

Chinese Hip Hop and East Asian Pop Culture

Curriculum Guide for the
2023 East Asia in the Upper Midwest Teaching Initiative



EAST ASIA
IN THE UPPER MIDWEST
CENTER FOR EAST ASIAN STUDIES

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Introduction

East Asia in the Upper Midwest is an annual summer program designed to provide professional development opportunities for K-12 teachers across Wisconsin (and beyond) who are interested in integrating East Asia into their classrooms and to exploring the connections between East Asia and the Upper Midwest.

Previous programs have looked at teaching the Korean War (2020), the Japanese influence on the architect Frank Lloyd Wright (2021) and Understanding U.S.-China Relations (2022).

Participants focus on a particular theme, interact with experts, receive classroom materials, and prepare lesson plans based on what they have learned.

Recordings of past programs and detailed lesson plans prepared by participants can be found on the website for the Center for East Asian Studies (CEAS): www.eastasia.wisc.edu/eaum/

CEAS is the focal point connecting East Asia to the University of Wisconsin-Madison. One of the UW-Madison's eight federally funded National Resource Centers, CEAS is dedicated to all aspects of research, education and outreach related to China, Japan, and Korea.

The 2023 East Asia in the Upper Midwest program is focused on the topic of understanding Chinese Hip Hop and East Asian Pop Culture. In consultation with UW-Madison PhD Candidate and Chinese Language and Culture Instructor Brendan Dowling, this program features scholar Dr. Lauren Kelly, Assistant Professor of Urban Education in the Urban Social Justice Teacher Education program at Rutgers University, presenting her pedagogical innovations in K-16 classrooms; a presentation by multimedia bilingual artist and activist Jamel Mims on Chinese Hip Hop; as well as a presentation by James Van Gilder on East Asian Popular Culture and its influence on Hip Hop. The following pages provide context for topics which will be discussed throughout the conference as well as multiple resources intended for attendees to reference before, during, or after the conference. This Curriculum Guide along with participation in the conference will provide educators the tools they need to craft new lesson plans for their courses. Please note that the content in this guide is meant to be consulted together with the presentations and workshops, and not used as a stand-alone document.

For further information on anything mentioned in this Curriculum Guide, please contact Brendan Dowling at bcdowling@wisc.edu

For questions about CEAS in general, contact CEAS Assistant Director Laurie Dennis at ldennis@wisc.edu

Hip Hop and Pop Culture in East Asia

Content:

- Introduction to Chinese Hip Hop
- Suggested Readings
- East Asian Pop Culture: Japanese Hip Hop
- East Asian Pop Culture: Korean Hip Hop

Introduction to Chinese Hip Hop

Chinese Hip Hop

Much like in Japan and Korea, China's Hip Hop movement was once organic and locally led. Local Beijing DJ and MC, Nasty Ray, also referred to as Lil' Ray, established China's first chapter of the Universal Zulu Nation. Founded in the 1970s by Hip Hop pioneer Afrika Bambaataa in New York City, the Universal Zulu Nation promotes positivity through teachings, while adding "knowledge" as the fifth element of Hip Hop (Chang 2005, p. 90). This is in addition to the four elements, which are DJing, MCing, Breaking, and Graffiti. In the 1990s, international students and long-term visitors to China from Japan, Korea, and the United States were known for hosting Hip Hop parties or playing Hip Hop music as parts of their DJ sets in Beijing and Shanghai. Although many of these individuals left, some international students and travelers stayed in China and their work fused with that of locals to cultivate Chinese Hip Hop culture.

Arguably, China's most authentic introduction to Hip Hop culture came in the late 1990s/early 2000s in the form of Battle Rap. Battle Rap is a type of live rap performance between two MCs who rap the best rhyming lines to get the crowd to like them and defeat their opponent. In 2001, African-American Muslim Dana Burton of Detroit gave young Chinese eager to represent themselves, their music crew, and their city, a local (and later) national platform to showcase their MC skills and gain recognition. This traveling battle rap enterprise was the longest ongoing official MC battle in the world, known in English as Iron Mic.

Dana Burton created not only a community of MCs and connected talented individuals across city and provincial borders but gave these (at the time) unknown MCs a safe environment to express themselves artistically. They could say what they wanted to say, and although many Iron Mic stages prohibited MCs from swearing, local regulators sometimes shut down his events. Burton did not take any corporate endorsements.

In 2017, the release of China's streaming service reality TV show, "The Rap of China," entered the mainstream and became an instant hit. Those who had helped transform the Chinese Hip Hop scene since the late 1990s and early 2000s, such as Dana Burton among many others, stayed unknown to the masses. Chinese Hip Hop went from grassroots movement to a commodity within one summer.

Pop Culture

“The Rap of China” TV show brought investors and advertisers to promote the new commodity that Hip Hop became. Although Iron Mic was still in business, countless traveling shows which looked more like “The Rap of China” were popping up. Suddenly, the average citizen had words like “Rap” and “Freestyle” in their repertoire but had never heard of Iron Mic or any MCs who were not on the new TV show. With the popularity of “The Rap of China,” a new era started, featuring many who were more interested in fame or money than skilled lyrical or rhythmic talent. “The Rap of China” was considered entertainment and not truly representative of Hip Hop culture, but at least artists’ performance prices for shows and tours were increasing. Many established underground MCs did not appear on the show, with some denouncing it for its lack of authenticity.

Korean influence

The entirety of “The Rap of China”, from stage set-up to theme, bore striking resemblance to the Korean rap reality TV show, “Show Me the Money.” Dating to 2012 in Korea, “Show Me the Money” became licensed in Thailand and was adapted in Vietnam in 2020. However, “The Rap of China” was not a licensed version of Korea’s “Show Me the Money” and received scrutiny from the producers for its overt imitation of the show. According to Jeffrey Kung, founder of China’s longest running broadcast Hip Hop radio show “The Park,” producers for a different show around the same time as “The Rap of China” was being developed were working on purchasing the official rights to “Show Me the Money.” However, this deal was never completed.

Despite the questions of authenticity surrounding “The Rap of China,” the show was a great success for those involved. For example, show prices for individual artists went up, appearances on regional and national platforms increased, and the fanbase grew exponentially. However, government control on the genre also increased, and more companies were pushing new artists with little creative expression. 2017 marked a time for Chinese Hip Hop where the power shifted from MCs and early influencers to state-owned enterprises and music executives with no organic connections to the culture let alone the music. These new leaders only had one focus, and that was how to increase profits. As radio DJ and Chinese Hip Hop aficionado Wes Chen mentioned in one of the episodes for his podcast “Audio-Therapy,” he and other promoters of early Chinese Hip Hop knew that the commodification of Hip Hop culture in China would come one day. But they just never thought it would come in the form of a TV show. In a country like China where so much has developed so fast in the past few decades, some could say it is surprising it took this long to gain the attention of the general public.

Suggested Resources:

The following either partially or entirely discuss Hip Hop in one way or another.

1. “The History of Rap in China, Part 1: Early Roots and Iron Mics (1993-2009)” ([Online Article](#))
2. China-Global Hip Hop ([List of Multimedia resources](#))
3. Hip Hopping Across China ([Scholarly article](#))
4. A documentary of Chinese freestyle rap ([Documentary](#))
5. Foreigners in Chinese Hip Hop ([Online Article](#)) and [Accompanying Video](#)
6. How a Muslim Convert from Detroit Became the Godfather of Chinese Hip Hop ([Online Article](#))
7. Commercialization of Hip Hop (Online [Article 1](#) and [Article 2](#))
8. Wes Chen and the History of Hip Hop in China ([Podcast](#))

9. History of Hip Hop ([Book](#))
10. History of Commercialization of Hip Hop ([Scholarly Article](#))
11. The Rise of Chinese Trap music in Chengdu ([Documentary](#))
12. The Rise of Chinese Trap music in Chongqing ([Documentary](#))

Selected multimedia playlists

13. Chinese Hip Hop Playlist 1 ([Audio and Music Videos](#))
14. Chinese Hip Hop Playlist 2 ([Only Audio](#))

East Asian Pop Culture: Japanese Hip Hop

Pioneers

- Yellow Music Orchestra - formed in 1978 as an electronic music group. Not only did this group influence Japanese popular music, but also believed by some scholars to have influenced the electronic sound of 1980s Hip Hop in the United States, such as Afrika Bambaataa. This sort of influence of East Asian Popular Culture to Hip Hop's early days extends to many other facets of Japanese, Chinese, and Korean culture.
- Rhymester - formed in 1989. Current members are Utamaru, Mummy-D, and DJ JIN. Most known for their 1998 single, B-Boy-izm. This song stands as a testament to Japanese hip-hop's preservation of b-boy culture. Over 20 years later, the instrumental is still one of the most popular beats in Japanese MC battles, where the original lyrics are often "sampled" mid-freestyle.
- King Giddra - formed in 1993. Raised the bar for complexity of rhyme schemes in Japanese Hip Hop and had a unique dark tone.

Pop Culture

Hip Hop manifested in Japan quite differently from in China. Unlike China, Japan in the 1980s was already seeing Hip Hop artists and hosting regular Hip Hop parties. This is in striking comparison to mainland China, which didn't see its first bonified Hip Hop act until 1992, with the group DD Rhythm. In Japan, the popular culture of Hip Hop was first found in the nightclubs. Much like Section 6 in Beijing or Iron Mic in Shanghai, nightclubs were crucial spots for Hip Hop's manifestation in Japan. They were environments where the processing of global Hip Hop occurred, fusing local language and culture with American Hip Hop. This breeding ground for authentic Hip Hop in Japan, or as Condry calls it "genba" is important to understanding not only Japanese Hip Hop's rise in Japan, but also how Hip Hop as a global entity combines with local culture.

East Asian Pop Culture: Korean Hip Hop

Pioneers

Korean Hip Hop also dates to the late 1980s and significantly predates Chinese Hip Hop. Pioneers of Korean Hip Hop include Hyun Jinyoung, who is credited with introducing Hip Hop as a genre to Korea in 1989, while Drunken Tiger, a Hip Hop group in the late 1990s was the major force in pushing Korean Hip

Hop music to prominence. They made lyrical content far different from the Korean popular music at the time and helped establish Korean Hip Hop as a force to be reckoned with. Additionally, Drunken Tiger also formed the Movement Crew, an influential Hip Hop community which birthed groups like Dynamic Duo, Leessang, and Epik High. These groups furthered Korean Hip Hop by creatively capturing audiences from dedicated Hip Hop heads to average Korean popular music fans.

Influence on China

Arguably the most influential and marketable product out of South Korea in the past few decades has been K-Pop. Many of these artists or groups have at least one member who fuses elements of Hip Hop music into their songs. While K-Pop is unique for its choreography, Hip Hop as a genre from its beginnings has fused all sorts of music and cultures from different countries. One could say that Hip Hop is the most inclusive form of music as it adapts outside elements into its own unique genre. And although Hip Hop can be traced back to 1970s Bronx, New York, it is sometimes difficult to pinpoint the exact who, what, when, where, and why of Hip Hop's introduction to a specific country such as China. What is clear, though, is Chinese Hip Hop music's debt to Korean pop culture.

As mentioned in the first section on Chinese Hip Hop, K-Pop indirectly contributed to the commercialization of Chinese Hip Hop with the "Rap of China" and its unlicensed adaptation of Korea's successful "Show Me the Money" program. As Wes Chen mentioned in a podcast, even the logo for the shows were similar. Notably, one of the original producers of "The Rap of China" was a former Canadian-Chinese K-Pop boyband member, Kris Wu. Currently serving a hefty sentence in a Chinese prison after being convicted of serious crimes, Kris Wu and his international pop star status was how many Chinese citizens were first introduced to Chinese Hip Hop. Seasoned Chinese Hip Hop artists may have disapproved of having Kris Wu as the star judge of the show introducing Hip Hop to the masses, though it proved a marketing genius. Kris Wu was a celebrity with status not only as a pop singer in Korea and China, but as an international movie star. His former K-Pop status helped Chinese Hip Hop gain attention not only from K-Pop followers in China and abroad, but also led many young Chinese to believe they too could become idols like Kris Wu.

Suggested Resources:

1. Japanese Hip Hop and the Globalization of Popular Culture ([Scholarly Article](#))
2. A Brief History of Korean Hip-hop ([Online Article](#))
3. Rap's Seoul Brother: Dance Transcended All Language Barriers for K-Pop Star ([Online Article](#))
4. Korean Hip Hop: More Than Music ([Online Article](#))
5. Authenticity, Commercialization, and the Media in Korean Hip Hop ([Scholarly Article](#))
6. First Korean rap [song](#)
7. First Chinese rap [song](#)
8. First Japanese rap [song](#)

East Asian Pop Culture Overview

Session leader: James Van Gilder

Content:

- Biography
- Session Description

Biography

James Van Gilder is a recent graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison who double majored in Computer Science and Chinese. He is a past president of CLACC (Chinese Language and Culture Club), the only organization on campus which promotes Chinese language learning through regular language corners and culture events. He has presented on East Asian Pop Culture at the 9th Annual Trans-Asia Graduate Student Conference in April 2022, as well as presenting at UW's Japanese House (Nihongo Hausu) language community.

Session Description

Hip Hop is an expression of Black American culture, which has been adapted globally. What may be less known is the ways in which East Asian nations, that is, China, Korea, and Japan, have influenced Hip Hop since the beginning. With important founding Hip Hop innovators incorporating Chinese characters, East Asian fashion, film themes, anime, and other cultural references in their work, the impact of East Asian culture cannot be understated in the conversation of the global dominant music genre which Hip Hop is. This presentation highlights the role East Asian Pop Culture plays in Hip Hop.

Chinese Hip Hop

Session leader: Jamel Mims

Content:

- Biography
- Session Description

Biography

Jamel Mims is an African American rapper, multimedia artist and revolutionary based in New York City. Also known as the bilingual storyteller MC Tingbudong, his work concerns the historical and contemporary cultural connections between Black America and China, social movements, memory and augmented/virtual/hyperreality. He received his Bachelor of Arts in Sociology at Boston College, and studied at the University of Business and Economics in Beijing. After graduating, he received a Fulbright scholarship to pursue an independent study about hip hop in China. He was an artist-in-residence at Found Sound China, a US State Department funded music diplomacy residency that brought select American and Chinese producers together for a collaborative tour. He began studying mandarin as a freshman at Sidwell Friends School in Washington DC. As MC Tingbudong, he has performed extensively across the U.S. and China: including South by Southwest Music Festival, China Week LA, Yue Space, NOX Chengdu, and Modern Sky Music Festival. His work has been shown at Telematicc Gallery, WallPlay, and SmackMellon Gallery in New York City. He is currently a Senior Fellow at USC Annenberg's Innovation Lab. His work has been featured in *i_D* magazine, *Variety*, *VICE*, *The Nation*, *Radii China*, *Goldthread* and more.

Session Description

This presentation and workshop will examine Hip Hop's manifestation in China, and its broader social, political, and economic implications. Attendees to this session will learn how Chinese Hip Hop as a dynamic and diverse movement reflects the social and political realities of contemporary China. The speaker's fieldwork as both a Fulbright Scholar during China's "Golden Age" of Hip Hop, and then as a music diplomacy artist-in-residence after the commercialization of Chinese Hip Hop, will be discussed. Additionally, this session will introduce Hip Hop Pedagogy activities and methods which have been utilized in Chinese language and humanities classrooms. Participants will have opportunities to engage with sample materials and interact with the speaker throughout the session.

Hip Hop Pedagogy

Session leader: Lauren Leigh Kelly

Content:

- Biography
- Session Description

Biography

Dr. Lauren Leigh Kelly is a passionate educator and scholar who uses Hip Hop as a powerful tool for social justice and transformation. As an Assistant Professor of Urban Education at Rutgers University's Graduate School of Education, she leads the Urban Social Justice Teacher Education program and the annual Hip Hop Youth Research and Activism conference. She has over a decade of experience teaching high school in New York, where she created innovative courses in Hip Hop Literature and Culture, Spoken Word poetry, and Theatre Arts. She also taught Hip Hop Literature at Five Towns College in New York; English Composition at Medgar Evers College, The City University of New York; and the Teaching of English at Teachers College, Columbia University. She is a sought-after professional development provider for teachers who want to incorporate Hip Hop pedagogies in their classrooms across the country.

Kelly's research explores how adolescents develop critical literacy, consciousness, and agency through Black feminist theory and Hip Hop pedagogy. She also advocates for critical, culturally sustaining pedagogies that honor the voices and experiences of marginalized students. Kelly's work has received national acclaim, including the 2022 Nasir Jones Fellowship at the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University, the 2022 NAEEd/Spencer Postdoctoral Fellowship, the 2021 Save the Kids Hip Hop Activism Scholar-Activist of the Year Award, and the 2020 American Educational Research Association (AERA) Writing and Literacies Special Interest Group Steve Cahir Early Career Award.

Session Description

This workshop aims to foster Hip Hop literacies and sociohistorical awareness of cultures and communities through the analysis of Hip Hop narratives in rap lyrics. Participants will engage in group activities to examine diverse Hip Hop narratives that are situated in specific temporal and spatial contexts. Using online resources, each group will investigate the locations referenced in the songs and explore their social, historical, and lyrical relevance within and beyond Hip Hop culture, incorporating local knowledge. The workshop will also address the relationship between time and these locations. Through research, geographic mapping, critical reading, and discussion, participants will collaborate to situate the authors and narratives of these Hip Hop texts within the histories, cultures, people, and locations that are intertwined with them.