

Superdiversity on the Internet: A Case from China

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Abstract

The Internet is the superdiverse space *par excellence* – a space of seemingly endless possibilities for self-expression and community formation. Yet, online environments are not characterized only by happy heterogeneity: rather, we are able to see multiple layers of normativity in the form of self-, peer- and state-imposed norms. That is, though allowing for the continuous diversification of diversity, the Internet is also a space where diversity is controlled, ordered and curtailed. This paper illustrates these dynamics through an examination of a Beijing-based rapper and his online activities. What emerges from this investigation is a superdiverse as well as normative space where diversity is constrained by a complex of normative struggles, as new forms of meaning-making are accompanied with new systems of normativity. The driving force in such increasingly online normative processes is, instead of locality or localization, the quest for authenticity.

1. Introduction: The superdiverse Internet

The Internet can be seen as a major mechanism in globalization processes and in the creation of superdiversity (Vertovec 2006, 2010).¹ The World Wide Web opens up entirely new channels of communication, generating new linguistic and cultural forms, new ways of forming and maintaining contacts, networks and groups, and new opportunities for identity-making (e.g. Sundén 2003; Baron 2008; boyd² 2009). Technology has made it increasingly easy to transgress one's immediate life-world, extend it to and beyond the screen, and engage in local as well as trans-local activities through previously unavailable means. All of this cannot be ignored in explaining the world today, and discussions on super-

diversity should take into account the significance of the Internet in complexifying the nature of human communication and engagement with others, of transnational movements and migration, and of social and cultural life in general. However, we should also be wary of too much optimism in this respect. The so-called 'Internet revolution' witnessed in the past three decades or so entices many with the promise of a superdiverse space *par excellence* – a space of seemingly endless possibilities for self-expression, individual life projects and community formation. Prevailing Internet ideologies often present us with an image of an online world saturated with opportunities and aspirations where one is able to indulge in infinite creativity in imagining and constructing both self and other.

While it may be a truism that life on the Internet is overwhelmingly innovative and diverse, it is necessary to recognize that this happy heterogeneity is only part of the scene. Much like in the 'real' world offline, rules and norms are also to be complied with in virtual spaces. As we

¹ This paper has been written in the context of the research project *Transformations of the Public Sphere* (TRAPS) at the Department of Culture Studies, University of Tilburg.

² danah boyd does not use capitals in writing her name and we adopt this preference when referring to her.

have demonstrated elsewhere (Varis, Wang & Du 2011), constraints do not only exist online, but are as important as the opportunities offered by the Internet: they have determining effects on the way Internet users are able to deploy and develop identity repertoires, engage with others and form communities. While enabling continuous 'diversification of diversity' (Vertovec 2006: 1), the Internet is also a space where diversity is controlled, ordered and curtailed. This control involves both explicit forms of normativity – e.g. policies for Internet use as observable in different geopolitical contexts such as China – and more implicit ones that emerge and are negotiated and monitored in online micro practices. Normativity online is no less important or complex than normativity offline; on the contrary, life online is also overlaid by the overwhelming speed and scope of communication as well as unprecedented heteroglossia, all of which further complicates the picture. As both a result and consequence of this heterogeneity and polycentricity, engaging in new superdiverse online environments often requires orientating in specific ways towards much more nuanced and more mixed, scaled forms of normativity than before, as a broad range of scales of orientation influences actions online. That is, in order to successfully communicate and engage in (sub)cultural action, it may be necessary to observe several different layers of normativity through which superdiversity (online) is controlled and shaped by multiscale forces.

Attending to these dynamics between freedom, creativity and normativity is crucial for obtaining a detailed and nuanced understanding of superdiversity on the Internet; yet the way in which such dynamics work, and, more fundamentally, what forms of normativity are at play and to what extent they organize online practices, still needs to be further interrogated. Attention to the work of order, coercion and power in cyberspace is needed to meet the current agenda for enriched theorization of concepts such as 'superdiversity' and 'globalization' in social sciences (see Blommaert & Rampton in this issue; Blommaert 2010; Blommaert & Varis 2011).

This paper is committed to the tasks outlined above, and we illustrate the exercises of norma-

tivity and creativity on the Internet by examining a case from China³ – a Beijing-based rapper and his online engagement with the global flows of hip-hop cultures. There are compelling reasons for this focus, the most elementary one being that it offers a rich instance of semiotization (i.e. meaning-creation using various semiotic resources) in online communication and identity-making in the context of globalization. Its use of multi-modal (texts, pictures and acoustics) and multilingual (Chinese, English and Korean) resources and its metapragmatic narrative on cultural practices (how to do hip-hop online), as we shall see soon, are all sites for the production of creativity as well as normativity. Secondly, as 'Internet hip-hop' – both created in online spaces and published online – it brings together two typical forms of superdiversity in the context of cultural globalization. Hip-hop is "the most profound and the most perplexing cultural, musical and linguistic movement of the late 20th/early 21st century" (Alim 2009: 3) with highly heteroglossic, innovative language and other cultural practices (e.g. Alim et al. 2009; Pennycook 2003, 2007a, 2007b), and its emergence online as an Internet subculture hugely expands its potential for superdiversity while at the same time appears shaped by normative forces.

As will surface later, the involvement of the two vehicles of superdiversity in our case (i.e. the semiotization of Chinese hip-hop) does not necessarily lead to doubled freedom and creativity in discursive behaviours. Rather, each opportunity for creativity goes hand in hand with normativity that is multiply layered and operates on different scale levels. Further, our case study assumes an empirical, 'bottom-up' ethnographic approach (e.g. Blommaert 2005; Cora Garcia et al. 2009;

³ The case discussed here is based on (Internet) fieldwork by Xuan Wang between autumn 2010 and spring 2011 as part of her Ph.D. research. The fieldwork involved an initial four-month period of online observation of hip-hop related activities surrounding MC Liangliang and his crew (musical performances, blogging, online discussions with fans and 'enemies'). After some online interaction and interviews with MC Liangliang by the researcher from outside China, a focused interview with him was conducted in Beijing in early 2011. This was followed by further ongoing contacts and observations via the Internet.

Hymes 1996; Kozinets 2010; Juffermans 2010; Rampton 2007). This allows us to develop more detailed and sophisticated understandings of this new communicative environment and how it works through the fine-grains of language use by the Internet users, as argued for in the position paper of this issue. Finally, we engage critically with China which, though at times projected as being in the periphery from the globalization centres such as the nation-states in Western Europe, provides an interesting case of engagement with both superdiversity and normativity in the virtual space. China's Internet development is impressive, but is also known for stringent control and censorship, this being a clear example of 'language policing' (Blommaert et al. 2010) from the state level. As our case suggests, however, there is more to it than this: normativity can also be imposed from below – by oneself or one's peers – and this introduces further, intricate local and translocal systems of normativity – the micropolitics of language and/or cultural policing that can be found in all interactions in different social spaces and contexts.

In what follows, we first situate our case through a discussion on the emerging superdiversity on the Internet in China, and hip-hop in China. We will then move on to discuss our Chinese case to illustrate how what could be termed a *global super-vernacular* (i.e. the global hip-hop culture) is creatively employed by a Chinese rapper online, and how this super-vernacular is spoken with an original 'local Chinese accent' – all the while strictly adhering to a certain complex of norms. The complex of creativity and norms will ultimately lead us to the notion of *authenticity* which, essentially, is about discursive orientations towards a specific configuration of norms in order to 'pass as' someone or something (see Blommaert & Varis 2011). Instead of locality or localization, it is authenticity that is the driving force in the superdiverse effort examined here.

2. Internet cultures in China

China became a more active participant in globalization processes two decades ago, and soon became considered a rising member of the global 'network society' (Castells 1996/2000, 2004) via

rapid, large-scale adoption of new technologies, such as the Internet, to facilitate and advance its economic modernization. Today China is home to the largest number of Internet users, or 'netizens', in the world, reaching 457 million by 2010⁴, more than the entire population of the United States. Its Internet penetration rate has reached over 34%, topping the world average. All these developments have taken place within the short span of just over a decade. The speed, volume and intensity of these developments are astonishing, even if rather uneven in terms of geographical and social distribution and accessibility (see Lu et al. 2002 for an overview of the Internet development in China).

The impact of 'the spirit of Chinese informationalism' (Qiu 2004: 99) is not, however, exclusively economic. Like in other parts of the world, in China the Internet is playing an ever more prominent role in the transformation of the public sphere and civil society, fostering the formation of an emerging network society and virtual communities, offering new space and resources for transnational and translocal engagements, and giving rise to enhanced social mobility and various empowering political, cultural and personal manoeuvres and contestations (see e.g. Leibold 2010; Li 2010; Lo 2009; Yang 2003a, 2003b, 2003c). The scope of opportunities, creativity and freedom introduced and sustained by the Internet is tremendous, even though China also implements explicit regulations on Internet use through heavy censorship (MacKinnon 2008; Qiu 1999/2000). The new opportunities are perhaps most notable in relation to political movements addressing questions such as freedom of speech, citizen activism and democracy in Chinese society (e.g. MacKinnon 2009; Qiu 2004; Schroeder 2005; Yang 2009), not to mention the fast expansion of e-business and consequently booming economic and social infrastructures based on telecommunications (e.g. Liang 2010). The emergence of Internet subcultures is another remarkable signification of globalization and its superdiverse face in Chinese society, es-

⁴ See, for example, a news report (Li 2011) in People's Daily, China's largest broadsheet, on March 30, 2011.

pecially in mediating the global flows of different forms of popular culture, such as movies, fashion and music.

Hip-hop today is a linguistically and culturally superdiverse phenomenon, with local interpretations of the global flourishing, also – and perhaps particularly so – on the Internet. ‘Internet hip-hop’ is also a good example of an Internet subculture – or, using different terminology, a ‘super-group’ in Arnaut’s terms (see Blommaert & Rampton in this issue) – that brings together great numbers of individuals who via the Internet engage with, circulate, appropriate and modify global hip-hop flows otherwise less visible and accessible for them. This is particularly prominent and relevant in China, as ‘Internet hip-hop’, known as *wangluo xiha*, occupies much of the hip-hop scene there. While still negotiating its way into the highly normative cultural and social mainstream, the globally available format of hip-hop is spreading rapidly and, primarily, via the Internet among the grassroots Chinese. Even if the visibility of the translocal practices of hip-hop is largely restricted to the online space, the degree of diversification in their uptake in China is extraordinary. Complex translocal, transnational networks are developed, and large numbers of locally appropriated versions of hip-hop begin to emerge on the Internet, varying greatly in terms of language features, cultural styles and political motivations. MC Liangliang (the focus of this study), whose online engagement with hip-hop has gained him considerable credibility among hip-hop and youth communities in China, and connected him to the wider part of global hip-hop flows, is one example of these processes. The translocal flows, thanks to the Internet, also reach marginalized individuals in remote locations, as in the case of a dialect rapper from Enshi – the periphery of globalization in China – that we have recorded elsewhere (see Varis, Wang & Du 2011, Wang 2010). This mobility offered by hip-hop globalization online is also observable in other parts of the world, for instance, in the case of Amoc, the Sami rapper in Lapland of northern Finland (e.g. Ridanpää & Pasanen 2009 and Pietikäinen 2010; Leppänen & Pietikäinen 2010). The opportunities in such

cases are as much about having access to and being able to participate in the global as they are about the appropriation and (re)invention of the local. What is at stake in the mixture of global and local is authenticity – the defining feature of global hip-hop ideology (e.g. Pennycook 2007a).

To ‘keep it real’, i.e. to be authentic in hip-hop terms, involves the creative blending of local and translocal resources while also orienting towards different normative scales that are brought together at the moment of creation. To ‘keep it real’ is indeed to speak a ‘resistance vernacular’ (Potter 1995) that demonstrates rebelliousness and deviation, or creativity by rendering what is global with local features. But creativity is always tied to normativity (how to be authentic and ‘keep it real’), and such dynamics are also relevant on the Internet – if not particularly so, because of the reduced prominence of locality in online spaces. Further, even though the Internet has hugely expanded our potential for creativity, normative systems do impinge upon online meaning-making. This, in the case of our rapper in China, also includes the state-imposed control of ‘unacceptable’ online behaviour by means of content and/or even website removal; that is, the products of one’s creativity can even be completely removed should they fail to adhere to the prevailing norms established for online behaviour. The dynamics between normativity, especially in relation to the production of hip-hop authenticity, and creativity will be of central concern in our examination of a 26-year-old Beijing-based rapper and his online hip-hop – i.e. the products of his (sub)cultural activity that he posts online.

3. ‘Real hip-hop’: A case from China

3.1 Creativity and normativity online

Before entering the world of online Chinese hip-hop it should be observed that posting music and lyrics online is of course not specific to Chinese hip-hop or even hip-hop in general – all kinds of artists all over the world publish their products on the Internet. This has fundamentally changed the economy and distribution of music as such: the world of music has become notably smaller and more accessible in many respects (consider

only the effect of MySpace in the global diversification of the music scene), and it is perhaps realistic to say that music producers independent of big industries can much more easily gain visibility for themselves and speak to audiences otherwise out of their reach. This also means that, despite the control (and homogenizing, de-diversifying influence) of huge industries in the business, the availability of different kinds of cultural products is, thanks to the Internet, more widespread than ever before. That is, the Internet allows for the emergence and visibility of cultural forms otherwise relatively, if not entirely, invisible to audiences and thus facilitates the diversification of culture and forms of cultural production in circulation.

The Chinese case investigated here – MC 良良, or MC Liangliang⁵ – is a case in point: we are looking at a rapper now based in Beijing (where he migrated a couple of years ago) who without the Internet would probably have much less visibility, and be able to reach far fewer people⁶. The Internet allows him to post his music and lyrics online and also to embrace a certain kind of identity – to engage in the global hip-hop semiotics in an unprecedented manner. Online environments offer us these possibilities, simply provided that there is access to a computer and an Internet connection. It would be an exaggeration to suggest that without the Internet none of this would happen, or that this rapper in Beijing would not have the global semiotics and cultural flows at his disposal – it is rather that the Internet facilitates all this, and allows for forms of engagement and participation that would not exist without it.

The Internet, of course, is not only a space for unlimited and unrestrained flows. The rules of engagement have (at least in many cases) not been established a priori, i.e. norms are

emergent, and this goes for all kinds of norms – those of communication, (sub)culturalization and identity-making. The fact that in many cases the norms have not been pre-established does not, therefore, mean that there are no norms, but that they are often (re)worked in the process of engagement on online fora. It should also be borne in mind that the global cultural flows within our reach thanks to the Internet are not only liberating and allowing for more diversity, but also provide templates and blueprints for (sub)cultural action, and therefore also constrain online creativity.

Global cultures, codes and flows, however, do not work according to a deterministic logic: they are not swallowed without chewing, so to speak. In this process of ‘chewing’ the global semiotic resources, potentially very interesting things happen, as ‘global’ and ‘local’ resources become creatively blended. As a result, global codes with a local accent appear. Global codes or templates are what we can call *super-vernaculars* – global ways of fashioning identities, forms of communication, genres, etc. recognizable for members of emergent super-groups. These super-vernaculars become recognized as certain things because they share certain recognizable features, and through the re-enactment and re-circulation of these, *super-communities* are created and subsequently sustained. To put it otherwise, certain shared indexical orders⁷ are acknowledged and recognized as belonging to a certain super-vernacular – for instance, in the case discussed here, that of ‘hip-hopness’. These global orders offer different affordances – resources and opportunities for meaning-making – for those appropriating these large-scale scripts and blending them with local orders, and one such affordance is de-globalization. As a result of such appropriations, *dialects of the super-vernacular* appear. This is

⁵ All translations from Chinese to English in this paper are ours.

⁶ It is important to note that although we describe Beijing as MC Liangliang’s ‘base’ in the sense of physical location, we regard his hip-hop activities as *translocal* rather than bound to locality (i.e. Beijing) as these activities are essentially Internet-based. The specific relevance of the locality of Beijing is beyond the scope and outside the focus of the present paper, and is addressed elsewhere (Wang 2011).

⁷ ‘Indexical orders’ captures the idea that the meanings attached to semiotic signs (be they forms of language use, pieces of clothing, etc.) are not random, but systematic, stratified and context-specific: we attribute meaning to signs according to conventionalized, normative patterns. For an accessible account, see Blommaert (2005).

what we shall now illustrate through the case of MC Liangliang and his posse.

3.2 MC Liangliang

Let us start with the rapper himself, MC Liangliang, or Liangliang as many of his fans refer to him. This name, as is common for both online and hip-hop names, is of course a pseudonym although, interestingly, 'Liang' is taken from his real name. His name also mixes the global hip-hop English 'MC' with the Chinese 'Liangliang', marking him as a member of the global hip-hop community, and, simultaneously, as a member of a narrower hip-hop niche, i.e. the Chinese hip-hop community. However, what is equally intriguing is that according to Liangliang, he is not an 'MC' in its globally recognized meaning (Master of Ceremony). Instead, he claims that his full hip-hop name is 'Month Catamenia Liang Liang (*yuejing Liang Liang*)'⁸. One way of interpreting this is that the global symbol of 'MC', as part of the hip-hop package, is localized and reinvented by Liangliang for his own purposes, while this shift towards local also involves items that are atypically local (in English) and incomplete (his use of 'month' instead of 'monthly'). This appropriation is about creativity as well as rebelliousness by taking the liberty to reject the global norm and to create something new. The outcome of the new invention, 'Month Catamenia' is also about rebelliousness as the phrase in Chinese (which is also explicitly used by Liangliang in the Chinese version of his hip-hop name) is a culturally sensitive word often replaced with a euphemism. The transgression apparent in the selection of the term iconicizes both the cultural and the counter-cultural sides of hip-hop. Here we already begin to see alignments toward – and resistance against – different sets of indexicalities and markers of identity and identification, and observing MC Liangliang's online presence will take us a step further in seeing how the global becomes enmeshed with the local.

MC Liangliang appears actively on several Internet platforms, primarily the website

⁸ See an online interview with MC Liangliang at http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_5074792a01008o9f.html (last viewed September 9, 2011).

www.yyfc.com for publishing his songs, and the *Baidu* message board and Sina microblog for chats and blogs related to his artistic work, and other more general topics – that is, to engage with his audiences. He raps both independently and as part of a crew called 乱感觉 ('MessFeel'). Several of the members of this group live in his hometown region in North-Eastern China; so, apart from himself, none of the group members is currently based in Beijing. The collaborative work of composing and performing is therefore done *virtually*, i.e. entirely online, and the group uses QQ (a Chinese programme used for instant messaging, blogging, gaming, etc.) to exchange ideas and inspiration, to relay bits of work or simply to socialize with one another. Their artistic production is, then, essentially a virtual and translocal enterprise.

Such a virtual and translocal enterprise of course implies a number of liberties and gains that can be achieved only through such methods of artistic production. Thanks to the Internet, MC Liangliang and his partners are able to produce and circulate their own music online, without the limitations of time and space and the 'editorial' restrictions (by e.g. record companies) present in 'offline' artistic work. The group is able to collaborate 'off-the-scene', and to create, organize and engage with their peer groups and communities of practice that are either non-existent or invisible in their immediate corporeal world – whether these are people from back home, or elsewhere outside Beijing. The Internet also allows for going with the global flows of hip-hop; in online environments it is easier than ever before to participate in and take influences from the transnational hip-hop scene. MC Liangliang's online pursuits, however, are not only about liberty and chances for participation in global activities, but also about the pursuit of authenticity as a rapper. In this sense, the scene is also one that functions according to certain regularities and normativities.

3.3 The semiotization of authenticity

We shall now move on to examine the first stanza of a song published online by MC Liangliang and his crew to illustrate the points made



Image 1

Source: www.yyfc.com

© www.yyfc.com

Image 2

Source: www.yyfc.com

© www.yyfc.com

above, but first a few words about the hip-hop semiotics by which the song is framed. Online, MC Liangliang does not only produce music or lyrics, but also performs the essential identity act of 'being hip-hop'. We can see that his choice of profile pictures on www.yyfc.com and *Baidu* message board point to familiar ways of fashioning hip-hop identities. Image 1⁹ features a young Afro male, suggesting an alignment with 'hip-hop authority' embodied in 'blackness' – being and doing 'black'. Image 2¹⁰ is different: there we see, in a way, a more 'authentic' image of Liangliang in the sense that this is an actual picture of him. The features of his face are obscured, but the emblematic signifiers indexing 'real hip-hop' are there: he wears a baseball cap and a sport top, both iconic of the globalized hip-hop fashion; the raised middle finger and the cigarette in his mouth point to a particular hip-hop attitude – a certain coolness, rebelliousness and subversiveness – the kind of 'badness' familiar from urban hip-hop scenes. It is also worth noting that the image features his hip-hop name in a particular way, with the English letters 'MC' printed much larger than the Chinese characters '良良': in this way, the appropriation of the global semiotics becomes highlighted. In a way these two images are very different, yet both point to a certain

'hip-hopness', the creation of which is afforded by the different semiotic resources offered by the Internet (creating a profile; using different multimodal means to do this; being creative in doing this, etc.), and based on what MC Liangliang believes hip-hop is about.

Let us now move on to the actual product of MC Liangliang's group, i.e. one of the songs he posted online. The song by MC Liangliang that we use here to illustrate our point is called 中国HIPHOP – Chinese HIPHOP. This already suggests to us something about the content of the song, as well as the kinds of orders of indexicality evoked in this cultural artifact. Dissecting the title into its constituent parts is quite simple – it consists of two parts, 'Chinese' and 'hip-hop'. However simple this may seem at first glance, these two point to different sets of indexicals, and different layers therein: that of the global phenomenon of – or, the super-vernacular of – hip-hop, as well as its Chinese 'accent'. We shall further delve into these different layers next.

The vocals for the song here are split into two parts, as in the lyrics posted online in written form the first part of them is not included. However, the song can also be listened to online, and in the audio version we can see that the written lyrics provided online do not include everything. Here is the missing part, assisting us in orienting towards the kinds of indexicalities at play here:

⁹ <http://yyfc.iq123.com/1024930> (Last viewed on April 7, 2011).

¹⁰ http://tieba.baidu.com/i/98805018?st_mod=pb&fr=tb0_forum&st_type=uface (Last viewed on April 7, 2011).

[chorus] *The real hip-hop, the real hip-hop*

[Liangliang] *Yea, the real hip-hop, Chinese hip-hop*

[chorus] *The real hip-hop, the real hip-hop*

[Liangliang] *Yea, yea, hum*

The first thing to note here is that this is *English* – a resource that can without doubt be recognized as belonging to the global hip-hop vernacular, whether or not we subscribe to the view that the Afro-American format is *the* global format. With the starting lines, we see a move from ‘real hip-hop’ to ‘the real hip-hop, Chinese hip-hop’, suggesting that Chinese hip-hop is, in fact, *the real* hip-hop. It might be suggested that there is an interesting contradiction here, as the implication that Chinese hip-hop is the real hip-hop is made by the means of *English* (although here we could also make the assumption that the English part is left out from the written lyrics posted in order to

make the song appear more ‘Chinese’). However, from the point of view of authenticity there is no contradiction here, as the language of authentic hip-hop is, indeed, English – the super-vernacular that becomes appropriated and ‘chewed’ here to serve certain purposes.

As for the *written* lyrics themselves, posted online on www.yyfc.com¹¹, we can already make one observation without even reading them, i.e. by simply *looking* at them. Let us have a look.

The observation to be made is that, in the lyrics – which are mainly in Chinese – there are English elements embedded into it. Or, vice versa, it would be equally, if indeed not more, justified to say that the Chinese is embedded into the English, as the global super-vernacular provides a template for the Chinese to appear. In any case, the English elements here are very conspicuous due to the use of capitalized Roman script for writing them. The lyrics are, then, an interesting linguistic mix of different scripts and of Chinese and English, the latter appearing to give the lyrics

中国 HIPHOP

MC 良良

拉开窗帘又看到人群喧嚣的大街
有很多 HIPHOP 泛儿的孩子穿着白色 T 恤
都挂着 BLING BLING 一闪一闪亮晶晶
NY 的帽子 白色球鞋 还有雷鬼式的头型

可是你懂 HIPHOP 吗? BABAY
中国的 RAP 很假 听多了会变傻
大都是四四拍的唱得好像数来宝
没完没了的双押韵 压得~人想睡觉

嘘~~~请把音响关掉 BABY
中国那所谓的 HIPHOP MUSIC 让人听不下
张嘴就吹** 有 AK-47
从上海到北京都运着他们的 KING

**地 中国 HIPHOP 前辈都是害人精
**地 玩儿饶舌的嘴巴没实力
**地 YO 中国 HIPHOP 前辈都是害人精
**地 看到这群伪 HIPHOP 我就想听戏

Chinese HIPHOP

MC Liangliang

open the curtains I see again the crowded noisy street
many HIPHOP styled kids in white T-shirts
wearing BLINGBLING, twinkling and shining
in caps with NY, white sneakers and reggae-fashioned hair

but do you understand HIPHOP? BABAY
China's RAP is fake, you'll become stupid if you listen too much
most of it is 4-4 beat, like shulaibao
endlessly double rhyming beats you to sleep

shhh... please turn off the speakers BABY
China's so-called HIPHOP MUSIC is unbearable to listen to
bragging *** as their mouths open, that they have AK-47
from Shanghai to Beijing, transporting their KING

***, Chinese HIPHOP predecessors are perilous
***, these rappers' mouths have no strengths
***, YO Chinese HIPHOP predecessors are perilous
***, seeing the bunch of bogus HIPHOP I wanna listen to opera

¹¹ http://yyfc.iq123.com/play.aspx?reg_id=1024930&song_id=1985485 (Last viewed on September 3, 2011).

a (Western) hip-hop flavour. Linguistically, English is not the only 'non-Chinese' resource present in the lyrics, though: listening to the song, later on we also hear Korean, rapped by Joonjoon, a Korean-speaking member of MC Liangliang's group. In the written lyrics, however, Korean is not visible, due to the absence of Korean within the repertoire of the person who produced the lyrics in the written form and posted them online, i.e. MC Liangliang. Thus, what is linguistically actually more complex and diverse than this version suggests, and is of course there in the audio version, is reduced in this written online version into a mix of only certain (linguistic) resources due to factors constraining the presentation. It is clear, however, that there is an orientation here towards what hip-hop globally 'really' is about.

We shall return to this issue – i.e. the mix of Chinese, Korean and English – in more detail below, but let us first consider another feature in the lyrics that we can spot simply by *looking* at them: the small asterisks used to mask the 'inappropriate' word 'fuck'. Here we encounter perhaps the most explicit level of normativity shaping the lyrics. Even a less perceptive reader will notice the asterisks that disrupt the otherwise 'normal-looking' hip-hop lyrics – 'normal' in the sense of meeting the expectation we have when we see them, and how they are organized. The little stars, however, are there for the precise function of making the lyrics 'normal', but on another scale: 'normal' in the sense of sanitizing them to be acceptable for the online environment in which they appear.

What the little stars suggest is intervention by the state, mediated by Internet providers – often seen in the case of blogging in China, for instance, as bloggers may find individual (inappropriate) characters censored from their posts within minutes after their publication online, or even automatically censored at the moment of writing due to automatized censoring systems (as was the case with MC Liangliang here). Similar phenomena can of course be observed elsewhere as well (e.g. on YouTube, and also when 'Western' lyrics including what are considered profanities are posted online on certain sites). This is, however, a typically Chinese intervention in the sense that

the realization of norm-imposing (i.e. judgment on what is unacceptable, undesirable) is consistently marked with the little stars and, more importantly, is implemented by *the state*. This clearly illustrates that even in a supposedly free, global online environment, interventions from strictly local powers (in this case the state) do take place. However, we might even suggest that in this online space, the stars even function as adding a further layer of 'hip-hop authenticity' to the lyrics – what the stars cover is the very stuff that makes it recognizable as certain kind of hip-hop, namely, the kind inspired by rebellion and deviation for the purpose of creativity, and consequently authentic as such.

We have seen the imposition of two different normativities already: those of the state, and those of the global hip-hop culture. The appropriation of 'dirty' words (such as 'fuck' which is replaced by asterisks) in the lyrics is of course a feature of the global super-vernacular of hip-hop, and here, in what can be labelled as a local dialect of that super-vernacular, this feature is appropriated and produces an effect of authenticity. Interestingly, although the words cannot be seen here – they can only be heard when listening to the song – and they are replaced by the little stars, it can be argued that not being able to see them online further contributes to the 'hiphop-ness' of the lyrics, i.e. their authenticity: the stars mark something that is outside the established norms, transgressive and deviant, and therefore pointing to the core of what (certain kinds of) hip-hop are about. Two indexical scales (both 'good' and 'bad') and, consequently, two different normativities, are evoked with the same signs.

To return to the mix of Chinese, Korean and English, a number of observations can be made. Both English and Korean hip-hop are, although on different scales and of different value, *transnational global flows*. Both English and Korean also have purchase in the local Chinese scene, and it can be suggested that their value here is purely indexical: they get their value within the local Chinese economy of signs. Korean might seem to have less hip-hop prestige for Western audiences, but not so in China, where Korean hip-hop

is upmarket hip-hop (see e.g. Shim 2006 for a discussion on the rise of Korean popular culture in Asia). The role of English is something more familiar for larger, global audiences: it is the super-vernacular template that is essential in creating hip-hop authenticity. It is also worth noting here that the use of English is by no means random: it is not *any* English that we find in the lyrics, but rather the recognizable hip-hop English – the global elements that are iconic of hip-hop culture. Hence the expressions *hiphop*, *blingbling*, *baby*, *rap*, *NY*: they are part and parcel of what constitutes a core vocabulary of hip-hop.

Hip-hop authenticity is not, however, only about what is there: as Potter (1995: 71, emphasis original) observes, “hip-hop’s authenticity, like that of jazz, is continually posed *against* that which it is not”. This is something we already pointed to, as the global resources employed (‘wrong, bad language’) meet a different set of norms (one that disapproves of such language). Another way in which this is visible is the juxtaposition of Chinese hip-hop with more traditional Chinese cultural forms: Chinese opera, and *shulaibao* (a northern Chinese folk theatrical form consisting of recitation accompanied by clapperboard rhythm). Here, the authenticity of hip-hop is contrasted with specific spatial understandings of authenticity: the authenticity of the rapper’s region of origin (*shulaibao*) and of his country of origin (Chinese opera). Thus, in making this Chinese hip-hop song about Chinese hip-hop there are a number of normative levels to attend to: it is acceptable to be ‘local’ by using Chinese, but authenticity cannot be tied down to local or regional emblematic cultural forms. For authenticity effects, MC Liangliang distances himself from traditional Chinese culture on two levels: the specifically local (*shulaibao*) and the national (Chinese opera). These cultural forms index tradition, i.e. reproduction of what is already there, and this does not mix well with the new, transgressive, innovative and hybridized hip-hop Chineseness. MC Liangliang’s act of distancing himself from both *shulaibao* and opera in general illustrates the complexity and polycentricity of the scales of orientation here: being an authentic Chinese rapper requires

rejecting both the specifically local *shulaibao* and the national tradition – that is, tradition on two scale levels – and instead orienting towards the global super-vernacular of hip-hop.

A further normative level we can observe in the lyrics is indeed the metadiscursive level on *what authentic hip-hop is all about*. MC Liangliang makes a clear difference between ‘inauthentic’ Chinese hip-hop and Chinese rappers who do perform the right moves, so to speak, but are nevertheless not attentive enough to normativity: they dress and talk ‘hip-hop’, but they are not ‘real hip-hop’. The white T-shirts, the blingbling, the NY caps and the references to AK-47 are there, but it is ultimately *fake*. What distinguishes MC Liangliang and his crew from other Chinese hip-hoppers is perhaps not entirely clear, as in the end the means with which MC Liangliang creates hip-hop authenticity are ultimately the same as the ones he rebukes – the appropriation of the global hip-hop super-vernacular, i.e. the global template with its recognizable features and indexicalities. What is clear, however, is that this is indeed authentic hip-hop: it turns the strive for authenticity into a competition over who is the *most* authentic one, and this is where the ‘correct’ use of the global template becomes crucial: its appropriation is by no means random, and creativity not limitless. Creative authenticity, online or offline, has to follow certain norms.

4. Discussion

It is time to draw some tentative conclusions about our case here, going back to the points we raised above. As has become evident here and as pointed out earlier by Pennycook (2007a: 103, emphasis original),

“One of the most fascinating elements of the global/local relations in hip-hop, then, is what we might call *the global spread of authenticity*. Here is a perfect example of a tension between on the one hand the spread of a cultural dictate to adhere to certain principles of what it means to be authentic, and on the other, a process of localization that makes such an expression of staying true to oneself dependent on local contexts, languages, cultures, and understandings of the real.”

What Pennycook is describing in his analysis of hip-hop is a process of *localization*. Rather than being specifically about *locality*, we suggest that what we have observed here is a project of *authenticity*, involving several normative scales that need to be attended to in order to make the project successful – in order to ‘pass as’ something. The multi-modal project of authenticity observed here entails different levels of recognizability: it can be recognized as ‘Chinese’, as ‘hip-hop’, and, finally, as ‘Chinese hip-hop’. Hence, this is not simply about global hip-hop being localized, or local hip-hop being globalized. Ian Condry (2006: 19) made a similar observation in his examination of ‘Japanese’ hip-hop: “the opposition between globalizing and localizing turns out to be a false dichotomy”, as “hip-hop cannot be seen as straightforward Japanization of a global style, nor as simply Americanization.” (ibid.: 11). What is at stake here is being ‘Chinese enough’, as well as being ‘hip-hop enough’ – attending to different sets of normativities that are essentially about being *authentic* (see Blommaert & Varis 2011). That is, what we see here is not about “the hip-hop ideology of keepin’ it real as a discursively and culturally mediated *mode of representing and producing the local*” (Pennycook 2007a: 112, our emphasis). Essentially, what is produced is *authenticity*, and this is done by orienting towards different multiscalar – and hence polycentric – sets of normativities, embracing others and becoming censored by others.

Authenticity is of course very much part of hip-hop discourse in general, and that is something that has already been established by others before (see e.g. Ghandnoosh 2010). As we have seen here, the global template of hip-hop enables new, creative semiotizations of authenticity – it provides affordances for local actors for doing so. In these creative semiotizations, it is the employment of bits and pieces of the global template – the global super-vernacular – that makes it recognizable as hip-hop, whereas the local elements make it locally significant within a particular economy of signs and meanings. As MC Liangliang has helped us observe, cultural processes and artifacts are often complex lin-

guistic and (sub)cultural mixes, employing global super-vernaculars with a local (here Chinese) edge to them. We might even say that the bits and pieces of the global template are purely *indexical* (in our case, indexing ‘hip-hopness’), and, as they become *de-globalized*, they enter a different system of signs and help project images of, for instance, globalness and urbanness.

To return to the issue of superdiversity, and conceptualizing it in order to explain the diversification of diversity we witness – and all of it increasingly in online environments – we suggest that (super-)communities of today are not organized around the indexicals of locality, but rather of *authenticity*, and that authenticity revolves around *blending* multiscalar resources in particular ways. The fact that global resources are localisable expands the scope of ‘authenticity’, and as global resources – the familiar, recognizable templates that we can either embrace or choose to ignore (although more often than not having to opt for the first choice) – become de-globalized, they can be used to creatively make new meanings, new identities and new communities. As we have emphasized already, however, this creativity is not unlimited. We have used the Internet and a specific Internet subculture, Internet hip-hop, here to illustrate our point, but without a doubt our observations can be extended elsewhere. Rather than only *localizing* global flows, there is much more to the superdiverse cultural processes that we see around us.

This has implications for our research agenda, and the questions we ask of our superdiverse research objects. The making of superdiverse realities – the fashioning of identities, the construction of communities and subcultural meanings, the semiotics we employ in order to belong, to be authentic as someone or something – is a normative process: a procedure that involves orienting towards several centres and orders of indexicality. In observing superdiversity on the ground, normativity will have to be on our agenda.

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