly manifested in their styles, specifically at the symbolic level<sup>[4]</sup>. The Birmingham School also pointed out that after the emergence of the revolt styles of subcultures, mainstream culture and interest groups would incorporate subcultures through commercialization and other means<sup>[5]</sup>. However, the purpose of individuals integrating into subcultures is not entirely out of revolt to the mainstream society; sometimes it is actually a pursuit of identity recognition. Therefore, the binary opposition viewpoint of the Birmingham School has limitations.

After the 1990s, scholars such as David Muggleton et al.<sup>[6]</sup> proposed the post-culture theory, reflecting on the class determinism and binary opposition model of the Birmingham School. Post-culture research emphasizes that subcultures are constructed and fluid, breaking away from the binary opposition perspective and gradually forming the concept of "de-centering", expanding the research perspective of subcultures. They believe that consumption rather than resistance, pleasure rather than politics are its main characteristics. Therefore, hip-hop culture gradually developed the decentralized post-culture features.

With the development of new media, the Internet and the spread of hip-hop on online platforms, hip-hop culture has taken on the characteristics of a network subculture. Chen et al.<sup>[7]</sup> proposed that discussing the incorporation of youth subculture from the perspectives of traditional ideology and commercial capital cannot fully reflect the influence of technology on subcultures in the Internet era. Discussing network subculture from the interaction among the state, the market, and individuals has greater contemporary value.

Hip-hop culture, as one of the most popular global youth cultures at present, has undergone a development process from being underground to mainstream, and from being

a local phenomenon in the United States to becoming a global trend.

In the West, hip-hop culture serves as a means for teenagers to resist the mainstream society, and it is highly rebellious and political. In the 1970s, the African American community was facing the crisis of rising unemployment and urban decline. Young people in the Bronx, New York, alleviated the violent conflicts among street gangs by organizing street parties featuring music and dance, and expressed their dissatisfaction with society<sup>[8]</sup>. As Tricia Rose et al.<sup>[9]</sup> pointed out, hip-hop culture is essentially a cultural response by black youth to structural inequality. Hip-hop culture mainly includes MC, DJ, b-boy, and graffiti. In the late 1970s, with the intervention of the record industry and mass media, the originally highly local and grassroots hip-hop culture gradually became commercialized and gradually accepted by American mainstream culture. Since then, with the development of economic globalization and industrialization, hip-hop culture has become a way for young people around the world to resist mainstream culture and express their personal thoughts and emotions.

However, in China, the introduction of hip-hop culture went through a tortuous process from underground to mainstream culture. Under the unique political environment and the manipulation of complex commercial platforms in China, hip-hop culture demonstrated strong localization and de-politicization as it gradually became incorporated into mainstream culture.

Hip-hop culture entered China through American movies in the 1980s, but its dissemination was limited and its acceptance was not high at that time. In the 1990s, Japanese and Korean idol variety shows and groups attracted many young Chinese fans, which led to the second large-scale introduction of hip-hop culture. The third wave of development of hip-hop culture occurred after 2000, when it was introduced by singers from Hong Kong and Taiwan in China and permeated into the youth entertainment culture. This development wave made hip-hop culture gradually tend towards local development: in terms of form, it is reflected in the use of Chinese and dialects, as well as language mixing phenomena; in terms of content, it is reflected in the description of local social life and culture, with the sharpness of criticism and political color significantly reduced, mainly focusing on issues related to the growth of teenagers, etc.<sup>[10]</sup>.

In 2017, with the broadcast of the variety show *The Rap of China*, hip-hop culture experienced another wave of development, presenting a distinct “de-politicization” characteristic. Wang et al.<sup>[11]</sup> pointed out that *The Rap of China* emphasized the professionalism and techniques of hip-hop, largely isolating politics, as well as content and even originality. However, this “de-politicized” expression

was not completely departed from political nature; instead, it adopted a way of not directly expressing political demands, and reflected on social issues in an implicit and indirect manner.

Luo and Ming et al.<sup>[12]</sup> pointed out that the mainstream development of Chinese hip-hop is not merely commercialization; rather, it is a “conditional incorporation” of hip-hop subculture by the state as the power entity, with digital platforms and commercial capital acting as intermediaries. After 2018, the Chinese government introduced many regulatory policies related to hip-hop culture. The State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPREF) emphasized the “four resolute prohibitions” standard at an internal meeting and clearly stipulated that artists with tattoos, those embodying hip-hop culture, subcultures (non-mainstream cultures), and mourning culture (degenerate culture) cannot be used<sup>[12]</sup>. The “Notice of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism on Further Strengthening the Management of the Performance Market” clearly stated that a key review of rap programs should be strengthened<sup>[13]</sup>. GAI, who won the championship of *The Rap of China* in 2017, was forced to withdraw from the recording of the program *Singers* before and after the introduction of the “four resolute prohibitions” policy<sup>[14]</sup>. The co-champion PG One was exposed for having lyrics in his early songs that were “negative energy” and was banned across the internet due to a scandal. These policy interventions forced hip-hop artists to strategically restructure their identities, transforming their past “revolt” image into a “positive energy” image that conforms to the core socialist values. After 2020, the Chinese government's regulation of hip-hop culture gradually returned to normalcy and standardization. With the introduction of the “14th Five-Year Plan for Cultural Development” by the state and the “Opinions of the Ministry of Commerce and 27 Other Departments on Promoting High-Quality Development of Foreign Cultural Trade”, the “cultural digitalization strategy” was clearly proposed. This marks that hip-hop culture can survive and develop on online platforms, but it is also the process of hip-hop culture being reconstructed by online platforms and algorithm structures.

In 2025, the proposal of “New Popular Art” by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China during the “15th Five-Year Plan” period meant that the current positioning of hip-hop culture had a new explanatory framework. As pointed out by Zeng et al.<sup>[15]</sup> and others, New Popular Art is a mass literary form that emerges under the drive of the Internet and algorithmic and platform technologies, where ordinary people widely participate in creation and presents characteristics of human-machine collaboration and form integration. While Li et al.<sup>[16]</sup>

further emphasized that New Popular Art is not a simple replacement of subculture, but a historical extension of the traditional Chinese mass culture in new media conditions, and its core still points to “people-orientedness” rather than a single technological form. In this definition, the mainstreamification of hip-hop culture on the Internet platform is no longer merely passive incorporation, but is re-integrated into a New Popular Art system based on the legitimacy of mass participation and the structure conditions of platforms and algorithms. Moreover, Chinese hip-hop culture has formed a unique cultural form through dialects and localized narratives. This represents that Chinese hip-hop culture is no longer simply learning and imitating Western culture, but has produced original cultural connotations. Therefore, the proposal of New Popular Art also promoted the “cultural export” strategy.

However, at the same time, this institutional absorption also reshapes the original style differences, critical expressions and identity politics of hip-hop through platform mechanisms and value orientations, making it face the internal tension of compressed expression boundaries and regulated subjectivity while obtaining cultural legitimacy.

## 2.2 Authorship and identity

The concept of identity originated from discussions in logic and philosophy. Later, identity was adopted by sociology and psychology as a research subject and was borrowed by communication studies. From the perspective of cultural studies, identity is constructed by difference and representation. Hall et al.<sup>[3]</sup> proposed that identity is the process by which individuals find their own position in a specific history, culture, and discourse. During this process, individuals self-represent through symbols (language, clothing, music preferences, etc.). In Chinese hip-hop culture, creators construct group boundaries through symbols (clothing, dialect, flow, etc.) to obtain their own identity.

At the same time, subculture groups construct group identity through “style” and “taste”. Subculture groups use “bricolage” to improvise and transform mainstream cultural symbols (Hebdige, 1979). Meanwhile, audiences distinguish social classes and gain group identity through “tastes”. With the development of internet platforms, the issue of identity in virtual communities also needs to be discussed. Turkle et al.<sup>[17]</sup> emphasized the “fluidity” and “multiplicity” of online identities. Identities have become dispersed, allowing for arbitrary splitting or recombination.

The discussion on “authorship” is regarded here as a sub-proposition of “identity recognition”. Andrew Sarris et al.<sup>[18]</sup> established the evaluation system of “author theory” in the field of film studies. His main viewpoint is that

to achieve “authorship” one must possess technical skills, personal style, and intrinsic meaning in the work. In the process of the localization development of Chinese hip-hop, the authorship of the creators is not only reflected in the proficient mastery of techniques such as flow, but also in the spiritual connotations of “revolt” and “individual expression”. Michel Foucault et al.<sup>[19]</sup> proposed the “author function”, emphasizing that the essence of authorship is a legitimacy label granted to the text by a social power system. The Chinese government’s regulation of hip-hop culture reflects the view of regarding the creators as an authorship entity that needs to be responsible for social influence. “Keep it real” in hip-hop is also an embodiment of authorship. Creators must construct a “real” image to cater to the audience, but “real” is not a fixed attribute; it is a result jointly constructed by social context, discourse competition, and cultural practice<sup>[20]</sup>. Tricia Rose et al.<sup>[9]</sup> pointed out that the authenticity of authorship comes from lived experience, that is, it must be consistent with one’s social position. She opposed the distortion of commercialization and emphasized community identity, and also proposed that music is a social testimony rather than just entertainment. However, this authenticity is also constructed; it is both a tool of cultural resistance and may become new norms and restrictions. Therefore, authenticity in hip-hop is both liberating and disciplinary.

Chinese scholars analyzed the self-construction of media identities of domestic hip-hop singers and proposed that authorship is jointly constructed by three factors: the online platforms, commercial capital, and state governance<sup>[21]</sup>. Firstly, hip-hop singers, through cross-media narrative strategies on online platforms and social media, construct different aspects of their own image in a targeted manner. Secondly, due to the manipulation of commercial capital, hip-hop singers inevitably amplify entertainment elements and suppress rebelliousness in the construction of their own image. This leads to the questioning and reflection of hip-hop singers on their own image, disrupting the consistency of image construction and resulting in fragmented, contradictory, and chaotic image construction and identity recognition. Finally, the incorporation of the mainstream ideology also prompts the reconfiguration of authorship. On the one hand, mass media creates an idealized image of hip-hop singers and consciously guides hip-hop culture towards a direction that conforms to the core values of society, thereby eliminating the resistant color of hip-hop culture. On the other hand, state governance regulates the words and deeds of hip-hop singers and artists through policies and regulations, achieving a deterrent effect. This process of reconfiguration of authorship although weakening the revolt of hip-hop culture, effectively incorporated it into mainstream culture and constitutes

a “China Chic” hip-hop culture.

Western scholars proposed that identity is not a background but is continuously constructed through language, style, and discourse practices<sup>[22]</sup>. The localization of hip-hop culture is not a replication of American hip-hop culture, but rather lies in how local youth select and incorporate language into the global hip-hop community (GHHN), and maintain or even reshape their local identity. Therefore, as an important medium for constructing identity, language is necessary to be studied in the context of Chinese hip-hop culture.

### 3. Methods

This research is mainly based on case studies, textual analysis, and critical discourse analysis(CDA). According to Yin et al.<sup>[23]</sup>, a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. In this study, we selected a Chinese hip-hop singer, GAI, as a research objects. To assure that this selection is not a random one but a typical consideration, here are the reasons of this selection.

First of all, GAI has a highly representative status in Chinese hip-hop culture. GAI was the champion of *The Rap of China*, a commercial TV show that emerged in the year 2017. This indicates his prominent status in the field of Chinese hip-hop culture. Moreover, he has a huge fan base, which, in turn, shows his influence towards young people and makes sure that the online resources are enough to conduct biographical approach and digital discourse analysis in this case study. Take the online platform Weibo as an example, GAI has over 11.6 million followers. Secondly, GAI went through the process of incorporation by both digital platform (media) and the censorship of the government, which can reflect the games of power between subculture, governance, and the commercial platforms. The conversion of his style of music and lyrics is an important aspect when understanding how his self-identity and authorship were reshaped under the circumstances of incorporation.

In GAI’s songs, Jianghu (a traditional Chinese concept referring to an alternative social space beyond the imperial bureaucracy, characterized by chivalry, wandering swordsmen, and informal codes of conduct) and marketplace atmosphere are distinctive elements that showcase the author’s identity of traditional local culture. The content of the lyrics often uses traditional Chinese proverbs and characters in historical novels to connect with the audience.

Thus, selecting GAI as a research object in a case study is

necessary since he occupies a significant status in Chinese hip-hop and has significant ways of self-identity construction. Through analyzing the materials, we can understand how hip-hop singers can reflect the contrast and compromise between subculture, government censorship, and digital platforms.

Textual analysis is a methodology that involves understanding language, symbols, and/or pictures present in texts to gain information regarding how people make sense of and communicate life and life experiences<sup>[24]</sup>. This method goes beyond surface description to explore how texts reflect and construct social meanings.

In this study, textual analysis is adopted as the primary method for examining song lyrics. Unlike surface description, textual analysis allows the researcher to identify recurring patterns, metaphorical structures, narrative strategies, and semantic codes that reflect both individual artistic inventions and broader cultural context. The lyrics of GAI serve as rich textual materials, as they reflect individual identity, cultural values, and social issues.

I chose GAI’s songs according to different phases of his career development. During the underground period (2015), *The Gangsta*(超社会) is a significant work of GAI since it shows the original authorship that GAI has constructed as a hip-hop singer. During the process of him entering the mainstream (2018), I chose *Ascetic Monk*(苦行僧), *One Hundred and Eight*(一百零八), and *Empty City Strategy*(空城计) as the representatives of GAI’s Jianghu Flow style and China Chic Rap. After the conditional incorporation by commercialization and the state’s censorship, GAI composed *Huaxia*(华夏) and *Nezha*(哪吒) to reform his authorship. In all of these songs, I selected a few lines of lyrics that are important to understand the formation of authorship and the construction of identity.

Critical discourse analysis is concerned with studying and analyzing written and spoken texts to reveal the discursive sources of power, dominance, inequality, and bias, and how these sources are maintained and reproduced within specific social, political, and historical contexts<sup>[25]</sup>. In order to collect the comments on GAI in a comprehensive and objective way, I looked at the comments under GAI’s Weibo account. Unfortunately, due to the platform’s policy and algorithm, users can filter the comment to control the public opinion, and thus most of the comments are positive in attitude and lack the comprehensive interpretation and criticism of the artist, which is not objective enough for critical discourse analysis. Thus, I turned to using keywords searching as a way to find the controversial events and the comments under them.

In the critical discourse analysis, I searched for comments on Weibo from January 20 to March 21, and I selected 79

comments in total and specifically analyzed 7 comments which are important to understand the negotiation between GAI and the audience and fans. Besides, through the platforms Bilibili, Renmin Net, Forbes China, Souhu, Jiemian, and Pengpai, I selected 10 interviews of GAI and picked out 6 of them for analyzing.

## 4. The Construction and Negotiation of Authorship and Identity

### 4.1 The “de-politicization” of Chinese hip-hop culture

In this study, within the case study of GAI, based on the life stories of GAI’s characters, I explored whether the process of subculture being incorporated showed a trend from “bottom-up” to “top-down”. This part of the content will be interpreted through the analysis of GAI’s life stories and interview materials, regarding the development process of his China Chic rap and the influence of cultural governance on it.

In the 1970s, the African American community was confronted with the crises of rising unemployment and urban decline. Young people in the Bronx, New York, through organizing street parties featuring music and dance, alleviated the violent conflicts among street gangs and expressed their dissatisfaction with society, thus giving birth to hip-hop culture<sup>[8]</sup>. As a structural marginalized group in the United States, although the African American community gained legal equality through the civil rights movement, they still faced systematic exclusion in economic, educational, political and social-cultural aspects. These survival predicaments gave rise to the early hip-hop culture’s strong characteristics of social criticism, identity struggle, and street narrative. In the 1990s, gangster rap became a commercial mainstream by depicting real life in the slums<sup>[26]</sup>. This genre was highly “social” and “grassroots”, becoming the main style type that Chinese hip-hop singers imitated after the globalization of hip-hop. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, hip-hop was officially introduced to China. During the localization and mainstreaming process of hip-hop culture in China, extremely contradictory forms emerged: it was both a “cool culture” under consumerism and still had a “grassroots nature”. Overall, after hip-hop was introduced to China, it went through a process of “de-politicization” and “symbolization”. The “de-politicization” of Chinese hip-hop culture lies in that its lyrics content does not directly engage in social criticism and identity struggle, but instead, it expresses personal feelings, cultural identity, and positive energy through a way that emphasizes professional technicality<sup>[11]</sup>. However,

the “grassroots nature” of Chinese hip-hop was not eliminated by “de-politicization”, but transformed from an explicit antagonistic form to a hidden narrative form. This narrative expression made Chinese hip-hop singers focus on grassroots life, using the real predicaments of ordinary people as the entry point to resonate with the audience.

GAI, as a representative figure of Chinese hip-hop culture, has also played a leading and innovative role in terms of style. His original “China Chic rap” first stood out in the TV show *The Rap of China*, enabling him to win the championship; subsequently, with his unique singing style and lyrics content, he gained widespread popularity among the public in China. From his early underground period to his current complete mainstream and commercialization, throughout this process, he has constantly demonstrated various controversies and complex identities. At the level of subculture narrative, his narrative style has gradually transformed from the initially highly “grassroots” style to a “positive energy” narrative that promotes cultural identity and national identity.

In 1987, GAI was born in Weiyuan County<sup>[27]</sup>, a small energy city in southern Sichuan Province which was mainly dominated by mineral resource-based industries in the 1980s<sup>[28]</sup>. At the time, the county’s towns, villages, and mining areas were mixed, and markets and factories were interwoven. The pace of life was slow but the pressure was high, and the local atmosphere was very lively. It was the growth experience in this small city that shaped GAI’s initial local and grassroots characteristics. When GAI was in junior high school, he got bullied at school, but the teacher did not handle the problem directly. From then on, GAI followed the big brothers in society to start fighting and brawling. This growth environment made GAI have social experience very early, and also laid the foundation for the “martial arts style” of GAI’s later hip-hop works. In 2015, GAI wrote his breakthrough song *The Gangsta(超社会)* on the spot. In the Sichuan dialect, 超社会 (Chao SheHui) means to be involved in society. The lyrics consist of a large amount of Chongqing dialect, martial arts slang, and street vernacular, and have a very local characteristic<sup>[29]</sup>. The lyrics describe the street scenes and rebellious postures of the lower-class people, forming a strong grassroots nature. At the same time, the lyrics present the survival predicaments, underground rules, and resistance to the mainstream order of young people at the periphery of society in an extremely realistic way, thus having strong sociality and revolt. The theme and technical expression of *Super Society* made the rap circle unable to ignore it. GAI’s Weibo fans quickly rose to tens of thousands, and the GOSH label also gained popularity because of this song. At the same time, due to the overly explicit lyrics, it was soon removed from various music

websites and platforms.

GAI enjoys pop music. In 2006, Pepsi-Cola held a new star singing competition. GAI won the championship of the Chongqing region by performing Jay Chou's *Huo Yuan Jia* (霍元甲). Jay Chou, as a representative figure who promoted the "third wave" of Chinese hip-hop, incorporated a large number of Chinese cultural elements into his hip-hop songs and the content was free of vulgar words, becoming GAI's childhood idol. The influence of Jay Chou on GAI was undoubtedly significant. GAI expressed his love for Jay Chou in the 2020 TV show *Mars Intelligence Bureau*<sup>[30]</sup>. In an interview, GAI once said that in the lyrics of "Sang Huixian" he sang in "China Has Hip-Hop", "CTRAP" (Chinese Trap) represented a kind of hip-hop school he created. "This style originated from hip-hop, but it is not hip-hop; it is mine," he said in an interview<sup>[31]</sup>.

In 2017, GAI shone brightly on *The Rap of China* program, sharing the championship with PGone. During the competition, GAI's "China Chic rap" style became increasingly prominent. In songs like *Ascetic Monk* (苦行僧) and *One Hundred and Eight* (一百零八), GAI continued to use the Chongqing dialect as the main rap language while incorporating a large number of elements from traditional culture and Chinese history. These national style elements combined with GAI's "social" characteristics formed GAI's distinctive and unique Jianghu Flow style (also mentioned earlier as CTRAP). With GAI's championship win on *The Rap of China* program, he officially moved from an underground singer to the mainstream and entered the public's view. According to an interview, GAI donated all of the 1 million RMB in championship prize money to the "Hope Project Happy Music Classroom" project in Southwest China<sup>[31]</sup>. GAI believed that this behavior represented an attitude and his "bottom-up" vision for mainstream development.

Luo and Ming et al.<sup>[2]</sup> regarded *The Rap of China* as a watershed in the development of Chinese hip-hop culture. At the subculture narrative level, since the broadcast of this program, Chinese hip-hop culture has entered the mainstream culture. At the same time, this has also led to the deconstruction within the hip-hop culture: unlike the long-term evolution process of Western hip-hop commercialization, *The Rap of China* has marked the boundary between underground restricted production and mainstream large-scale production. This has triggered the struggle of the internal power structure of hip-hop singers, and was most evident in the online platform comments at the time of the program's broadcast. At the national governance level, it was also a turning point for the central government to replace the mandatory regulatory special alternative cultural policies with alternative policies. It proved that through

online platforms and market operations, marginalized subcultures can be transformed into controlled mainstream cultures. Based on the "incorporation" concept first proposed by the Birmingham School in the UK<sup>[4]</sup>, Luo and Ming et al.<sup>[2]</sup> formed a new interpretation of "conditional incorporation" in the Chinese context - that is, by replacing commercial and ideological incorporation with an alternative censorship mechanism.

However, the 2018 PG One scandal incident crossed the red line of this conditional incorporation approach, forcing the Chinese government to strengthen its supervision of hip-hop culture. The State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television emphasized the "four strict no-use" standards at an internal meeting and clearly stipulated that artists with tattoos, those representing hip-hop culture, subculture (non-mainstream culture), or mourning culture (degenerate culture) cannot use<sup>[12]</sup>. In the same year, when GAI participated in the recording of *Singers*, due to the involvement of the PG One scandal and the discovery of negative energy information in the lyrics of *The Gansta*, GAI was forced to withdraw from this program. At the same time, GAI immediately changed his original name "GAI 爷只认钱" (GAI who only cares about money) to "GAI Zhouyuan" (GAI's Chinese name) on Weibo. On May 22<sup>nd</sup>, GAI released the single *万里长城* (*Ten Thousand Li Great Wall*), praising the heroic soldiers who defend the country. This "positive energy" identity construction also reflects the characteristic of artists actively conforming to the mainstream under strong policy censorship.

On April 20, 2019, GAI released the song *华夏* (*Huaxia*). Its music video was reposted by the Communist Youth League Central Committee's Weibo account and received high praise. In August, the Communist Youth League Central Committee and the Central Cyberspace Administration jointly awarded the "China Young Netizen of Good Conduct" prize, and GAI received the "Outstanding Story Award"<sup>[32]</sup>. Therefore, the narrative of hip-hop subculture actually follows a process led by the conditional incorporation from the top-down by the state, and is coordinated with the bottom-up active integration into the mainstream by hip-hop singers.

After 2020, the Chinese government's regulation of hip-hop culture gradually returned to a normal and standardized state. With the introduction of the "14th Five-Year Cultural Development Plan"<sup>[33]</sup> of the country and the "Opinions of the Ministry of Commerce and Other 27 Departments on Promoting High-Quality Development of Foreign Cultural Trade"<sup>[34]</sup>, the "Digitalization Strategy for Culture" was clearly proposed. This indicates that the governance level of the country is gradually relaxing its interference in hip-hop culture and reinterpreting it

through digital media platforms. This process has made the previously subversive subculture become a part of China's national cultural soft power.

In 2025, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China proposed "New Popular Art" in its "15th Five-Year Plan"<sup>[35]</sup>, which provided a new interpretative framework for the current positioning of hip-hop culture. Firstly, the proposal of New Popular Art indicates a shift in the form of cultural production from being dominated by artists to "mass participation". As Wang et al.<sup>[36]</sup> pointed out, one characteristic of New Popular Art is the transformation from "receiving the masses from a single dimension" to "a dual-dimensional 'creation - reception' of the masses". Taking the rise of short-video platforms as an example, the masses not only watch videos but also become video creators. Therefore, hip-hop culture can leverage the influence of digital platforms to enable the masses to participate in cultural creation and narrative. Secondly, the transformation of hip-hop culture from "underground culture" to "digital platform culture" corresponds to the emphasis of New Popular Art on the reshaping of literary forms through media technology. This transformation has prevented hip-hop culture from existing as an underground culture that resists the mainstream, but instead has allowed it to be disseminated on digital platforms as a digital platform culture that has been conditionally incorporated by the mainstream, becoming a form of mass practice. Finally, New Popular Art emphasizes cultural confidence and local innovation. This hip-hop culture, which incorporates dialects and unique Chinese narratives, has become a distinctive cultural symbol. It has abandoned the simplistic model of learning and imitating Western hip-hop culture and, through the "cultural export" strategy, has spread China's unique culture overseas, becoming a manifestation of soft power.

Therefore, from a macro perspective, the development of Chinese hip-hop culture has gone through three stages: from underground culture to mainstream culture and then to digital platform culture. During this process, the conditional incorporation of subcultures generally followed a coordinated development trend where the state top-down took the lead and hip-hop artists from bottom-up adapted and integrated. Hip-hop culture gradually moved from being an edge subculture to becoming mainstream, and through incorporating China's unique cultural narratives, it became a part of cultural soft power. During this development, national culture actually serves as a tool and technical means for the state to rationalize subcultures in its governance; it is a medium through which cultural identity is promoted and subcultures are conditionally incorporated. However, during the process of subculture incorporation, how hip-hop singers gradually construct

their authorship under the influence of mainstream culture and how their identity is constructed remain unresolved issues.

#### 4.2 Constructing authorship through style and meaning

The process of GAI's ascent from underground to mainstream involved the incorporation of various forces such as commercialization and state governance. This would result in differences in the authorship construction of his works.

Andrew Sarris et al.<sup>[18]</sup> proposed that to achieve authorship, a work must possess technical competence, personal style, and intrinsic meaning. Technical competence serves as the threshold for authorship, and this aspect will not be discussed in this article. From the perspectives of GAI's success in hip-hop competitions in China, his long-term active participation in the mainstream music industry at an industrialized level, and the evaluations from industry insiders, GAI's control over Flow, the arrangement of rhymes, and his on-stage performance ability have all become the foundation of his creative process, no longer serving as variables that distinguish his unique authorship. Therefore, this article will focus on analyzing "personal style" and "intrinsic meaning" to observe how GAI's authorship is formed and transformed.

"Style" is a crucial factor for hip-hop artists to establish their authorship. The Birmingham School's Hebdige et al.<sup>[4]</sup> has already provided a detailed explanation of the formation of style. He discussed styles as "bricolage", "revolt", "homology", and "incorporation" separately. Bricolage is the process of removing everyday objects from their original context and giving them new meanings. In the context of GAI, these everyday objects can be elevated to become linguistic and local cultural symbols. Revolt is a form of resistance by the youth working class against the mainstream order, which is very obvious in GAI's early works. However, with the process of mainstreaming and commercialization, GAI's works gradually began to cater to the mainstream and the market, becoming more in line with the popular aesthetic and cultural narrative. Homology emphasizes the symbolic fit between the group's lifestyle and specific symbols and musical forms. GAI incorporated his experiences from the underground period into the lyrics narrative, achieving a symbolic fit with young people in modern society.

GAI has developed its unique style by integrating local elements and China Chic rap based on personal experiences. This unique style encompasses its inherent meaning (although this meaning is relatively fluid). These represent the symbols of local culture, as Hall et al.<sup>[37]</sup> puts it, by en-

coding these local cultural symbols, thereby giving them new meanings. In GAI's early works, this encoding usually had a revolt feature. However, after the mainstream process of national regulation and commercialization, this revolt gradually weakened, and the homology feature oriented towards group values significantly strengthened. At the same time, the cultural symbols used by GAI for bricolage were re-encoded at the national level under the background of conditional incorporation, allowing GAI's China Chic rap to transform from a risky subculture into a positive energy product. With the support of the new mass art policy, it has become a carrier for promoting cultural confidence.

GAI reinterprets Chinese traditional culture and local cultural symbols through the method of bricolage, thereby giving them new meanings. In this process, GAI actually constructs a set of hip-hop symbol systems with local cultural characteristics. The bricolage proposed by Hebdige is not limited to the use of a single symbol, but rather a continuous cultural practice - constantly recombining symbols from different contexts to form a new system of meanings. The Jianghu Flow and the China Chic styles of GAI have continuity and are important ways for GAI to construct authoriality through bricolage. In GAI's works, the main collage elements are divided into: a) local culture; b) China Chic/jianghu ethics; c) Chinese traditional culture.

In *The Gangsta*<sup>[29]</sup>, GAI extensively employs the Chongqing dialect and martial arts narrative. Here, language serves as a tool for constructing identity, and also functions as a cultural symbol, giving GAI a highly distinctive authorial identity. Phrases such as “qi kan” (starting, the lowest point), “ha ma bi” (idiot), etc. are all part of the Chongqing and Sichuan dialects. Moreover, elements like “pulling out a Zhonghua cigarette”, “paying respects to Guan Er-ge”, and “having a dragon shoulder tattoo” are not only national style elements but also the revolt of the mainstream social order by reflecting the living conditions of the lower classes and narrating folk culture and martial arts ethics.

During the *The Rap of China* era, GAI officially established the C-Trap genre of China Chic. Songs such as *Ascetic Monk* (苦行僧), *One Hundred and Eight* (一百零八), and *Empty City Strategy* (空城计) extensively incorporated elements of Chinese traditional culture and combined with the dialect of Chongqing, creating a distinctive style in Chinese hip-hop culture. For instance, *One Hundred and Eight* borrowed a story from *Water Margin*, combining the loyalty and righteousness of the heroes in the story with the social experiences of the artist, thus forming the Jianghu Flow rap style.

Through the conditional incorporation of national gover-

nance and commercial platforms, the authorial nature of GAI has undergone a transformation. After 2019, as the state strengthened its supervision over hip-hop culture, the bricolage objects of GAI also shifted towards national cultural symbols and traditional culture. Taking *Huaxia* as an example, lyrics such as “It's not a waste for the soul to enter Huaxia” and “How should we praise the sweat of the working people” were narrated from a grand perspective of the state, replacing the criticism of social reality with the sentiment of praising the motherland. *Nezha*, as the theme song of a film with the same name, reinterpreted the character image of Nezha from traditional Chinese mythology. Through the first-person narrative perspective, the fate of Nezha was closely linked to the emotional core of the audience. “Then let me remain in this world for one more life, not understanding has happened more than once. Then let me make the final bet, not wanting to spend every day in the dimness.” Taking these four lines as an example, the emotional core of “fighting against fate” demonstrates a determination to change one's living situation, which is highly consistent with the pursuit of personal value realization by young people in modern society, and is a concrete manifestation of homology.

This style transformation has sparked some controversy among GAI's fan base. Various voices emerged on the internet: some criticized him for not being “real” enough and being too commercialized. During the transition from underground to mainstream, GAI seemed to lose his “street charm” and turned to more grand concepts as the narrative objects. However, GAI himself clarified in an interview, “I think it's mainly that my state of mind and the environment I'm in have changed, and the creation comes from life.”<sup>[38]</sup> In another interview, GAI believed that facing one's own life situation truthfully is the true “real”<sup>[39]</sup>. Tricia Rose et al.<sup>[9]</sup> pointed out that the essence of “keep it real” is to reflect the author's real social situation and avoid the distortion caused by commercialization. However, this style change was influenced by the cultural governance environment of the subculture. The core and intrinsic meaning of the China Chic style did not undergo a fundamental change; it was only the governance of the state towards the subculture that led to a change in the encoding of the original symbols.

The negotiation and mediation at the scene (livehouse and the “on-site” of live shows and variety programs) have become the key to constructing authorship. In the context of live music, authorship does not merely stem from the work itself, but is constantly produced and confirmed in specific performance scenarios. As Luo et al.<sup>[40]</sup> pointed out, the live music space is a “meaning production” scene composed of audiences, performers, and various objects. During the interactive participation, the audience jointly

constructs the meaning and emotional value of the music with the singer. In this process, authenticity also comes from the scene. Therefore, the scene is not only a place for music presentation, but also an important mechanism for the perception, verification, and continuous reproduction of the artist's authorship.

As early as during the underground period, GAI was performing in various bars in Chongqing. This period was GAI's "hip-hop enlightenment" and also a crucial time for him to establish his own authorship. Therefore, the on-site condition cannot be ignored; instead, it has become a key element in building authorship. However, since standing on the stage of *The Rap of China*, GAI has been more active in front of the audience and fans through various online platforms. He showcases his works through various variety shows and talent competitions. This has expanded the core issue of the online platform as a medium: it has a delay. This delay is inevitable, as the singer on stage cannot have timely interaction and quick resonance with the audience on the screen, resulting in a break in emotions. This is why many fans criticize GAI's songs on online platforms but still get infected by his concerts. The advantage of live house lies in the timeliness of interaction, that is, the audience and the singer can establish practice in spatial position, so that psychologically they are no longer disconnected, making it easier for them to resonate, and facilitating the singer to create an atmosphere. At the same time, most of the programs broadcast on online platforms have pre-set scripts and rules, which will reduce the audience's trust in the singer. In contrast, live house concerts, the audience tends to think that this performance style is more real and real. This is because in live house, the singer's identity is unified rather than fragmented, and their music and authorship are matched.

However, at the *2025 Singer* show venue, another highly controversial behavior of GAI emerged - constantly challenging the normative space. During the performance of *Mountain City Bandits* (山城棒棒军), he improvised and changed the lyrics, expressing dissatisfaction multiple times throughout the performance. First, he shouted: "Today, this song won't have high notes, no melody, and no pitch. You guys don't need to judge me anymore." During the interlude, he said: "I've competed for nine episodes. This round is the first time I truly understand that no matter who votes for me, there's no way to make me happy. Remember, being yourself is truly satisfying." The melodic singing style was abandoned, and the word "I" in the lyrics was all replaced with the straightforward "I", with the improvised rhythm making the subtitles unable to keep up. Finally, at the end of the song, he shouted: "Singer? Of course I'm a singer, I'm a Chinese rap singer! Let's meet on the spot!" This loud "See you on the spot!" was

an unapologetic call for a personal concert<sup>[41]</sup>. This show actually contains rules and order, and GAI's act of actively breaking the rules and resisting the order here precisely proves that his authorial nature has not been eliminated; instead, it has been emphasized once again.

### 4.3 Negotiating the construction of identity

Regarding the construction of identity, it actually falls under a general proposition of authorship. Identity is the origin of authorship construction, and authorship is also an expression of identity. If authorship is dominated by the singer and influenced by the cultural governance environment, then the construction of identity will be influenced by the joint actions of the audience. Below, we will analyze the dialogues and negotiations between GAI and his fans in some major events and explore how GAI's identity is constructed.

Since GAI did not directly reply to the comments, this article will analyze his attitude towards different comments in the interview as a way to understand the communication and negotiation between him and his fans.

#### 4.3.1 Controversy over The Gangsta

After GAI won the championship on *The Rap of China*, he transformed from an underground artist to a public figure. His early work *The Gangsta* was unearthed by fans and the public, triggering significant controversy. This song, in plain Sichuan-Chongqing dialect, vividly depicted the living conditions of the lower-class people in society. Due to its rough lyrics and the presence of a street-like wildness, it was criticized as "lowbrow", "disgusting" (Weibo, 21-5-7), "destroying one's moral standards" (Weibo, 21-5-8), and some even said he "successfully rehabilitated" himself through the program (Weibo, 25-6-15). However, others expressed an approving attitude towards his works: "I like it. It's truly something that ordinary people can't write. The words like 'gai' (past and present) are not something that most people can come up with. Because he is now at a higher level, so if you look at his previous works, even if someone else did the translation, you could still get something similar. Because basically every rapper starts by writing about drugs, gambling, and prostitution. Even so, Gai's words are more memorable to you. This is his strength." (Weibo, 25-6-15)

"The song *The Gangsta* is undoubtedly a true reflection of the past Chongqing and Sichuan regions. If you take the time to learn about what those regions were like in the past, you won't be so talkative here. It's chaotic, there are too many "social deviants", and everywhere is "riffraff". I'm not saying that this song is praise-worthy, but it is very realistic. This is also the dark history of Chongqing, and it's something that shouldn't be easily forgotten."

(Weibo, 25-6-15)

From the conversations in these comments, it can be seen that the critical comments against GAI mainly focused on the content and values of the work. The core reason for considering its content as vulgar is that the commenters evaluated the work within the framework of mainstream morality, with an analytical attitude and perspective. Those who expressed approval were not agreeing with the attitude and values of this song, but rather affirming its hip-hop techniques and reflection of social reality. This actually reflects the cognitive differences between mainstream culture and subculture. In hip-hop culture, “keep it real” is regarded as an important evaluation criterion for the authenticity of artists. As Tricia Rose et al.<sup>[9]</sup> pointed out, authenticity does not mean conforming to mainstream moral standards, but requires the creator to be able to truly reflect the social environment they are in.

In this study, although both positive and negative comments were screened, from the overall data, both subjective and objective, positive comments were far more than negative comments. This means that the audience has gradually recognized GAI’s authenticity through negotiation and dialogue, rather than making judgments from a moral high ground. This also indicates that GAI’s early identity recognition has gradually been constructed as a “true street storyteller”. More importantly, the dialogues and negotiations between fans and the general public also participated in the construction of this identity.

#### 4.3.2 Controversy from the mainstream and the underground

However, after GAI won the championship in *The Rap of China*, there were also comments denying the authenticity of GAI. Most of these comments believed that GAI’s participation in *The Rap of China* as a way to “whiten” himself was an insufficiently genuine manifestation, and the purpose was to actively cater to the mainstream for commercial purposes:

“Hey, Gai is just a fake. Even if there’s a conflict and he doesn’t respond with a diss, he still acts as a whistleblower. All we can say is that he’s an excellent singer.” (Weibo, 26-5-20)

“A good representative rapper from Chongqing has now become a singer? Where’s the authenticity? Hasn’t he forgotten his original purpose? Haha” (Weibo, 18-1-20)

These comments suggest that GAI has lost its grassroots, life-oriented narrative style and its “authenticity” during the process of mainstreaming. In response to this, GAI addressed the issue in an interview:

“Nowadays, there are a lot of voices on the internet, but when creating, one must also have their own ideas. One cannot change themselves just because of others. One

must stick to what one is doing. One cannot force the audience to unanimously agree. You have your own standards, and he has his own feelings. The mindset doesn’t have any impact. I won’t deny myself or become arrogant because of others’ evaluations. Regarding music creation, I first focus on myself and also listen to the outside voices. Of course, I also hope that my music can be accepted by more listeners<sup>[38]</sup>.”

“Don’t talk to me about the ‘Keep Real’ stuff. Face your own life situation honestly. That is what true means. You say I’ve changed. Are you still me? Do you know what I’ve gone through to achieve all this?<sup>[39]</sup>”

From these responses, it is easy to see that GAI always believed that the change in his artistic style was due to the difference in his identity positioning. During the underground period, he could unreservedly rebel against the mainstream order and create extremely explicit and rough lyrics. However, after mainstreaming, his situation changed, and thus his identity also changed. He believes that he is no longer an underground rapper but has transformed into a commercial singer. This kind of adjusting the content of the work due to changes in personal circumstances is acceptable because truly reflecting the social environment in which one is situated is the essential requirement of authenticity.

In the context of hip-hop culture, the underground identity is often regarded as an important source of authenticity. After GAI became mainstream and gained increasing popularity, some underground rappers criticized him, claiming that he had compromised for commercial interests. Many hip-hop artists such as Ma Siwei and MC Guanggu also created songs to diss GAI.

In response to the mockery and criticism from the underground rappers, he said in an interview with People’s Daily:

“I was already famous underground. I could have stayed underground, but I didn’t, right? It’s because I didn’t have the money. The market is much larger now. In fact, they can support themselves now. But it’s not as prosperous as we are on the stage right now. They will definitely get support.<sup>[42]</sup>”

In this interview, GAI provided a new interpretation of authenticity. He did not deny his commercialization efforts, but instead pointed out that underground singers remained underground because of the lack of market opportunities. He believed that expanding the market could provide a larger space for the development of hip-hop culture and music artists. Therefore, he reinterpreted the “betrayal” mentioned by other rappers as a realistic choice. This new interpretation of authenticity has also become an important marker to distinguish Chinese hip-hop culture from Western hip-hop culture.

As mentioned earlier, Western hip-hop culture, due to its relatively open social and cultural environment, has developed through a process of gradually commercialization while resisting the mainstream. However, this approach does not work in the Chinese context. If hip-hop artists merely pursue resistance, they will not gain recognition from the mainstream society, and thus cannot be commercialized or gain a larger market. In the context of Chinese mainstream culture being a conditional incorporation, only by actively adapting to these rules and order can one secure sufficient space for the development of hip-hop culture, be accepted by the mainstream, and be seen by more young people. GAI's career development precisely confirms this development pattern, and also indicates that GAI holds a pioneering and avant-garde position in Chinese hip-hop culture, and constitutes a part of his identity. As expressed in his song *Ascetic Monk*: "The pioneers who blaze the trail must break the old rules"<sup>[43]</sup>. This shows that GAI not only considers himself a hip-hop singer or rapper, but also has more grand and ambitious ideas - to become a pioneer of Chinese hip-hop culture.

Overall, the controversy from the mainstream and the underground mainly focuses on whether GAI has remained "real" after commercialization. The negotiations between GAI, his fans, audiences, and underground rappers are the key elements that constructed GAI's identity. Audiences and underground rappers consider GAI's commercialization as an act of "selling out" of the hip-hop culture. However, this does not affect the fact that GAI's authenticity still can be explained. It is these controversies themselves that ultimately shaped GAI's unique identity.

#### 4.3.3 Creating identities through various forms of media

While being interviewed on CCTV's website, he also made intense comments on commercial songs on Weibo: "I'm not playing the underground game anymore. You guys are the most professional, the most powerful, and the most popular. I'll give you a round of applause. My commercial songs are numerous. Commercial songs are enough for an entire album."<sup>[44]</sup>

From this comment and the above interview, it can be seen that GAI's attitude and expression style vary greatly when interacting in different media and facing different audiences. In interviews with mainstream media, he tends to explain the rationality of commercialization in a rational manner; while on social media platforms such as Weibo, he responds to criticism in more emotional language. This difference reflects his identity performance strategies in different discourse environments. Domestic scholar Ma Zhonghong et al.<sup>[21]</sup> proposed that hip-hop singers, on online platforms and social media, through cross-media

narrative strategies, construct different aspects of their own image. His research summarized several forms of self-identity construction, namely "ideal self", "mysterious self", "authentic self", and "contradictory self". Excluding the "ideal self" and "mysterious self" which are very inconsistent with GAI's situation, but this study found that the "authentic self" and "contradictory self" could not well reflect GAI's identity construction.

"The authentic self is consistent with the original cultural spirit of hip-hop culture: on the one hand, hip-hop singers follow the hedonistic principle and showcase their self-desires and emotional needs; on the other hand, hip-hop singers present a rational and reflective image of a social critic." The social critic image he proposed lies in emphasizing the struggles of hip-hop singers - resisting commercialization and encountering unfair treatment. However, in the case study of GAI, GAI actively accommodates the mainstream and participates in commercialization, and does not consider himself to have received unfair treatment. "The contradictory self" is manifested as inconsistency and self-contradiction, but GAI has always maintained sincerity towards himself and the audience. He acknowledges his mainstream development, does not deny the transformation of authorship, and follows his own interpretation of "keep it real". He merely expresses through cross-media narrative strategies, and the expression style varies in different media. This precisely indicates the limitations of quantitative research for career-hungry hip-hop singers with complex careers, and proves the necessity of this case study.

GAI has constructed his unique identity through cross-media narrative strategies. However, the reason for using this strategy for narration still needs to be discussed. The following will attempt to analyze the specific reasons.

The differences in GAI's expression style stem from his creation of a dual self-identity. In an interview, GAI discussed his thoughts on the different identity identities he held when he was "GAI" and "Zhou Yan" (the original name):

"My father taught me since childhood that you should act in a certain way towards different people in different situations. When the time came, I recalled what my father had told me about how to deal with different people to make them feel comfortable and that you are an appropriate person. But GAI doesn't care about that much. I think GAI is a person shaped by the kind of upbringing I received. There is always a voice in my mind telling me that if it were me, then I would do this, but GAI might not allow you to do so. I think GAI's personality is something that hip-hop brought to me after I was exposed to it."<sup>[45]</sup>

From this, it can be seen that GAI himself regards "GAI" and "Zhou Yan" as two distinct identity roles. The iden-

tity of “GAI” was constructed by him after coming into contact with hip-hop culture, and thus only constitutes a part of his identity. This part dominated in the early underground period and became the basis of his style of resisting the mainstream order. However, during the process of mainstreamization, his identity more inclined towards the proper and well-educated “Zhou Yan” identity, which is why fans and audiences can feel such a strong contrast. Nevertheless, the identity of “GAI” has never been eliminated by the mainstreamization process. Instead, it was transformed into another form during the mainstreaming process - it was integrated into GAI’s creation and performance, becoming an integral part of his authorial identity. Therefore, the transition of GAI from its underground period to the mainstream period was not a simple oppositional relationship, but rather a continuous process of negotiation. During this process, GAI’s identity was constantly changing, rather than being a simple “contradictory self”. He used the cross-media narrative strategy to construct his unique identity. It also indicates that media themselves could affect the way of identity construction of hip-hop singers.

## 5. Conclusion

This study indicates that the development of hip-hop culture in China is not merely the result of commercialization, but is a process of mutual negotiation and evolution among national governance, media structure, and subcultural narrative. During this development process, the formation of the authorial style of hip-hop singers, as well as the construction and negotiation of identity, has created new mechanisms. The authorship of Chinese hip-hop singers is the outcome of the continuous construction and encoding by multiple power structures. The identity of Chinese hip-hop singers is being constantly constructed and negotiated through media platforms, cultural governance, and audiences.

From a macro perspective, hip-hop culture in China has gone through three logical stages: the underground period of marginal revolt - the conditional incorporation into the mainstream - and the digital platform governance. During the underground period, hip-hop culture was less influenced by state governance, so hip-hop artists generally emphasized their resistance to the mainstream order and expression of their own emotions through a very rebellious style. During this period, live house served as the main medium and also shaped this interactive and highly rebellious authorial style. At this time, hip-hop culture was in a marginal revolt logic. The broadcast of *The Rap of China* marked the official mainstreaming of hip-hop culture in China and also marked the beginning of its con-

ditional incorporation into commercial platforms and state governance. From 2018 to 2019, the tolerance of the government towards hip-hop culture was relatively low. Although hip-hop culture entered the mainstream and gained public attention, it still remained in a marginal position in cultural governance. The operation of commercial platforms indicated that hip-hop culture merely existed as a conditionally incorporated subculture. After 2020, national policies gradually relaxed and the development space for hip-hop culture gradually expanded. The prosperity of digital media platforms also promoted the dissemination of hip-hop culture, expanding this cultural form to a broader range of fields within the context of New Popular Art, and involving the public in the construction and dissemination of culture.

In summary, the development of hip-hop culture in China has distinct characteristics compared to that in the West. In the Western context, hip-hop culture has undergone a process from resistance to commercialization. However, in China, hip-hop culture follows a non-confrontational mainstreaming development path, which is a further refinement of the binary opposition model of “resistance - incorporation”. Commercial media platforms play a significant role, and they work in conjunction with the cultural governance at the national level, forming a situation where hip-hop culture can be conditionally incorporated. If Western hip-hop culture has always been a resistance against the mainstream, then Chinese hip-hop culture has gradually found a balanced approach through interaction and negotiation with the mainstream. This approach is a mechanism where the state “from top to bottom” takes the lead, and hip-hop artists “from bottom to top” collaborate and adapt. After entering the mainstream public view through commercial platforms, hip-hop artists will encode the content based on their own creative style to conform to the national governance policies. Here, the China Chic style is merely a tool for the legalization of hip-hop culture, and it is an element for building cultural identity and enhancing cultural soft power.

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## Appendix

Date	Comment
18-1-20	A good rapper from Chongqing has now become a singer? Where's the authenticity? Has he forgotten his original purpose?
20-5-26	Gai is just a faker. It's understandable that he doesn't respond when there's a conflict and doesn't engage in dissing either. But to be an informer? That's just unacceptable.
21-5-8	The Gangsta is so disgusting.
21-8-15	destroying one's moral standard
25-6-14	Gai has been successfully rehabilitated. Take a look at his early original song The Gangsta. Ordinary people can't come up with such lyrics. Who is actually enjoying his music?
25-6-15	I like it. It's truly something that ordinary people can't write. GAI's lyrics (from the past to present) are not something that most people can come up with. Because he is now at a higher level, so if you look at his previous works, even if someone else did the translation, you could still get something similar. Because basically every rapper starts by writing about drugs, gambling, and prostitution. Even so, Gai's words are more memorable to you. This is his strength.
25-6-15	The Gangsta is undoubtedly a true reflection of the past Chongqing and Sichuan regions. If you take the time to learn about what those regions were like in the past, you won't be so talkative here. It's chaotic, there are too many 'social deviants', and everywhere are 'riffraff'. I'm not saying that this song is praise-worthy, but it is very realistic. This is also the dark history of Chongqing, and it's something that shouldn't be easily forgotten