

TECHNOLOGICAL MEDIATION AND MUSICAL CREATIVITY: CONTEMPORARY CHINESE MUSIC IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE

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Abstract: This article examines how technological mediation reshapes musical creativity in contemporary China and its role in cultural identity, social movements, and political discourse under globalization and state regulation. Drawing on ethnomusicology, cultural studies, and political sociology, it analyzes how digital production, circulation, and performance negotiate tensions between tradition and innovation, expression and censorship, and local identity and global flows. Attention is given to Chinese hip-hop and artists such as Higher Brothers, whose multilingual styles exemplify mediated cultural revival and transnational exchange. The author argues that technologically mediated music becomes a space for indirect political expression and identity formation, alongside broader artistic interventions by figures like Ai Weiwei.

Keywords: *Art, Globalization, Hip-Hop, Identity, Music, Political Discourse, Postmodernism, Reinterpretation, Resistance.*

1. Introduction

Music has historically occupied a formative place in Chinese cultural thought, where sonic harmony was associated with moral order, governance and collective identity. In the contemporary period, this longstanding relationship between music and social life is being reconfigured through digital technologies that transform how sound is produced, circulated and experienced. Online platforms, recording software, algorithmic recommendation systems and transnational media networks have

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not merely expanded access to music; they have reshaped the very conditions of musical creativity and reception. Within this technologically mediated environment, contemporary Chinese musicians offer a complex terrain marked by globalization, cultural revival and regulatory oversight. Musical expression increasingly operates through indirect, symbolic and stylistic strategies that allow artists to articulate social reflection without inviting direct confrontation with state authority. In genres such as hip-hop, artists employ coded language, multilingual expression, sonic experimentation, and visual aesthetics as strategic means of negotiating the limits of permissible expression. Figures such as Ai Weiwei and the rap group Higher Brothers exemplify how art and music, when mediated through digital technologies, participate in cultural dialogue, symbolic critique, and the construction of new global imaginaries of China. Their work reveals how technologically mediated creativity enables artists to balance local cultural rootedness with transnational circulation while subtly engaging questions of identity, authority and representation.

This article adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach that integrates cultural analysis, discourse analysis and musicological interpretation. Rather than offering quantitative measurement, it presents an interpretive examination of musical texts, performances and platforms to demonstrate how technological mediation reconfigures musical creativity as a site of negotiation between tradition and innovation, expression and regulation, and local identity and global visibility in contemporary China.

2. The Dynamic Role of Music and Chinese Cultural Identity

Scholarly discussions on Chinese music consistently demonstrate that it has served not only aesthetic purposes but also moral, social and political functions across history. In the contemporary machine age, characterized by digital media, algorithmic circulation and platform cultures, music assumes an expanded mediating role between tradition and innovation. It no longer merely reflects cultural identity; it actively participates in reshaping how that identity is remembered, performed and

communicated in technologically networked environments. As Sheila Melvin and Cai Jindong (2004) argue, classical Chinese music frequently operated within a utilitarian framework, serving ethical, ritual, and political purposes rather than existing as autonomous art (299). By contrast, Erica Fox Brindley (2012) emphasizes its formative role in pre-imperial thought, where music, counted among the Six Classics, contributed directly to identity formation in the Central States and Zhou periods. These perspectives reveal a historical continuity in which music has been closely associated with governance, moral philosophy and social order (25).

In the present digital context, this historical alignment acquires new forms. Public discourse reported by *Global Times* highlights how cultural confidence and global influence are articulated through renewed attention to traditional arts, including music. Tian Qing for example, presents harmony as a foundational value embedded in Chinese musical traditions, a value now re-circulated through social media and digital platforms where traditional genres find new audiences. Scholars such as Joseph Sui Ching Lam observe that contemporary musical transformations stimulate social and political dialogue (299), while Marc L. Moskowitz (2010) notes how early Chinese music videos emphasized processes of indigenization within global media forms (22). Similarly, Krystyn R. Moon traces changing representations of China in American popular music, indicating the transnational circulation of musical imagery. The influence of Jay Chou, as discussed by cultural commentators like Wendy Ng, exemplifies how the fusion of traditional motifs with modern musical styles reshapes popular culture across linguistic and national boundaries. By integrating classical Chinese poetic imagery, indigenous instruments and contemporary pop production, such artists demonstrate how heritage can be rearticulated within global soundscapes. These developments indicate that, in the machine age, Chinese music functions simultaneously as cultural memory, political expression and a medium for global cultural dialogue. Technological mediation does not sever music from its historical roots; rather, it amplifies its capacity to reinterpret tradition while engaging present social

realities and transnational audiences through digital circulation, streaming platforms, and algorithmically curated listening environments.

3. Social Significance of Music in Chinese Culture

Music has always occupied a central place in Chinese cultural life, though its meaning and function have evolved across historical periods and technological transformations. As Frederick Lau (2023) observes, Chinese modernity began to take shape in the late nineteenth century under the pressure of foreign incursions. The modernization of music, therefore, did not follow a simple path of Western imitation but unfolded through imperial institutions, literati traditions and regional practices, each shaped by deeply rooted cultural logics (155). Because Chinese music has long been linked with morality, governance, Confucian ethics and scholarly life, its transformation reflects continuity as much as change (156).

In the present era of digital recording, online circulation and platform culture, music has acquired new roles as a medium for social reflection and expression. Artistic practices increasingly engage questions of memory, authority and cultural preservation. The work of Ai Weiwei illustrates how art, including sound and performance, can challenge dominant narratives and provoke critical dialogue. His well-known act of dropping a 2,000-year-old urn in 1995 symbolized a confrontation with rigid notions of heritage and state control. Through such gestures, Ai has consistently addressed issues of censorship, human rights and historical memory, arguing that the inability to express oneself amounts to exclusion from society and a denial of one's humanity. Born in Beijing in 1957, Ai experienced exile during the Cultural Revolution and later studied in New York before returning to China in 1993. Drawing on Chinese cultural motifs, his work became a platform for social critique, especially concerning state authority and the legacy of Tiananmen. Despite imprisonment and surveillance, his commitment to free expression has remained steadfast, demonstrating how artistic practice can foster public reflection even under constraint.

These developments invite reflection on the broader role of music and art in contemporary China. As Sarah Urist Green (2016)

notes, such artistic acts symbolically challenge fixed narratives of heritage and control. Musicians and artists today, often working within regulatory limits, use technologically mediated spaces to engage with social realities. Thus, Lau’s account of musical modernity and Ai’s artistic activism together reveal how Chinese music and art continue to evolve as culturally grounded yet politically meaningful forms of expression.

4. Revival and Reinterpretation in Chinese Music

Across living cultures, revivalist impulses often arise as responses to the homogenizing pressures of globalization. Consequently, communities revisit inherited traditions and reinterpret them in ways that speak to contemporary realities. In Chinese music, this process is visible when artists combine traditional instruments with innovative compositional approaches, sustaining cultural legacies while reshaping them for new audiences. A helpful framework for understanding such processes comes from Tamara E. Livingston (1999), who describes music revivals as social movements aimed at restoring fading musical systems for the benefit of present society (66). She emphasizes that revivalists often adopt an activist stance, positioning themselves against dominant cultural norms while advocating authenticity and historical continuity. Her model identifies key elements of revival movements such as catalysts, original sources, ideology, discourse, community, organized activity, and supporting industries (69). Livingston later highlights the participatory nature of revivals as spaces of social cohesion and cultural meaning-making - an insight that resonates strongly in today’s digitally networked environments (72). Offering a complementary perspective, Mark Slobin (1983) questions the very term ‘revival,’ suggesting that expressive culture evolves in spirals rather than through simple cycles of decline and rebirth (37). Similarly, Owe Ronström (1996) interprets revival as a shift from ‘tradition’ to ‘heritage,’ (5-20) where cultural practices become conscious resources for negotiating the pressures of modernity. All these viewpoints illuminate how contemporary Chinese musicians engage revival not as a mere restoration of the past, but as a creative reinterpretation. Through technologically

mediated platforms, they renew tradition in ways that promote cultural continuity, social meaning and artistic innovation.

5. Chinese Hip-Hop, Identity and Ecology

The coexistence of traditional and emergent genres in China reveals a striking musical fluidity. Yet the ways these genres intersect with sociopolitical change and technological mediation invite closer reflection. Musical innovation today participates not only in cultural preservation but also in identity formation and subtle responses to shifting cultural norms. A compelling example is the Chengdu rap group Higher Brothers – MaSiWei, (Ma Siwei), DZKnow, (Ding Zhen), Psy.P, (Yang Junyi) and Melo (Xie Yujie) – formed in 2015 through the local collective Chengdu City Rap House. Their initiative shows how Chinese hip-hop combines strong local rootedness with global ambition. Their breakout track *Made in China* (2017) challenges the assumption that Mandarin is ill-suited for rap while asserting cultural confidence on an international stage. Bilingual rhymes, regional references and symbolic imagery create a layered negotiation between local identity and transnational aesthetics. References to Chinese cultural symbols and Psy.P's region-specific lyrics emphasize rootedness in southwest China, even as the music adopts global hip-hop conventions. The song's ironic portrayal of Western dependence on Chinese manufacturing reverses familiar Orientalist power narratives. Yet the feature by American rapper Famous Dex complicates this reversal, reintroducing stereotypical tropes and revealing how identity, power and representation remain entangled in global cultural exchange. Another track, *WeChat*, released in collaboration with the media platform *88rising*, illustrates a strategic shift toward international accessibility. The increased use of English lyrics, global cultural references and collaborations with artists like Keith Ape broaden audience reach while creating multilayered linguistic and visual textures. Rapid editing, stylized visuals and immersive aesthetics reflect the influence of platform-based media cultures on musical expression, where meaning is conveyed as much through image and rhythm as through words.

An ecological perspective deepens this analysis. Catherine

Grant (2012) warns that preservationist approaches can isolate musical traditions from their living cultural environments (36-41). Her discussion of the UNESCO recognition of *Ca trù* shows how heritage frameworks may unintentionally detach practices from community priorities. This insight applies equally to Chinese music: technological mediation should not freeze traditions into static artifacts but enable them to evolve within their socio-cultural ecosystems. All these examples show how Chinese hip-hop operates within technological, cultural and ecological frameworks. Through linguistic diversity, visual experimentation and digital circulation, artists negotiate tensions between authenticity and globalization, preservation and innovation—thereby reflecting broader transformations in contemporary Chinese society.

6. Trap Aesthetics and Linguistic Strategy in *Higher Brothers*

Music theorist Ben Duinker notes that the style of Higher Brothers closely parallels contemporary U.S. trap, marked by sub-bass textures, 808 drums, slower tempos and irregular hi-hat patterns that produce the well-known triplet flow associated with artists such as Young Thug, Migos and Future. This rhythmic design supports dense syllabic delivery that can verge on partial unintelligibility without diminishing aesthetic impact. Scholars including Elsher Abraham and Ashley S. Drew describe this vocal approach as part of what is popularly called “mumble rap,” where phonetic reduction, dialectal variation and vocal texture challenge expectations of lyrical clarity.

According to Elsher Abraham, the above-mentioned styles privilege affective vocal performance over semantic transparency, a tendency amplified by studio technologies, autotune and digital production. Within this context, tracks like *Made in China* and *WeChat* adopt trap’s triplet flow while incorporating Sichuan Mandarin pronunciation, slurred articulation and multilingual phrasing. Their tempos (around 73–75 / 146–150 BPM) link closely with U.S. trap conventions, prompting frequent comparisons with Migos. This partial unintelligibility is not accidental but aesthetic.

Abraham’s research links the stigmatizing label “mumble

rap” to broader attitudes toward African American Vernacular English, arguing that listeners often misrecognize phonetic reduction as deficiency rather than stylistic choice. Journalistic accounts, such as Charley Locke on Young Thug, similarly note how vocal sound can communicate emotion beyond semantic clarity. The voice becomes an instrument shaped by technology as much as by language.

The aesthetic value of such vocal estrangement recalls Viktor Shklovsky’s concept of defamiliarization in *Art as Technique* (1917), where difficulty renews perception. Applied to Chinese popular music, this perspective helps explain why slurred or rapid delivery can enhance listener engagement rather than hinder it. Scholars like Justin Adams Burton further argue that trap’s sonic features carry implicit politics. In China, however, the politics of unintelligibility intersects with state regulation: sonic ambiguity allows expressive space without direct confrontation. This context became especially visible after the 2018 crackdown on rappers such as PG One and Gai. Commentators asked why *Higher Brothers* largely avoided censorship. One explanation lies in style: unlike earlier boom-bap rap with clearly articulated social critique, trap’s dense flow, multilingual phrasing and sonic emphasis render meaning less immediately explicit. Ambiguity, nuance and indeterminacy become protective as well as aesthetic strategies.

Linguistically, *Higher Brothers* move fluidly between Chengdu dialect, Putonghua and English. This multi-accentual repertoire parallels dialect strategies in U.S. hip-hop while remaining regionally grounded. Non-lexical adlibs and interjections—“yeah,” “whoa,” “ay,” along with onomatopoeic sounds like “skrr,” “pong,” or “didi”—shift emphasis from semantic meaning to sonic affect. These vocal gestures, lacking fixed lexical content, evade ideological scrutiny while intensifying emotional texture. Occupying a space between the verbal and the non-verbal, the intelligible and the affective, *Higher Brothers* participate in a globally circulating trap aesthetic while fashioning a localized response to sociopolitical constraints. Through technologically mediated production and circulation, their music demonstrates how rhythmic design, linguistic repertoire and

regulatory context converge to create a form that is aesthetically innovative, globally legible and politically oblique.

7. Self-Censorship and Expressive Negotiation

In contemporary China, universities, cultural institutions and state authorities are often positioned as custodians of moral and cultural order. Within this framework, censorship is commonly justified as a means of safeguarding social values, particularly in relation to pornography, drug culture and public morality. Yet the most pervasive regulatory force is frequently indirect: self-censorship practiced by media companies, digital platforms and artists who seek to maintain cooperative relations with authorities and avoid sanctions. Against this backdrop, music becomes a technologically mediated arena where expressive freedom is negotiated rather than openly contested. Digital platforms, recording technologies and algorithmic circulation systems simultaneously enable creativity and delimit what may be publicly articulated. Musicians increasingly employ metaphor, allegory, coded language and stylistic indirection to register social reflection without provoking overt intervention. Expression is thus displaced from explicit critique to aesthetic strategy.

Empirical work by Ke Nie (2021) shows, through quantitative analysis of music data, that regulatory pressures reshape rather than suppress creativity within Chinese hip-hop. Constraints generate adaptive strategies that reconfigure musical style, lyrical delivery and thematic framing. This adaptive creativity is visible beyond hip-hop as well. Experimental rock, electronic music and revivalist genres often explore themes such as urban alienation, identity and political tension through sonic experimentation rather than direct statement. Drawing on revival theories associated with Kay Kaufman Shelemay and Tamara E. Livingston, Serena Yiai Wang argues that contemporary Chinese musicians blend inherited traditions with global genres to produce hybrid forms that are culturally grounded yet stylistically innovative. Revival operates not as restoration but as re-composition. Through new arrangements, recontextualized motifs and inventive lyrical techniques, musicians create works that resonate with contemporary social realities while retaining

historical depth. Performances, online dissemination and community-based musical events further transform music into a medium of shared experience and subtle commentary. In this way, technologically mediated Chinese music sustains cross-cultural dialogue while carefully keeping up the balance between regulation, creativity and social expression.

8. Conclusion

Contemporary Chinese music illustrates how artistic expression functions as a dynamic site of interaction among culture, technology and political life. In the digital era, music extends beyond performance venues into platform-based circulation, recordings and transnational collaborations, where new modes of communication coexist with new forms of regulation. Within this environment, musicians continually negotiate tradition and modernity, continuity and transformation. Amid surveillance, regulatory frameworks and implicit pressures toward conformity, musical creativity often turns to indirect, symbolic and stylistic modes of expression. Innovation in sound design, genre hybridity and coded expression enables artists to engage social realities without overt confrontation. Technological infrastructures thus function ambivalently: they expand the reach of music while simultaneously shaping the conditions under which it can be produced and shared. Artistic practice becomes a platform for negotiation rather than a space of unqualified freedom. By reworking inherited musical traditions within contemporary forms, Chinese musicians maintain cultural rootedness while engaging global influences. Music, in this context, serves as a medium of community formation, cultural dialogue and reflective engagement with present social conditions. Technologically mediated musical creativity, therefore, demonstrates how art can remain a vital arena for meaning-making, connection and thoughtful response within complex socio-political landscapes.

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