

**CHINESE HIP HOP/RAP: A SUB-  
CULTURE CASE STUDY IN  
SOFT CULTURAL POWER**

LIM Tai Wei

*EAI Background Brief No. 1726*

Date of Publication: 25 August 2023

## Executive Summary

1. Like K-pop and J-pop hip-hop, Chinese hip-hop has a “loan-borrow relationship” from important African American hip-hop culture and Northeast Asian popular culture.
2. By 2017, Chinese hip-hop was said to have become culturally mainstream almost overnight, attributable to public interest generated by the Chinese hip-hop reality show “The Rap of China” that became viral and attracted 100 million views after only four hours of airtime.
3. The proliferation of another genre of hip-hop in the form of street dance has seen national organisations muscling into the scene. Hip-hop street dance culture in China was popularised by street dancing movies featuring pioneering and iconic dancers like the late choreographer Tao Jin, who was made famous by his performance in the 1988 movie “Rock Kids” directed by Tian Zhuangzhuang.
4. There are about one million people working in the street dance industry, with a huge fan base of nearly eight million in China, mostly of the young.
5. The Chinese authorities have linked music with public morality. Traditional Chinese culture, languages, cultural nationalism imageries, patriotic themes and other elements that can contribute to ‘maintaining the integrity of Chineseness’ were encouraged in the songs but vulgarity, violence and misogyny have progressively been forbidden on media platforms and performances.
6. The state was able to mobilise groups like the China Oriental Performing Arts Group (with history dating back to the 1950s choreographing grand dance performances and facilitating cultural exchanges) to teach street dancers in cooperation with the General Administration of Sport of China and the Chinese Olympic Committee.
7. When the International Olympic Committee officially elevated street dance to a medalled event for the 2024 Summer Olympics in Paris, it opened up a whole new

avenue for state involvement in the activity which had suddenly transformed from an organic activity to a state-level competitive sport with potential nationalistic symbolism.

8. The musical genre's ability to encourage self-reflection of social ills and bad public behaviour has also been singled out by hip-hop artistes and rappers. It enables the community to compel offenders to self-reflect on their anti-social discriminatory behaviour. The hip-hop rapper community has become a self-policing bastion of progressive social morality.
9. Besides ethnic unity, Chinese hip hop and rap appear to bring equity to gender issues in China as well. Hip hop and rap also allow talented individuals to transcend gender barriers in traditional male-privileged Confucian China.
10. Chinese hip-hop and rap scenes are starting to make their appearances on the regional circuit as a testimony to their growing cultural soft power. The genre, along with K-pop and J-pop hip hop, is making its presence felt even in the original land of hip-hop culture in the United States.