

Trinity University

Digital Commons @ Trinity

---

Communication Faculty Research

Communication Department

---

2019

## Rapper GAI, Style and Hegemony in China: Examining a Transformation from Jianghu Liu to Xinhua Liu

Zhaoxi Liu

Trinity University, [zliu@trinity.edu](mailto:zliu@trinity.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/comm\\_faculty](https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/comm_faculty)



Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

---

### Repository Citation

Liu, Z. (2019). Rapper GAI, style and hegemony in China: Examining a transformation from Jianghu Liu to Xinhua Liu. *International Communication Research Journal*, 54(2), 2-16.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Communication Department at Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Communication Faculty Research by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact [jcostanz@trinity.edu](mailto:jcostanz@trinity.edu).

# Rapper GAI, Style and Hegemony in China: Examining a Transformation from Jianghu Liu to Xinhua Liu

Zhaoxi (Josie) Liu<sup>1</sup>

---

Unlike several studies on rap musicians and the lyrics of their songs, this study examines both obvious and obtuse meaning embedded in the styles of Chinese Rapper, GAI, and their implications for hegemony in his country. Following state censorship, GAI changed his style from that of a gangster to a patriot. On the surface, the style change indicates sustaining the hegemony upheld by the CCP (Chinese Communist Party). However, this study argues that the state crackdown on hip hop culture, its styles included, engenders a paradox for hegemony in China.

**Keywords:** GAI, Chinese hip hop, style, hegemony, obtuse meaning, signification

---

In 2017, rap musician GAI won China's première rapping competition, "The Rap of China" (hereafter, *The Rap*), streamed on iQiyi, China's Netflix equivalent. He quickly became the face of China's burgeoning hip pop culture. In early 2018, he was invited to a major singing television show, "The Singer" (hereafter *Singer*) on Hunan TV. After the first round, he quietly disappeared, although he was not voted out (Zhang, 2018). His disappearance was significant: just when it appeared that rap had finally moved from the subcultural realm to China's mainstream entertainment arena, it was pushed back. As Hall (1982) points out, popular culture is the site of struggle of meaning between the dominant and subordinate groups; "where hegemony arises, and where it is secured" (Hall, 2006, p. 487). The present study therefore examines rapper GAI's styles, rather than his lyrics, in order to highlight the peculiar challenges style can pose for hegemony in a political system.

## Background: The Rise and Fall of GAI and Hip Hop Culture in China

GAI is musician Yan Zhou's stage name. He was born in 1988 in Neijiang, Sichuan, a small city next to Chongqing, China's fourth provincial-level municipality. He was a bar singer in Chongqing before joining GO\$H, a local hip hop label and started writing and performing rap songs (Da, 2015). GO\$H was one of the underground hip hop groups that mostly performed at nightclubs and released music through the internet. From the 2000s, hip hop not only gained popularity and tremendous following among the youth in Chongqing, but also in many large cities in China. This "wild growth" is largely attributable to the influence of hallyu (the Korean wave), American hip pop, Taiwan and Hong Kong singers (Barrett, 2012; Clark, 2012; Hu & Lai, 2004; Jia, 2018; Lin, 2017). Consequently, some independent labels began to release rap records, hip hop dancing classes appeared in colleges, and *rap battles* where underground rappers competed in improvising "free style" were held in Shanghai and Beijing (Amar, 2018; de Kloet, 2005; Khiun, 2006; Liu, 2010).

However, what turned the underground hip hop into a pop culture phenomenon was the 2017 internet show, *The Rap*. iQiyi invested more than 200 million yuan (about US\$30 million) to produce the show, which was first streamed online in June 2017 (China National Radio, 2017). After several rounds of competition

---

<sup>1</sup> Zhaoxi (Josie) Liu is an associate professor in the Department of Communication, Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas, USA.

by hundreds of rappers, GAI and another rapper from northern China, PG One, became co-champions as they won the same number of votes cast by the studio audience and the judges (Liang, 2017).

*The Rap* was an internet sensation, garnering more than 1.3 billion views (Amar, 2018). GAI, PG One and other participating rappers became instant music celebrities. After the competition, GAI appeared in several mainstream entertainment shows on national TV, including *Singer*, a hit show in which professional singers compete for the title of “the Singing King.” The success of *The Rap* and GAI’s subsequent appearance on mainstream TV shows largely signified that hip hop was no longer an underground musical phenomenon (Jia, 2018; Sina Entertainment, 2018; Zhi, 2017).

On January 4 and 5, 2018, three prominent national institutions, *China Women’s Daily*, the Youth Communist League, and China’s Xinhua News Agency denounced via Weibo (China’s social media platform) PG One’s 2015 song, *Christmas Eve*, for containing drug references (“pure white powder”) and insulting women (“bitches”), citing complaints from netizens. Following the denunciations, all of PG One’s songs were removed from stores and online streaming platforms (Amar, 2018; He, 2018, “PG One,” 2018).

On January 12, 2018, the first episode of *Singer* was aired and GAI performed a rap version of “Cang Hai Yi Sheng Xiao” (“Blue Sea Laughter”). GAI was ranked 3rd among the seven singers competing in the first round, and advanced to the next round (He, 2018). On January 18, 2018, a day before the second episode was to be aired, the *Chutian Metropolis Daily* confirmed that GAI was “requested to withdraw” from the competition (Zhang, 2018). The next day, *Sina Entertainment* posted an online notice issued by China’s State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) that clearly stated that TV shows could not feature artists with tattoos or use “hip hop culture, subculture and dispirited culture” (An, 2018; Amar, 2018; Quackenbush & Chen, 2018). Thus, after several years of free growth, hip hop in China faced a major government crackdown.

### **Main Themes in Literature on China’s Hip Hop: Authenticity and Counterhegemonic Voice**

Hip hop in China has attracted considerable scholarly attention, one of the main themes being that Chinese hip hop lacks authenticity. Some scholars argue that due to the dominance of foreign artists in China’s hip hop scene in the early 2000s (Jing, 2006), China’s hip pop is a “cultural pollution” that clouds both the Chineseness and purity of the music genre (de Kloet, 2005).

However, the impression that Chinese hip hop as just copycat began to change when Chinese rappers, particularly those in Chongqing and Chengdu, two mega cities in Southwest China, started to rap in their local dialect rather than Mandarin. This gave Chinese hip hop a unique flavor and sense of originality (Amar, 2018; Barnett, 2012; Jing, 2006; Kahn, 2009; Khiun, 2006; Liu, 2014; Starman, 2019). China has hundreds of different dialects which differ in tones, pronunciation and sometimes vocabulary. Many rappers mixed Mandarin, English and their local language in their work, offering Chinese rap a “form a multimodal, hybridized semiotic ensemble,” which allows the rapper to “articulate authenticity on his own terms” (Wang, 2015, p. 236).

The present study does not focus on this issue of authenticity, but the hegemonic implications of hip pop culture in China, which is another main theme in the literature. For Chinese youth, the biggest appeal of hip hop lies in its opportunity for self-expression and individualism (Barnett, 2012; Steele 2006), and a forum to resent China's rigid education system (Amar, 2018; Wang, 2009). Hip hop culture offers young Chinese "ready-made ways to assert individualism in a society that still emphasizes public displays of conformity" (Fackler, 2002).

Several rap songs also criticize social issues, asserting "an oppositional, counterhegemonic voice against the ... mainstream discourse" (Liu, 2014, p. 266). Some of the songs complain about the urban chaos and moral decline brought by the migrant workers (Liu, 2014), marginalized status of some citizens (Steele, 2006; Kahn, 2009), social injustices (Liu, 2010; Wang, 2009), and a sense of being left out of China's economic boom and their desire for success (Barnett, 2012; Lin, 2017; Liu, 2010; Steele 2006; Wang, 2009).

Most of the studies mentioned above focus on the counterhegemonic expressions in their lyrics. In this study, the focus is on another essential element of hip pop culture: style, using GAI as the subject of analysis. Since political messages conveyed through lyrics are very risky in China and many rappers are wary of that (Kahn, 2009; Liu, 2010), the non-verbal discursive elements, such as style, bear significance and deserve close examination.

## **Style, Signification and Hegemony**

In this study, the author attempts to establish the connection between signification and hegemony in the analysis of GAI's style. Hebdige (1979), who provides a key study on the style of subculture, does not provide a clear definition of style, but offers ample clues for understanding the concept, such as the "most mundane objects—a safety pin, a pointed shoe, a motor cycle" that take on a symbolic dimension and convey certain meaning that usually carry "subversive implications" (p. 2). Besides the most mundane objects, Hebdige (1979) examines outfits and accessories that convey "the dreams and the disappointments of an entire generation" (p. 41). Style could also be about non-objects, body language, expressions, postures and gestures, all of which could mean defiance, contempt or acceptance etc.

Style is also an integral part of hip hop culture in China. These include oversize parkas, low-rise baggy jeans, necklaces, basketball boots and body piercing that set the fashion trend among young people (Clark, 2012; Fackler, 2002; Hu & Lai, 2004). Wearing Andl sports shoes and playing basketball on the streets express a different identity than wearing Nike or Adidas (Clark, 2012). Hair style is another form of expression, be it blonde colored hair or dreadlocks (Fackler, 2002; Liu, 2010). In short, hip hop style "lets Chinese young people express themselves physically and visually" (Liu, 2010, p. 151). As such, hip hop style has meaning and political implications.

### **Signification of Style**

As Hebdige (1979) observed, "objects are made to mean" (p. 3). This process of "made to mean" is signification. Drawing on the works of Barthes (1977), Hebdige (1979) and Kristeva (1973), the current study analyzes GAI's styles at two levels: the "obvious meaning" and the "obtuse meaning."

Subcultural style could be read as signs (Hebdige, 1979). "A sign is anything... that stands for something other than itself" (Danesi, 2004, p. 4). The object (of style) is the signifier, and its meaning is the signified. The Stoics, considered the first to formulate a theory about the sign, placed signification "in the position of necessary relation" between "the out-there and that which speaks it, the thing and the word" (Kristeva, 1973, p. 26). In conventional semiotics, "the process of signification is, thus, the relation X=Y itself" (Danesi, 2004, p. 12).

Subcultural styles deliberately appropriate objects from various sources and turn them into signs. For instance, "lavatory chains were draped in graceful arcs across chests encased in plastic bin-liners. Safety pins were taken out of their domestic 'utility' context and worn as gruesome ornaments through the cheek, ear or lip" (Hebdige, 1979, p. 107). Through such a style, the punks "were able to restate their position to dominant values and institutions" (Hebdige, 1979, p. 116), which is a position of resistance and contempt. In this manner, the meaning of the signs (e.g., the lavatory chains and safety pins) is rather obvious. "It is what the author wanted to say" (Barthes, 1977, p. 54). At the level of the obvious meaning, the signifier corresponds with a definite signified.

However, the signifier does not always have a definite signified. When examining certain elements of punk style more carefully, Hebdige (1979) found the signified elusive. Therefore, conventional semiotics, which intends to establish a fixed connection between the signifier and the signified, cannot fully explain the meaning of subcultural style. "Any attempt at extracting a final set of meanings from the seemingly endless, often apparently random, play of signifiers in evidence here seems doomed to failure" (Hebdige, 1979, p. 117). Instead, Barthes (1977) proposes an additional way of reading style, that of the "obtuse meaning" (p. 54).

The idea of the obtuse meaning breaks the "relation of necessity" (Kristeva, 1973, p. 28) between the signifier and the signified, and opens "the field of meaning totally, that is infinitely" (Barthes, 1977, p. 55), as the obtuse meaning is "polysemous" (Barthes, 1977, p. 56). Obtuse meaning exists "when the text is read (or written) as a moving play of signifiers, without any possible reference to one or some fixed signifieds" (Barthes, 1977, p. 10). The current study examines both the obvious (clear correspondence between the signifier and the signified) and obtuse (uncertain, polysemous) meaning of GAI's styles.

To further complicate the matter, style is rendered meaningful through "dialectic between action and reaction" (Hebdige, 1979, p. 2). Action is the style itself, reaction is how society responds to it. Eventually, how the style comes to mean and what it means is a "process of meaning-construction" (Hebdige, 1979, p. 118), which involves the "manner in which the society to a certain extent communicates what it thinks of it [message of a symbol]" (Barthes, 1977, p. 17). The current study also examines this action-reaction dynamic in the case of GAI.

## Hegemony

The meaning of subcultural style bears complicated implications for hegemony. In Gramsci's writing, hegemony means the "cultural, moral and ideological leadership over allied and subordinate groups" (Forgacs, 2000, p. 423). Hegemony is a special kind of power. It is "the power to frame alternatives and contain opportunities, to win and shape consent, so that the granting of legitimacy to the dominant classes appears not only 'spontaneous' but natural and normal" (Clarke et al., 1976, p. 38).

A hegemonic cultural order prescribes “not the specific content of ideas, but the limits within which ideas and conflicts move and are resolved” (Clarke et al., 1976, p. 39). Gramsci is also clear about the importance of “culture and thought” to the “moment of hegemony and consent” (Forgacs, 2000, p. 195). These points apply to hip hop culture as well.

To win the spontaneous consent of the subordinate groups, the dominant group has to take into account their interests and tendencies (Clarke et al., 1976; Forgacs, 2000). The site of consent is civil society, which is “the ensemble of organisms commonly called ‘private’” (Forgacs, 2000, p. 306), in opposition to “the state (political society) which is a site of coercions, dictatorship, domination” (Forgacs, 2000, p. 224). Coercion or direct domination is used when “spontaneous consent has failed” (Forgacs, 2000, p. 307). “So hegemony cannot be taken for granted... It has to be won, worked for, reproduced, sustained” (Clarke et al., 1976, p. 40).

In China, the dominant group is the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its top leadership. It rules through its massive network of party organizations and state institutions, including media control mechanisms. The hegemony in China could be called the Party hegemony. The Party and state systems are in the hands of a group of political, business and intellectual elites (de Burgh, 2017; Khiun, 2006; Zhao, 2008), whereas the common people could be considered the subordinate group. Rappers, who are mostly marginalized urban youth, are part of the subaltern (Liu, 2010; Liu, 2014; Steele, 2006; Kahn, 2009; Wang, 2015).

The signification of hip hop style can be connected with hegemony, in that hip pop style, with its obvious and especially obtuse meanings, poses a unique challenge to the Party hegemony. Consequently, the present study attempts to provide answers to the following research questions (RQs):

1. What is the obvious meaning of GAI's styles?
2. What is the obtuse meaning of GAI's styles?
3. What are the implications of these meanings for the Party hegemony in China?

## Method

Data for this study are from videos of GAI's performances. His rise to prominence in China's hip hop culture makes him a good case for this study, especially due to the fact that he is one of first—perhaps the only one—rappers to emerge from the underground to the mainstream stage, only to be censored by the state.

Seven videos from three different stages of GAI's career were chosen to analyze his style. These are videos of his most popular songs or performances highlighted in the media, and are still available on YouTube. Below is a brief description of the seven videos (see Appendix for links to the videos):

Stage 1: Before *The Rap*, 2015 – June, 2017.

- *Chao Shehui* (Gangsta) music video, released in 2015. It established GAI's fame as a Chongqing dialect rapper (Starman, 2019).

Stage 2: From *The Rap* to the state ban, June 2017-January 2018.

- Three live performances during *The Rap* competition: *Tian Gan Wu Zao* (second round); *Kong Cheng Ji* and *108* (final round), June-September 2017.
- Performance on the China Central Television (CCTV) show, *I Want to Be*

on *Chun Wan: Hou Guo Di Liao* (Hot Pot Soup Base), December 2017. *Chun Wan* is the CCTV Chinese New Year Gala, a five-hour live variety show consisting of singing, dancing, acrobatic display, comedy sketch and many more. Performing at the gala is the benchmark for recognition as a mainstream artist. *I Want to Be on Chun Wan* is a talent show to choose some performers at the gala.

- Performance on *Singer: Cang Hai Yi Sheng Xiao* (Blue Sea Laughter), January 2018. The song is a popular pop song in China, first released in 1990. GAI added a rap segment to it.

Stage 3: After the Ban in May, 2018.

- *The Great Wall* music video, released in June 2018. Each video was viewed multiple times by this author, to identify and review the style as carefully and closely as possible. Drawing on Hebdige's (1979) and Hall & Jefferson's (1976) analysis of subcultural styles, this study focuses on the following aspects of the rapper's styles:
  - Outfit: clothing, jewelry and other accessories, including tattoos.
  - Facial expression: expressions rendered by mouth, eyes, and so on.
  - Body language: movements of body, arms, legs, and feet, and hand gestures.
  - Demeanors: specific behavior and attitude.
  - Vocal style: particular vocal characteristics, sounds and utterances.

On the basis of the above factors, this researcher then proceeded to do a qualitative textual analysis of GAI's style at two levels: the obvious and obtuse meaning. This method of analysis is essentially where researchers "evaluate the many meanings found in texts and we try to understand how written, visual and spoken language helps us to create social realities" (Brennen, 2017, p. 204). To further contextualize and triangulate the analysis, clips from *The Rap*, documentaries about China's hip hop, one-on-one media interviews with GAI and other related material were examined by this researcher.

## Findings and Analysis

This section first describes GAI's styles in the three different stages, then offers the obvious and obtuse meaning of the styles, followed by a discussion on their implications for hegemony.

### GAI's Styles: From Jianghu Liu to Xinhua Liu

During Stages 1 and 2 of GAI's career, from his pre-*The-Rap* years to after the competition but before the state ban, he was labeled as the lead man of *Jianghu Liu* rap (Feng, 2017). The Chinese word, *jianghu*, translates to big river or lake. In Chinese literature, *jinaghu* is used as a metaphor for the world out there, or more specifically the social realm outside the mainstream establishment; the world of swordsmen and outcasts. The world of *gangstas* is a typical *jianghu*. "Liu" means flow or style. *Jianghu liu* therefore means *jianghu style*, a reference to China's version of gangsta rap. This style is evident in GAI's early music video, *Gangsta*, and his performances on *The Rap* and *Singer*.

In those performances, GAI's outfit is mostly loose t-shirts and jackets, paired with

white sneakers or black boots, and occasional pair of round-shaped sunglasses. He usually wears a gold chain, gold earrings, and eyebrow slits. His hair is always extremely short. In the “Gangsta” MV and his live performance in clubs, he often goes topless, revealing the tattoos on his neck, chest and arms (Amar, 2018; Shi, 2015; Starman, 2019).

His facial expression is sometimes disdainful, amplified by exaggerated lifting of one corner of his mouth, head tilting up while looking down with eyes squinted (*Gangsta*), or staring intensively with eyes wide open (*The Rap*; *Singer*).

GAI’s body language mirror his facial expression, as he waves hands violently, shakes his head wildly, swings his arms forcefully, kicks his legs high, and stomps ferociously. He shows his middle fingers in the *Gangsta* music video, but not in the shows. He walks with a wobble and big arm swings, described in Chinese as “da yao da bai” (big strut, swaggering).

His demeanor is that of a *bad boy*. In *Gangsta*, he holds a cigarette in one hand and wields a long butcher’s knife in another. He squats in the street while rapping, drinks beer, and plays cards bare-chested. During a pre-show interview on *The Rap* he points his finger at the camera, with his signature head-tilting-looking-down gesture, threatening those contestants who he calls “fake” and “technical garbage,” telling them to wait for him to “clear all of them out of the show.” He adds, “Let me burn, and bomb them to death” (*Tian Gan Wu Zao*).

GAI’s vocal style is consistently forceful, very loud and powerful. He sings, literally, at the top of his lungs, and at times shouts angrily. In *Gangsta* he repeatedly shouts: “Laozi is from the street!” “Laozi” is a vulgar slang for “I” in Chinese, usually used by hooligans, gangsters and people with little education, indicating rudeness and toughness.

Overall, the *jianghu* style, evident in Stages 1 and 2 of GAI’s career, is a style of *gangsta* swagger. It is rough, tough, raw, and vulgar. It is arrogant, aggressive, energetic and passionate. However, there are visible style changes between the *Gangsta* music videos and televised shows. On those shows, he is fully clothed to cover up his tattoos. He reverently bowed and thanked the judges and audience; no more mouth-twisting and face contortions. The closer he is to the mainstream, the softer his style becomes. When he stands on CCTV’s stage, the center of China’s mainstream media and entertainment, his *jianghu* style is tuned down to nearly zero. On that show, his clothing is rather fit than baggy and completely covers every trace of his tattoo. He does not wear the gold chain and earrings, his trademark throughout *The Rap*. His hand waving is much softer. There is no kicking or stomping, only CCTV-choreographed happy dancing; no staring or sneering, but cheerful grin. His vocal is also softened and tuned down. The *gangsta* persona disappears.

Yet, mellowing down his gangsta swagger did not earn him a place on the Chinese New Year Gala. Instead, like other rappers, he was banned from television altogether. For a few months after the ban, he slowed down his work and got married to his longtime girlfriend. When he resurfaced with a new single in May 2018, he had transformed from *jianghu liu* to *xinhua liu* (Ifeng Music, 2018; Sina Entertainment, 2018). “Xinhua” means new China. GAI now wears a new China style. The new single, “The Great Wall”, and its music video mark a clear departure from GAI’s *jianghu* style.

In the new music video, GAI wears a sportswear from Li-Ning, a Chinese brand. His jacket has the character “China” printed at the front. In some scenes he dons a Chinese style kong fu suit with a big cape. The sun glasses and gold chain are still there, making him look like a rapper, but his tattoos are completely concealed. He still tilts his head up and looks down his nose, but the sneering is no more. His body language retains the waving, kicking and head shaking, but not as wild and fierce as in previous videos. His swagger is turned down a notch. His cigarette or long knife now give way to a giant Chinese ink brush writing calligraphy all over the floor. His vocal is still forceful and powerful, but instead of screaming about his personal aspirations, he shouts about national pride.

From the tattoo-showing, knife-wielding, and sneering rapper squatting in shabby streets in the *Gangsta* to the fully clothed, straight faced rapper standing on top China’s scenic Great Wall in *The Great Wall*, GAI had migrated from *jianghu* to the mainstream style.

### Signification/Meanings of the Styles

In this section, the meaning of GAI’s varying styles is explored at two levels: the obvious and the obtuse.

**The Obvious Meaning: From Grassroots Identity to National Identity.** The obvious meaning is what rapper GAI wanted people to get. Some elements of the *jianghu style*—the tattoos, sneer, middle finger, etc.—are signs, and their signified is a grassroots identity. GAI is a migrant from a small city (Neijiang) trying to make it in a huge metropolis (Chongqing). He made a living by singing pop songs and later rapping in bars and clubs and often ran out of money. He said he used to fight people “in order not to be bullied” and was beaten by the police as a teenager (Da, 2015). In a 2015 interview, GAI sided with the urban poor: “There is a big disparity between the rich and the poor in China. Why are there people in China who wield knives trying to kill people? That is because you don’t let them live...He cannot get what he wanted; no education, no connections, and family background is not strong. Just like me” (Da, 2015). Therefore, the tattoos, gestures, and behavior signify his grassroots identity: rough, tough, aggressive and unyielding. Such a style allows him to “convey directly the most ordinary social topics and values” (Feng, 2017), to depict “the most realistic, the so-called social groups [unemployed idlers]” (Tencent Entertainment, 2017). He wanted people to see him as someone from the streets.

In contrast, the *xinhua* style uses a different set of signs: the outfit by a Chinese sportswear brand, the “China” print on it, the ink brush, kong fu suit, and above all, the Great Wall. The signified of these signs is a national identity. Speaking of the motivation for writing *The Great Wall* GAI said: “I feel that the country is really great, and I just want to showcase my patriotism” (Sina Entertainment, 2018). As patriotism is a mainstream value promoted by the Party, such a change could also help with marketing and sales of his music. His change of style—concealing tattoos, wearing a straight face, restraining from cussing, and better behaving—is also intentional; he wants people to notice his new identity. “With *xinhua liu*, I want to make it a new direction for China’s rap,” GAI explained (Sina Entertainment, 2018). He told *Sina Entertainment* that he has always tried to integrate Chinese cultural elements with foreign music styles, and that he wanted to celebrate

Chinese culture (Ren, 2019). From the *jianghu* style to the *xinhua* style, the obvious meaning of the change is to move from a grassroots identity to a national identity.

**The Obtuse Meaning: Polysemy of the Swagger.** Some elements of GAI's styles, such as tattoo, clothing and hand gesture can be analyzed as signifier with clear signified, but some are signifiers without clear signified. Most of his swagger—the waving, kicking, stomping, headshaking, staring, and powerful vocal—fall under the latter category, as the signified of those signs are not clear. For GAI the swagger, whether as part of his *jianghu* or *xinhua* style, is very likely a trademark. He uses a style to establish “an alternative identity which communicated a perceived difference: an Otherness” (Hebdige, 1979, p. 88-89). This identity is that of a rapper, of hip pop culture, which sets himself and fellow rappers apart from other musicians and entertainers. The swagger is also part of the entertainment that appeals to the audience.

Nonetheless, due to the lack of clear signified, the polysemy of the signs, his swagger could be interpreted quite differently. Some view his swagger as toughness, “the most fierce, aggressive and yet free roaming” (Feng, 2017), or as bringing “abundance of defiance and wildness” (Tencent Entertainment, 2017). The *jianghu* association has also been interpreted as inheriting the “rebellious cultural heritage” (Feng, 2017) of grassroots heroes like the 108 rebels in *Water Margin*. Such readings are problematic for the state, which further deems such a style, and by extension the person who displays it, as a threat, even though GAI himself does not necessarily mean to challenge the political order. When he kicks, stomps and stares on stage in *The Rap and Singer*, it is really hard to say that he is threatening anybody in particular. He is just a performer.

As earlier discussed, the meaning of style is assigned by both action and reaction. When the authorities banned GAI, they essentially pointed to resistance as the meaning of his *jianghu* style. In reality, GAI might not have wanted to be seen as a rebellious grassroots hero, yet the crackdown made it officially so. As the rapper suggested, “Music is music. Just be the best of myself is enough. Don't think about other things” (Tencent Entertainment, 2017).

## Implications for Hegemony

Both the obvious and obtuse meanings of GAI's styles have complex implications for the Party hegemony in China. After the crackdown, GAI voluntarily abandoned the *jianghu* style, substituting it with the *xinhua* style, moving from the grassroots identity to establish a national identity (obvious meaning). This suggests victory for the Party hegemony. However, a closer examination reveals that the ban and its impact may have engendered a paradox for the Party hegemony, whereby hegemony is simultaneously maintained and undermined.

**Paradox of the Crackdown.** As already discussed, the realm of hegemony is civil society, in contrast to the “direct domination or command exercised through the state and juridical government” (Forgacs, 2000, p. 306). Direct domination is not hegemony. By ordering GAI off air and banning the hip hop culture altogether from broadcast, the government resorted to coercion, direct demand and dominance, rather than spontaneous consent. The crackdown therefore is not a hegemonic move. Even if hip hop culture in China, including GAI's celebration of a grassroots identity through the *jianghu* style, does contain counterhegemonic expressions, it

cannot obliterate hegemony from the system. Instead, counterhegemonic voices tend to reproduce and sustain hegemony. So, it is in the interest of the dominant group to incorporate counterhegemonic voices into the mainstream, rather than shut them out with a sweeping ban (Hebdige, 1979). A clear indication of the weakening of a hegemonic order “is the shift in the exercise of control from the mechanisms of consent to those of coercion” (Clarke et al., 1976, p. 40).

Since President Xi Jinping came to power in 2013, ideological control has been heightened across the Chinese society, including pop culture (Agence France-Presse, 2018; Amar, 2018). President Xi wants pop culture to convey the “positive energy” of socialist values, while rap, with its vulgarity and gangsta swagger, appears to contradict these values (Amar, 2018). On the surface, the crackdown on hip hop appears to maintain hegemony, but underneath, the application of coercion could actually undermine hegemony.

**Paradox of the Impact of the Crackdown.** In a way, the crackdown worked. The “abrupt official backlash against hip hop culture has tamed the swagger of artists” (Agence France-Presse, 2018). GAI abandoned his *jianghu* style and went for the *xinhua* style. He now sings about nationalism rather than individualism, concealing his tattoo and behaving himself. Even the Youth Communist League now praises him for conveying the “positive energy of traditional spirit” to the younger generation through rap (Tencent News, 2019). Reacting to the ban, GAI said, “I respect all the arrangements of the state.” His fame and financial gain has given him a sense of security, which he very much cherishes. “I don’t rebel my current life,” he said (Sina Entertainment, 2018). This is GAI’s spontaneous consent. The censorship therefore worked “to bring hip-hop back into the Chinese cultural conversation, and also to demonstrate that no style of music, however popular, is exempt from toeing the Party line” (Amar, 2018, p. 112). The dominant group thus appears to have succeed in containing the subordinate groups “within an ideological space” (Hebdige, 1979, p. 16).

But, has it? The crackdown triggered some backlash online among rap music fans. Some of the comments include: “SAPPRFT is so trashy! They didn’t want to give Chinese hip pop singers any chance of survival! We can go back to ancient times” (Quackenbush & Chen, 2018); “I have always believed that an evil establishment is not going to be satisfied with our appeasement” (“How to View,” 2018). In Gramscian terms, this is the moment of collapse of the spontaneous consent.

The crackdown also created a chilling effect among the rappers, who now face “more careful screening” for “ideological mistakes” in their music (Agence France-Presse, 2018). The space for hip hop artists in China is even tightly squeezed and such tight control generates discontent. “We’ve gotta find a way. But we don’t want to have to ‘find a way’ to express ourselves. We just want to express ourselves,” says Shanghai rapper, Naggy (Agence France-Presse, 2018). What people in power cannot deny is that “young people with lower socioeconomic status appreciate rap and hip hop because it expresses their feelings, emotions, and attitudes, and, more importantly, it helps make their voices heard” (Liu, 2010, p. 151).

To win spontaneous consent, the dominant group has to recognize the interests and the tendencies of subordinate groups (Clarke et al., 1976; Forgacs, 2000).

The disadvantaged urban youths has the need to express themselves through hip hop. Rapper Mr. Wang said “rapping helps him deal with bitterness that comes with realizing he is one of the millions left out of China’s economic boom” (Wang, 2009). Hip hop allows young people to vent dissatisfaction with the adult society. This helps “alleviate (the) psychological pressure laden on them” (Hu & Lai, 2004), and “to some degree has social amendment function” (Feng, 2017). Such pressure-release function helps to maintain the consent of the subordinate groups, and also hegemony. Cracking down on hip hop seals this safety valve and social pressure keeps accumulating. When people are left with no channel to express discontent in non-confrontational ways, they may be forced into open confrontation, thus threatening hegemony.

Hip hop also provides a route to success—from rags to riches (Hebdige, 1979)—for young people who are otherwise “losers” in society. “Many underground kids hope to change their life and future through music,” says GAI (Sina Entertainment, 2018). That is perhaps why thousands of rappers flocked to *The Rap*. On the show, many rappers sang about their hard life as underground rappers, their desire for recognition, earn money and live a better life. The rappers hope the show and television appearance would ultimately lead to fame and finance gain. However, the state ban took away their hope, and likely their consent. When consent fades away, hegemony tends to be undermined (see Figure 1).

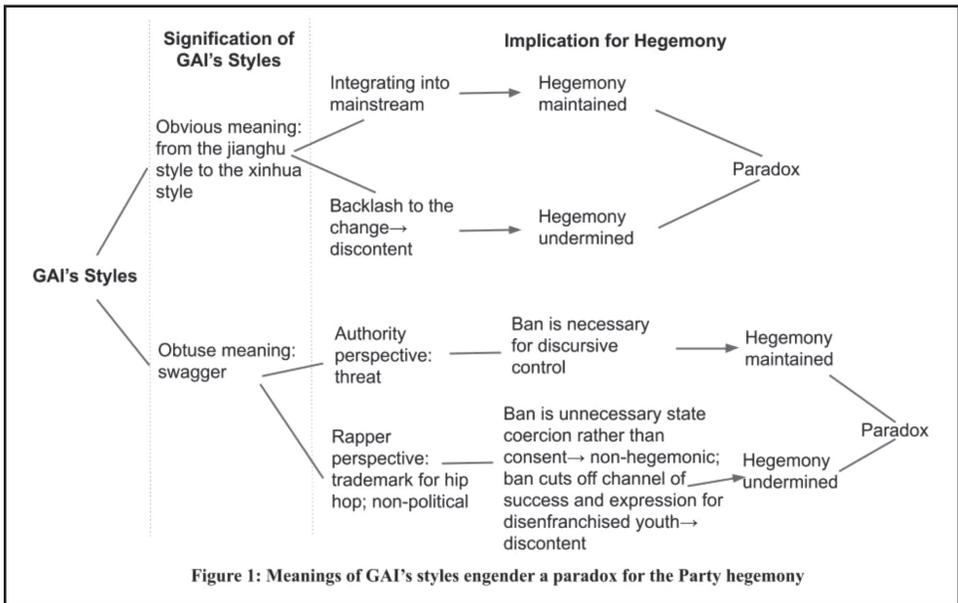


Figure 1: Meanings of GAI's styles engender a paradox for the Party hegemony

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that rapper GAI's style and hip hop in general pose peculiar challenges to China's Party hegemony. From being an underground rapper, participating *The Rap* and other mainstream shows, to being banned and resurfacing with patriotic songs, GAI's style has evidently morphed from the *jianghu* grassroots style and identity to the *xinhua* nationalism style. His swagger, whose

meaning is more obtuse than obvious, could be read as differentiating (hence the hip hop label), threatening (hence the ban), or nation loving (hence the official endorsement). The obtuse meaning of the swaggering style is polysemous.

The polysemy of his style is further enhanced by the dialectic of action and reaction. On the surface, GAI has been tamed by the state crackdown, as reflected by his style change, and the Party hegemony has been maintained. This study, however, argues that the crackdown itself is about coercion, which subverts hegemony. Without the subaltern's spontaneous consent toward the dominant group, hegemony faces a peril. GAI's style transformation has therefore engendered a paradox for the Party hegemony, whereby the Chinese state has won the battle but is losing the war over hegemony.

By making a connection between signification of style and hegemony, this study makes a theoretical contribution that opens a new line of inquiry with respect to the meanings of subcultural styles, which are more often obtuse than obvious, and pose a peculiar challenge to hegemony. Such an inquiry is particularly relevant in today's media landscape, as the plethora of media in a digital age only broadens and deepens the polysemy of subcultural styles. Is state censorship still effective in the face of such polysemy? Is it still possible to maintain the Gramscian hegemony in a fragmented media world? The study calls for reconsideration and reconfiguration of hegemony in relation to subcultural styles.

This study has limitations, the most prominent being that it only highlights the hegemonic implication of the hip hop style in China. In this regard, it needs to be noted that the hip hop culture, even in China, has very broad social, economic, cultural and political implications, which provide vast researchable areas for future studies to explore.

## References

- Agence France-Presse. (2018, February 8). "Gotta find a way": Chinese rap in crisis after crackdown.
- Amar, N. (2018). "Do you freestyle?": The roots of censorship in Chinese hip-hop. *China Perspectives*, 2018(1–2), 107–113.
- An, D. (2018, January 19). SAPPRFT requests TV shows not to use artists with low taste, tattoo and hip hop culture [总局提出节目嘉宾标准:格调低纹身嘻哈文化不用]. Retrieved January 24, 2019, from sina.com website: <http://ent.sina.com.cn/tv/zy/2018-01-19/doc-ifyquptv7935320.shtml>
- Barrett, C. (2012). Hip-hopping across China: Intercultural formulations of local identities. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 11, 247–260.
- Barthes, R. (1977). *Image, music, text* (S. Heath, Trans.). London: Fontana Press.
- Brennen, B. (2013). *Qualitative research methods for media studies*. New York: Routledge.
- China National Radio. (2017, May 3). First hip-hop competition 'The Rap of China' slated for June [首档Hip-hop选秀《中国有嘻哈》定档六月]. Retrieved January 25, 2019, from CNR.com website: [http://finance.cnr.cn/gundong/20170503/t20170503\\_523737053.shtml](http://finance.cnr.cn/gundong/20170503/t20170503_523737053.shtml)
- Clarke, J., Hall, S., Jefferson, T., & Roberts, B. (1976). Subcultures, cultures and class. In S. Hall & T. Jefferson (Eds.), *Resistance through rituals: Youth subcultures in post-war Britain* (pp. 9–74). London: Hutchinson Education.
- Clark, P. (2012). *Youth culture in China: From Red Guards to netizens*. New York: Cambridge University Press

- Da, B. (2015, October 15). If can do commercial, who the hell wants to do underground [能做商业, 谁他妈愿意做地下: 和重庆说唱歌手 GAI 一起“超社会”]. Retrieved June 7, 2019, from vice.cn website: [noisey.vice.cn/read/interview-with-rapper-gai](http://noisey.vice.cn/read/interview-with-rapper-gai)
- Danesi, M. (2004). *Messages, signs, and meanings: A basic textbook in semiotics and communication*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press.
- de Burgh, H. (2017). *China's Media in the Emerging World Order*. Buckingham, UK: The University of Buckingham Press.
- de Kloet, J. (2005, July 25). *Cultural synchronization: Hip hop with Chinese characteristics?* Paper presented at the International Association for the Study of Popular Music, Rome.
- Fackler, M. (2002, February 15). In China, hip-hop is happening - Kids, young adults assert individuality through music, dancing. *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, p. 10.
- Feng, Q. (2017). From Water Margin to hip hop: Hip hop culture and China's jianghu [从《水浒传》到嘻哈: 说唱文化与中国江湖]. Retrieved June 7, 2019, from sohu.com website: [http://www.sohu.com/a/169030139\\_99897611](http://www.sohu.com/a/169030139_99897611)
- Forgacs, D. (Ed.). (2000). *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935*. New York: New York University Press.
- Hall, S. (1982). The rediscovery of ideology: return of the repressed in media studies. In M. Gurevitch (Ed.), *Culture, society and media* (pp. 56–90). London: Methuen.
- Hall, S. (2006). Notes on deconstructing “the popular.” In J. Storey (Ed.), *Cultural theory and popular culture: A reader* (3rd ed., pp. 477–487). Harlow, England: Pearson Education Limited.
- Hall, S., & Jefferson, T. (Eds.). (1976). *Resistance through rituals: Youth subcultures in post-war Britain*. London: Hutchinson Education.
- He, R. (2018). GAI confirms withdrawal from “Singer”, where is the path for China's hip pop? [GAI确认退赛《歌手》中国嘻哈路在何方?]. Retrieved January 24, 2019, from jiemian.com website: <https://www.jiemian.com/article/1891261.html>
- Hebdige, D. (1979). *Subculture: The meaning of style*. New York: Routledge.
- How to view GAI being withdrawn from “Singer”? [如何看待 GAI 在《歌手 2018》中被退赛?] (2018, January 23). Retrieved January 24, 2019, from zhihu.com website: <https://www.zhihu.com/question/265770568/answer/299204589>
- Hu, L., & Lai, S. (2004, August 25). Hip Hop makes its way into south China. *Xinhua News Agency*.
- Ifeng Music. (2018, May 25). GAI Zhou Yan Single “The Great Wall” released [GAI周延单曲《万里长城》首发]. Retrieved June 27, 2019, from yue.ifeng.com website: [http://yue.ifeng.com/a/20180525/39847891\\_0.shtml](http://yue.ifeng.com/a/20180525/39847891_0.shtml)
- Jia, L. (2018, January 17). Hong Hua Hui work removed from the internet; can China's hip hop continue to grow wildly? [红花会作品遭全网下架, 中国嘻哈是否还能继续野蛮生长?]. Retrieved January 24, 2019, from <https://36kr.com/p/5114508?from=related>
- Jing, X. (2006, November 23). No Quickstep for Hip Hop in China. *Beijing Review*, 24–26.
- Kahn, K. (2009). Chinese hip hop music: Negotiating for cultural freedoms in the 21st century. *Muziki*, 6(2), 232–240.
- Khiun, L. K. (2006). Xi ha (hip hop) zones within global noises: Mapping the geographies and cultural politics of Chinese hip-hop. *Perfect Beat*, 7(4), 52–81.
- Kristeva, J. (1973). The Semiotic Activity. *Screen*, 14(1–2), 25–39.
- Liang, X. (2017, September 11). “The Rap of China” gives birth to “double champions” [《中国有嘻哈》诞生“双冠军” PG One和GAI“破冰”]. Retrieved June 6, 2019, from [sc.people.com.cn/n2/2017/0911/c345489-30720632.html](http://sc.people.com.cn/n2/2017/0911/c345489-30720632.html)
- Lin, S. (2017). Wu Yifan's freestyle was dissed [吴亦凡式freestyle惨遭diss, 《中国假嘻哈》和谐了什么?]. Retrieved January 24, 2019, from <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/27985709>
- Liu, J. (2014). Alternative voice and local youth identity in Chinese local-language rap music. *Positions*, 22(1), 263–292.

- Liu, X. (2010). Across the borders: Hip hop's influence on Chinese youth culture. *Southeast Review of Asian Studies*, 32, 146–153.
- PG One song accused of encouraging drug use [PG ONE这首歌疑似教唆吸毒 虽道歉下架可情况并不那么简单]. (2018, January 6). Retrieved January 24, 2019, from qq.com website: <https://society.qq.com/a/20180106/005357.htm>
- Quackenbush, C., & Chen, A. H. (2018, January 22). "Tasteless, Vulgar and Obscene." China Just Banned Hip-Hop Culture and Tattoos From Television. Retrieved January 28, 2019, from Time.com website: <http://time.com/5112061/china-hip-hop-ban-tattoos-television/>
- Ren, S. (2019, January 21). GAI Zhou Yan Launches 2019 Tour [GAI周延2019巡演启动]. Retrieved June 5, 2019, from China News website: <http://www.chinanews.com/yl/2019/01-21/8734696.shtml>
- Shi, J. (2016). *Gangsta*. Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4GWF8\\_MgK4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4GWF8_MgK4)
- Sina Entertainment. (2018, August 23). A year later, is he tamed by the mainstream? [一年了, 他被主流“驯服”了吗]. Retrieved June 5, 2019, from sina.com website: <http://eladies.sina.com.cn/wzx/star/2018-08-23/0834/doc-ihhxaafz4316753.shtml>
- Starman, B. (2019). Trap in Southwest. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xrOsUNj6-M>
- Steele, A. D. (2006). *Zai Beijing: A Cultural Study of Hip hop*. (Unpublished MA thesis). Stanford University, California, USA.
- Tencent Entertainment. (2017, July 18). Chongqing hip hop singer GAI [重庆嘻哈歌手GAI: 嘻哈你Gai爷, 不是个传说]. Retrieved January 24, 2019, from qq.com website: <https://ent.qq.com/a/20170718/046957.htm>
- Tencent News. (2019, April 22). GAI Zhou Yan Single "Hua Xia" released [GAI周延单曲《华夏》首发 新华流说唱领军者唱响中国精神]. Retrieved June 5, 2019, from qq.com website: <https://new.qq.com/omn/20190422/20190422A08HNN.html>
- Wang, J. (2009, January 23). Now Hip-Hop, Too, Is Made in China. *New York Times*, p. C1.
- Wang, X. (2015). Inauthentic authenticity: Semiotic design and globalization in the margins of China. *Semiotica*, 203, 227–248.
- Zhang, C. (2018, January 18). *Withdrawing from "Singer"* [退出《歌手》GAI团队确认]. Retrieved from <http://ent.sina.com/music/zy/2018-01-18/doc-ifyquwzu3653567.shtml>
- Zhao, Y. (2008). *Communication in China: Political economy, power, and conflict*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Zhi, Y. (2017, August 10). Does China have real hip hop? [中国究竟有没有真正的“嘻哈”]. Retrieved February 11, 2019, from sina.com website: <http://ent.sina.com.cn/zt/2017-08-10/doc-ifyixhyw6648855.shtml>

## Appendix: List of Videos Analyzed

<b>Song</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>URL</b>
Gangsta	Music Video	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4GWF8_MgK4">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4GWF8_MgK4</a>
Tian Gan Wu Zao	Performance on "The Rap of China"	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jeo8tf0ZMkw">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jeo8tf0ZMkw</a>
Kong Cheng Ji	Performance on "The Rap of China"	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q3wFfzWtlz0">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q3wFfzWtlz0</a>
108	Performance on "The Rap of China"	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xtODEsdlp8Y">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xtODEsdlp8Y</a>
Hot Pot Soup Base	Performance on "I Want to Be on Chun Wan"	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wTezYyU_zbU">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wTezYyU_zbU</a>
Blue Sea Laughter	Performance on "The Singer"	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3PazbAYoHK8">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3PazbAYoHK8</a>
The Great Wall	Music Video	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8A4JCbf-2dY">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8A4JCbf-2dY</a>