Protesting with Text and Image: Four Publications on the 2019 Pro-democracy Movement from Hong Kong Civil Society

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“Rappers React to Covid-19”: What the Mobilisation of Chinese Rappers Teaches Us about Artistic Engagement in Times of Crisis

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“it’s for the soldiers fighting in the hospitals all night
Thanks for the lanterns lighting up the dark”
— AR ft. Q.luv

The ad hoc coming together of popular musicians to record discs and/or perform on stage with the aim of raising funds for philanthropic purposes is known as charity rock. Charity songs rely on the media system and the recording industry to transmit a “collective conscience likely to induce change” (Carlet and Seca 2005). The mobilisation of artists in times of humanitarian crisis is far from new. George Harrison (1971) and Bob Geldof (1984, 1986) were the first celebrities to use their fame and artistic network to support populations in danger. In China, the first recording of a charity song (gongyi gequ 公益歌曲) dates back to 1986, when a hundred young singers dressed in yellow and pink jackets sang “Let the World be Full of Love” (rang shijie chongman ai 让世界充满爱) in the Beijing Workers’ Stadium to celebrate the International Year of Peace. More recently, new charity songs have emerged following certain catastrophes: “Hand in hand” (shouqianshou 手牵手) in Taiwan and “Walk All the Way” (yilu tongxing 一路同行) during the SARS epidemic (2003); and “Wings in the Wind” (feng zhongyi yuyi 風中的羽翼), “The Same Dream” (tongyiye mengxiang 同一个夢想), and “Promise” (chengnuo 承諾) after the Wenchuan earthquake (Sichuan, 2008). During the first weeks of the Covid-19 epidemic that became a pandemic, a not inconsiderable number of charity songs were recorded by Chinese musicians, with technological developments facilitating online artistic collaborations whilst at the same time helping them reach a wider audience thanks to streaming platforms. On the initiative of iQiyi, “Let the World be Full of Love” was revived and recorded by international singers and a hundred Chinese artists under the direction of Guo Feng. The music streaming platforms also opened sections to songs dedicated to Wuhan and the pandemic (shengyuan wuhan 聲援武漢), where amateur artists rubbed shoulders with professionals.

Chinese rappers were amongst the first artists to act in the days following the quarantining of the country, providing observers with an illustration of the social and political role hip-hop has acquired in just a few years. From an underground practice adopted by marginalised young people, rap has become music for a wide audience in China, notably thanks to the success of the programme The Rap of China (Zhongguo you xia 中國有嘻哈), broadcasted in 2017 on iQiyi. As a result of their increased visibility on Chinese social media, certain rappers have become very well-known (Flew, Ryan, and Su 2019), to the extent that the doors of CCTV’s 2020 New Year’s Gala were opened to this type of music. This whirlwind success amongst young people in China has nonetheless been carefully controlled by the authorities, who censure aspects considered unsuited to the political context, whilst favouring artists who embrace the national narrative (Amar 2018).

The digitalisation of music consumption as well as shortcomings in the system of protection of royalties in China has contributed to the tightening of controls on the Chinese music industry and on the content of the work published, allowing the authorities to decide which songs to make available to Chinese listeners. In this respect, several academics have therefore been able to demonstrate the relationships (voluntary or otherwise) between Chinese hip-hop and the central government (Zou 2019; Gu and Zhou 2019) whilst voices have been raised abroad criticising its representatives’ lack of political engagement.

1. “夢想” (mengxiang), 27 January 2020. See the list of songs at the end of the article for the original titles.
2. iQiyi 愛奇藝 is a Chinese video streaming platform similar to Netflix.
In the present circumstances, it is interesting to examine the way in which Chinese rappers used their art during the first month of the Covid-19 pandemic by developing a non-official— but not necessarily subversive— discourse on the health crisis. Between 23 January and 26 February 2020, 21 songs on this theme were put on the Internet, and a considerable number of rappers expressed themselves via posts on the Sina Weibo microblogging site and on Instagram. Although this form of action differs from the classic charity rock model, it nonetheless enables us to analyse a public and artistic expression of opinion in the midst of a health crisis as well as the fresh political tensions it has brought to the surface in China. Acting on the principle that catastrophes influence the production of music on occasion but that music also nourishes the narrative that is constructed from the events, might it not therefore be appropriate to examine the significance of music production in China in a time of crisis?

**From charity song to Chinese-style useful work**

The major artistic and humanitarian actions of the twentieth century have been severely criticised in the past for their construction of a quasi-mythological scenography in which “big-hearted” celebrities spontaneously and disinterestedly engage with the victims of disasters (Carlet and Seca 2005). Above all, as with humanitarian songs, Chinese artists who take action usually do “useful work” by amassing important symbolic capital that will later serve their careers (Velasco-Pufleau 2013). At the beginning of the pandemic, in January 2020, Chinese rappers found themselves from one day to the next with no stage to perform on following the closure of clubs and concert halls as well as the cancellation of the spring festivals. In all, almost 20,000 shows were cancelled or postponed in three months, engendering losses estimated at two billion RMB for the Chinese music industry. Although this period might seem to favour creativity, since artists have more freedom of action, it differs from the classic period during which rappers expressed themselves via posts on the Sina Weibo microblogging site and Instagram. Although this form of action differs from the classic charity rock model, it nonetheless enables us to analyse a public and artistic expression of opinion in the midst of a health crisis as well as the fresh political tensions it has brought to the surface in China. Acting on the principle that catastrophes influence the production of music on occasion but that music also nourishes the narrative that is constructed from the events, might it not therefore be appropriate to examine the significance of music production in China in a time of crisis?

The rise of music production at home and the impossibility of performing on stage have, for example, incited certain Chinese rappers to record songs on the pandemic for purely commercial ends. This is the case with Masiwei 馬思唯 and KnowKnow, where the title and sleeve of the song “Mask” lead one to imagine a link with Covid-19 whilst in fact it is a love story with simple, universal lyrics. Issued a few days before the release of Masiwei’s first solo album, the song reveals an underlying market strategy that has provoked a great deal of criticism from listeners. The Sichuanese singers Vava and Wang Yitai 王以太 also recorded a song whose promotional strategy, heavily reinforced by teasing from a recording studio in Los Angeles, reveals an objectivity that is more commercial than humanitarian. The formalism and professionalism that surrounded the promotional campaign for “Life is Beautiful” also tend to call into question the spontaneity and disinterested nature of their initiative.

In attaining a form of popular success, rap in China has been transformed under the effect of a commodification favoured by the involvement of major brands and advertisers. However, the main key to success for a pop artist in China remains the compatibility of their work with the national ideology (Fung 2008). In 2017, the popular success of the first season of the programme *The Rap of China*, which amassed almost three billion online views, led the General Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT—now the NRTA, National Radio and Television Administration) to temporarily bar representatives of hip-hop culture from access to the national media (Amar 2018). The return of the programme the following year was subject to strict observance of the concept of “positive energy” (zheng nengliang 正能量), a term used by official propaganda to restrict public debate to a non-adversarial ideology that prevents the construction of counter-discourse (Chen and Wang 2020). The development of Chinese rap therefore falls in line with Xi Jinping’s pronouncement on the arts in 2014: obscurity (esu 恐怖) and vulgarity (disu 低俗), singled out in a communication issued by the SAPPRFT, have disappeared from consumer formats. During the health crisis, this control of creativity can be seen in the songs produced by rappers. The titles of the songs published in the two first weeks that followed the quarantining of Wuhan reflect real optimism in the face of disaster: “Tomorrow All Will Be Well,” “Hope,” “Roll on Spring, Can’t Wait to See You.” In these songs, the artists use the vocabulary

Illustration 1: Extract from the song “Mask” (口罩 – Masiwei, KnowKnow). “I give you my mask, when the epidemic breaks out, my love is the antidote.” Credit: screenshot by the author.


11. “Mask” 呼啸 (Wang Yitai) and Knowing 唱 (Xia Peng and KnowKnow) recorded a song whose promotional strategy, heavily reinforced by teasing from a recording studio in Los Angeles, reveals a commercial strategy that surrounds the promotional campaign for “Life is Beautiful” also tend to call into question the spontaneity and disinterested nature of their initiative.


of improvement to create a positive message underlined by melodious instrumentation. Through their words, the rappers send their support to the Chinese people and call for solidarity and vigilance, reinforcing the national narrative shaped by the crisis.

**The doctor: A depoliticised and consensual figure**

Like the government and national media during the crisis, many rappers have used the figure of the doctor in their songs, sometimes presented as a national hero, sometimes likened to a soldier going into battle. The Guangdong rapper JR FOG was the first to dedicate a song to them, entitled, *Heroes*. In the lyrics we find several metonymies commonly used to describe doctors in Chinese propaganda, “white coats” (*baise dagua* 白色大褂), “heroes in white coats” (*baise yifu de yingxiong* 白色衣服的英雄), and “white angels” (*baise de tianshi* 白色的天使).

等你凯旋
Waiting for your triumph

白色衣服的英雄 義無反顧對抗疫情我心痛
Heroes in white clothes, look back to fight the epidemic

他們鬆開了摯愛的手 揹在了最前方的危險中
They let go the hands of their beloved ones, get in the way to face the danger

沒有什麼能沖散 一心的萬眾 一切在掌控
Nothing can break the heart of the people, everything is under control

加油武漢 加油中國 加油英雄
Come on Wuhan, come on China, come on heroes

寶石 GEM, the first rapper to have taken part in CCTV’s New Year gala, also issued a song dedicated to the doctors: “Going to War” (*chuzheng 出征*). He links his words to the warrior universe of General Yue Fei 岳飛, taking up the verses of one of his poems: 滿江紅 (*manjianghong*). In this text, the rapper likens the figure of the doctor to that of the fighter and soldier and casts the virus as an enemy (*dikai* 被敵) to be eliminated (*miediao*). But over and above the words, the illustrations used by these two rappers also reveal the proximity of the official discourse and that of music composition at the start of the health crisis. The sleeves that accompany the songs use the same illustration of a doctor seen from the back, wearing a white coat and attaching a mask to his face. The video clips, in their role of “political images” (Gow 1994), use the same illustrations as the national media. Pictures of hospital staff hard at work, patients being taken in charge, crying families, and the soldiers of the People’s Liberation Army on a war footing succeed each other. Despite their white coats and faces marked by effort, the doctors are re-humanised with the help of sequences that show them united, hugging each other, or writing their names on their coats. We also see Dr. Zhong Nanshan 鐘南山, “SARS heroes,” the construction of Wuhan Hospital in less than ten days, as well as Chinese factories mass-producing masks and medicines. The staging and rhythm show a China that is mobilised, organised, and determined to combat the virus, visual elements of a rhetoric that has enabled the nationalist propaganda that followed to affirm the “superiority of the Chinese model” and its “victory in the People’s war” being fought against Covid-19.

The figure of the doctor, and more broadly, the world of the hospital, gives Chinese rappers a depoliticised and consensual environment that allows them to construct a narrative of the health crisis that does not contradict the official narrative. The use of figures of speech and general, imprecise terms also allows them not to take a stand at a time in the crisis when the authorities are dissociating the good doctor (Xu Hui 徐辉) from the bad (Li Wenliang 李文亮). The choice of images therefore reveals a partisan policy, since the 寶石 GEM and JR FOG clips offer a certain picture of the crisis, preferable to other more critical images such as those of the citizen journalists Fang Bin 方斌 and Chen Qiushi 陳秋實.

**Implied criticism**

In the first weeks of the pandemic, the death of Li Wenliang, problems with the distribution of resources by humanitarian associations, and Xi Jinping’s handling of the crisis gave grounds for fresh criticism of the authorities by the Chinese people and led to a great wave of online protest. As for music, whilst the 13 songs published in the two weeks following the quarantining of Wuhan chose positive subjects (solidarity, hope) and catchy instruments, the next batch of songs adopted a different tone. The vocabulary used in the texts changed, and certain rappers now openly expressed their pessimism, as in “Degenerate DEMO,” “Blind” (*Xiazi*ная punitive example), “In the.cz.....” (*Czbd*, 2020).

"Should I Say I Love You" (JD) presented on the music streaming platform 音乐宝 (NetEase).
Credit: screenshot by the author

"Should I Say I Love You" (JD) presented on YouTube.
"When death comes suddenly, there is no time to get ready to go.
The attack by the virus is so natural, its dance so full of grace and charm."
Credit: screenshot by the author

On 12 February 2020, whilst the country was at a standstill and the handling of the crisis continued to be the subject of discussion on the Internet, MC Guangguang 光光, one of the veterans of Chinese hip-hop and from Nanking, published the song "Blind" (Xiazi 晦子). Whilst never referring to the health crisis and therefore circumventing censorship, the rapper made one of the most explicit criticisms of the handling of information and the health disaster.25

Illustration 3. Words of “Should I Say I Love You” (JD) presented on the music streaming platform 音乐宝 (NetEase).

Illustration 4. Words of “Should I Say I Love You” (JD) presented on YouTube.

In the face of an unprecedented health crisis, the Chinese rap scene showed itself to be reactive and mobilised by recording and releasing a considerable number of songs in record time, whilst at the same time moving away from the charity song model that had prevailed until then. Artistic expression on the pandemic participated at first in the general messaging on the crisis27 by praising health care staff and expressing the support of rappers for the inhabitants of Wuhan. However, the development of Covid-19 and the management of events in China have changed the nature of mobilisation amongst musicians. The body of songs listed suggests a critical turning point adopted by certain rappers that make use of a realistic vocabulary and use metaphors and double meanings in MC Guangguang’s text may legitimately cast doubt on his message but, considering the circumstances under which the song was released, it would seem totally improbable that his audience did not possess the keys that would enable them to decode and understand its words.

Conclusion

In the face of an unprecedented health crisis, the Chinese rap scene showed itself to be reactive and mobilised by recording and releasing a considerable number of songs in record time, whilst at the same time moving away from the charity song model that had prevailed until then. Artistic expression on the pandemic participated at first in the general messaging on the crisis27 by praising health care staff and expressing the support of rappers for the inhabitants of Wuhan. However, the development of Covid-19 and the management of events in China have changed the nature of mobilisation amongst musicians. The body of songs listed suggests a critical turning point adopted by certain rappers that make use of a realistic vocabulary and use indirect writing to avoid censure by the Chinese authorities. Although singing in a time of crisis would previously seemed to be a cathartic exercise

26. “光光新歌 我像個瞎子只能看到你你让我看到的” (Guangguang xing : wo xiang ge xiazi man who can only see what you let me see), Xiaoqiang Shushu, Xiha China, February 2020, https://www.xichina.com/42928.html [accessed on 30 October 2020].
27. The song by 小李 Pissy “明天要好的” was shared on the Weibo account of People’s Daily (人民日報) on 29 January 2020, https://www.weibo.com/2803301701/rkn29rt?type=comment [accessed on 5 March 2020].
in which celebrities expressed their commitment in large ecumenical gatherings, the abundance of Chinese rap songs at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic reveals a change of approach in the artists’ humanitarian engagement that does not, for all that, escape the critics. Finally, it is perhaps the reaction of an internet user on Douban that best illustrates the sentiment shared by many observers of Chinese hip-hop at the beginning of the pandemic:

唱歌要是有用的話 韓紅不比你會唱 她 什麼不去唱歌去運物資？
If singing were useful, Han Hong would sing better than you.
But she does not sing, she acts by transporting supplies.

List of songs studied in this article (in chronological order)
25 January 2020. 惡童 Etong, ETON. “共渡” (Gongdu, Spending Time Together).
2 February 2020. NOUS. “未命名” (Wumian).
5 February 2020. 孫旭 Sun X. “健康宅” (Jiankang zhai, Healthy House).
5 February 2020. JR FOG. “Heroes.”
8 February 2020. 寶石 GEM, Baoshi GEM. “出征” (Chuzheng, Going to War).
9 February 2020. KIT, 易.). “空城” (Kongcheng, Empty City).
20 February 2020. XZT, 直火幫 Zhi Huobang, “鏡子” (Jingzi, Mirror).
26 February 2020. JD. “Should I Say I Love You.”

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