

**Beats from the East:**  
**Transcultural Adaptation of Hip-Hop from North America to Eastern Asia**

**Andrew Melnyk**

**Abstract**

Hip-hop culture has spread from its origins in the South Bronx in the late 1970's to many countries across the globe, leading to the creation of a Global Hip-hop Nation, in which artist from every nation have the ability to share, collaborate, and critique the works of others. With the expansion of a culture that was created, predominately, by marginalized African-Americans, an issue that has arisen is the authenticity of what constitutes 'real' Hip-hop for those outside of North America. In this paper, the author will explore the relationship between Hip-hop cultures in North America and Eastern Asia in an attempt to show how both cultures have influenced each other rather than the commonly held view that Eastern Asian countries (Japan, China, and South Korea) have copied and imitated the styles of North America. Through secondary research and exploring the scholarship surrounding the creation and expansion of Hip-hop culture, the author will examine the circumstances that have lead to the popularity Hip-hop has gained in North America and Eastern Asia, and examine the aspects of Eastern Asian culture that have influenced Hip-hop artists in North America to show that the imitation and adaptation of cultures works both ways.

---

In the mid-1950s, second-generation immigrants—African-Americans leaving the southern states, military servicemen returning from overseas, and fresh immigrants from Puerto Rico—all flooded into New York's "distinguished, orderly neighborhood," the Bronx (Hager, 1984, p.1). Even though it was difficult to find a place to live, all came in search of the American Dream, hoping to make it in the land of opportunity. Little did these American hopefuls know, that, within a few years the neighborhood they had located to would be a decimated, rubble-strewn locale with over a thousand abandoned buildings (Hager, 1984). This abrupt decline began in 1959 "when Parks Commissioner Robert Moses began building an expressway through the heart of the Bronx... [with little] care for the small, tight-knit communities that stood in his way" (Hager, 1984, pp. 1-2). Those that could afford to move out of the neighborhood did so, and those that remained (impoverished black and Hispanic families) were forced into Moses' second project for the Bronx, "a 15,382-unit co-op apartment complex," which was completed in 1968 (Hager, 1984, p.3).

It was through these appalling conditions that the culture of Hip-hop was born. Young adults and teenagers with little or no options to make a living found themselves joining up with street gangs that became like second families to them.

Kids from these gangs started throwing block parties where they would play records for others to dance to, and some began writing (or tagging) their names on store fronts and subway cars (Hager, 1984). Deejays, emcees, b-boys, and graffiti artists were all the products of "a heroin-plagued borough rife with 'police

impotence, urban misery, and highly organized drug distribution,' urban blight, soaring transit fares, and 'miles of burnt out buildings'" (Broder quoting Ibid 2006, p. 39). Hip-hop culture developed in near isolation from the rest of the world until the 1980's when the group Sugarhill Gang released their first record, Rapper's Delight, which "unexpectedly sold two million copies, launched a new independent record company, and created a vast audience for rap music across the country (Hager, 1984, p. 50).

With the newfound popularity of rap music in the United States it was not to long until Hip-hop culture started reaching audiences overseas, especially in places like Japan which had been "avidly adopting a variety of foreign genres" (Manabe, 2013, p. 35). It was the 1983 documentary Wild Style that introduced Japan to Hip-hop culture, and then groups of break dancers that began meeting in parks and blasting hip-hop music from boom boxes were the first of the Eastern Asian Hip-hop culture (Broder, 2006). From this initial adoption of Hip-hop culture, Eastern Asian countries have adapted the styles that they consume from North America to create a culture that, although it resembles some of the characteristics of African-American Hip-hop culture, is their own. It is also important to note that Hip-hop, in itself, was the result of borrowing from other genres of music such as Gospel, Rock, Jazz, and Blues. So, the commonly held view of "Western writers who assume that [Asian] musicians are mere imitators who are uncreative and inauthentic, able to capture the technique but not the soul of these genres" (Manabe, 2013, p. 35) is too critical and debased from the reality of our current state of globalism and reterritorialization. Morris (2010) highlights another example of how Westerns view Eastern Asian cultures as inferior through Japan's appropriation of foreign words in the language—specifically English—as making up 5 to 10 percent, and states "These are numbers that may in and of themselves trigger a kind of pitying scorn in Westerners, being easily taken as yet another example of the supposed Japanese tendency for imitation" (p. 83).

Throughout the remainder of this paper it will be the author's goal to examine the aspects that demonstrate Hip-hop culture has been influenced by Eastern Asian cultures, and how these aspects have shaped Hip-hop in current times; by examining how Western cultures have been imitating and adapting aspects of East Asian cultures, long before the birth of Hip-hop culture, and have continued doing so even in today's society. Many Hip-hop artists have drawn from Eastern Asian cultures and incorporated these influences into their work. Hip-hop often starts with people that are marginalized, or subjugated, and the genre is used as a creative outlet for these people to express the struggles they face. The author will illustrate that Eastern Asian cultures are not strictly copying, but creating something that is unique to their countries and to the struggles that they face in everyday life.

As early as the 1850s, Western cultures have viewed the East as an exotic 'other,' and have been influenced by the unique styles and characteristics of their culture. In 1853, the American naval officer Matthew Perry forced open the ports of Japan and ended two centuries of closure to Western vessels (Arnason & Mansfield, 2010). The

opening of these trade routes started one of “the most pervasive influences on the nineteenth-century advance of modernist form” (Arnason & Mansfield, 2010, p. 31). Asian art that had a particular resonance were “the works of such masters as Kitagawa Utamaro, Katsushika Hokusai, and Ando Hiroshige [which] struck European eyes as amazingly new and fresh” (Arnason & Mansfield, 2010, p. 31). The influence of these artists can be seen in such artists as Édouard Manet and his 1868-painting *Portrait of Émile Zola*, in which a Japanese print and a Japanese screen are featured in the background. According to Arnason & Mansfield (2010) these elements “are symptomatic of the growing enthusiasm for Asian and specifically Japanese art then spreading through Europe” (p. 31). The influence on modernist art is only the earliest example of Eastern Asian culture that has been adapted to Western culture.

Another aspect of Asian culture that has been appropriated by Western culture is the teachings of Zen Buddhism. Buddhism was first practiced in the West, around 1848, when Chinese immigrants arrived in United States drawn by the gold rush (Seager, 2002). The oldest form of institutional Buddhism in North America, the Japanese Jodo Shinshu, dates back to 1899 when the first immigrant missionaries came, soon after the Chinese, to serve the Japanese population (Seager, 2002). The early Buddhist institutions faced hardships due to the largely Anglo-Protestant population as well as a number of government policies that restricted the rights of the Japanese-American citizen. These hardships served to Americanize and Anglicize the Asian immigrants and sever the ties they held with their home countries (Seager, 2002). In the 1950s, there was a ‘Zen Boom’ in which a large number of Americans converted to the Buddhist religion. From this boom in the 1960s stemmed the counterculture of a younger generation spreading messages of ‘peace and love’ in which the most poignant examples can be seen during the Vietnam War (Seager, 2002). With such a vast acceptance of Buddhism in America it is shown that the practices have been adapted as early as 1944 when government pressure forced the initial institutions to “repudiate all ties to Japan, redefine their relation to [their] headquarters in Kyoto, and recreate the office of socho or bishop as an elective position” (Seager, 2002, p. 109). Through this example of Buddhism we can see that the West has imitated, adopted, adapted a cultural trait from the East and integrated it into its own culture.

The most recent example of Western culture adopting an Eastern practice can be seen in the television industry with the importing of anime, or Japanese animation. According to Jane Leong (2011), since the 1990s anime has, and continues to gain considerable recognition outside of Japan due to “both our current climate of intense globalization and the dynamic practices of cultural production which anime fans engage in” (p. 20). Although anime is, and always will be, associated with Japanese culture, scholars have found that anime has a distinct ability to appeal to a number of diverse audiences (Leong, 2011). This ability of “perceived hybridity” in which “distinctive Japanese aesthetics and Western cultural forms and values

coexist,' and can therefore be 'appreciated by Japanese and Western audiences alike'" (Leong quoting Bainbridge and Norris 243, 2011, p. 20), explains why Western audiences are not 'put off' by the aesthetic qualities of anime. In the frame of Hip-hop culture, we can see specific examples of North American influences in the production of anime series such as *Samurai Champloo* (2004-05), in which an anachronistic history of feudal Japan incorporates elements of "hip-hop and samurai/chambara culture[s]" (Leong, 2011, p. 21), and *The Boondocks* (2005-current), which incorporates traditional Japanese-style animation with a satirical commentary on African-American and Hip-hop cultures in current times (Krueger, 2010). Also, the series *Afro-Samurai* (2007) features a black protagonist in a futuristic landscape that depicts, mainly, Japanese culture—marital arts, samurai values, and East Asian architecture, among other elements. It is clear from these examples that there is definitely a form of cultural appropriation that works both ways—Western borrowing from Asian, and Asian borrowing from Western. This cultural appropriation can be seen as a result of the intense climate of globalization previously mentioned by Leong (2011), but may be the result of a fascination by North American Hip-hop culture towards the exotic Asian 'other,' that reaches back to the early foundations of Hip-hop culture and its members.

The examples of North American Hip-hop culture adapting Eastern Asian cultures can be quite overt—Wu-Tang Clan, *The Shaolin*, *Buddha Monks*—or may simply be an incorporation of some aesthetic element such as: animation style, ideograms, or a cultural reference. In examining the adaptation of Asian cultures, a good starting point is with the rap group Wu-Tang Clan, who were among the first to overtly identify Eastern Asian elements in their music and style. The names by which they associate themselves with (previously mentioned) are taken from martial arts movies from China— "Gordon Liu's *Shaolin* and *Wu Tang* (1981)" (McLeod, 2013, p. 263)—and a number of their songs feature audio clips taken from these movies (McLeod, 2013). It can be argued that the incorporation of these Eastern Asian elements played a major role in shaping the group dynamics and styles of the Wu-Tang Clan and other Hip-hop artists. McLeod (2013) shares such examples as:

Clan member Ghostface Killah (who also took his stage name from a 1979 kung fu movie *The Mystery of Chessboxing*), for example, relied exclusively on clips from the well-known *Speed Racer* anime series for the video accompanying his 1996 release 'Daytona 500'. Similarly, fellow Wu-Tang Clan member RZA has, as a solo artist, scored several *Samurai* movies, including Jim Jarmusch's *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (1999) and Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* series. Many other hip hop artists such as Foxy Brown, Diggable Planets and Jeru the Damaga have referenced kung fu movies; even the old-school moniker 'Grandmaster' (as in *Grandmaster Flash*) alludes to martial arts films. (pp. 263-264)

Other examples of Hip-hop artists referencing Eastern Asian culture can be found in the videos of Kanye West and Nicki Minaj. In his 2007 video for the song 'Stronger' Kanye West incorporates several elements of Japanese culture which include being "shot over nine days in Japan,... features prominent scenes of neon-lit Tokyo and digitized pop-up Katakana script that echo West's lyrics... [and it] is also highlighted by multiple scenes which pay homage to the 1988 anime film *Akira*" (McLeod, 2013, p. 266). With the incorporation of these Eastern Asian elements, it is clear that they are included not to create a connection to the lyrical elements of the song, but for an aesthetic value and a fascination with the popular culture of Japan. Such an example of cultural adaptation unmistakably proves the connection of Hip-hop cultures across the globe, and how one builds off the other. Nicki Minaj also uses several elements from Asian popular culture, and refers to her identity as a 'Harajuku Barbie' (McLeod, 2013). She has used poses that reflect "hyper-sexualized anime and geisha costumes" (McLeod, 2013, p. 269) and has intended for some of her videos to be odes to Japanese culture.

Another example can be seen in the show *The Boondocks* (2005), which deals with a number of issues that African-Americans and the Hip-hop community face in today's society. Through the use of satirical humor Aaron McGruder, the show's creator, is able to address issues like social and political inequality, racism, and government regulations that have direct effects on African-Americans (Krueger, 2010). The connection that *The Boondocks* has with Asian cultures is the use of Japanese animation for the visual aesthetics. The choice by an African-American to use Japanese animation over more typical Western-style animation, again, demonstrates the adaptation between the two cultures of Eastern Asia and the West. These examples demonstrate that, in Western culture, borrowing and adaptation from Eastern Asia have had a major influence on the genre of Hip-hop, and have helped shape what North American Hip-hop has become.

It is also important to examine the Hip-hop culture of Eastern Asian countries in order to note the differences that have come from the adaptation of a North American phenomenon. Although Hip-hop was originally a North American genre, Eastern Asian adaptation has had to make some necessary changes, in order to make the lyrical structures and musical elements fit into their cultures. Tsujimura and Davis (2009) as well as Lin (2009) examine the verbal elements that Asian rappers have had to change in order to create rhyming schemes that work for the Japanese and Cantonese languages, respectively. Through these changes Hip-hop cultures in Hong Kong and Japan have created a genre that is specific to each of their own countries and does not merely copy North American rap music. For example, traditional Japanese poetry makes use of mora count as opposed to syllables, where "[a] mora is instantiated by (i) a vowel with an immediate preceding consonant if there is one; (ii) a nasal consonant that is not accompanied by a following vowel; or (iii) the first part of a long consonant (i.e., a geminate consonant)" (Tsujimura and Davis, 2009, p. 181). Following the traditions of their

poetry, early Japanese Hip-hop had very little or no rhyming, but made use of word repetition (Tsujimura and Davis, 2009). Over time, however, Japanese Hip-hop has evolved and adapted elements of rhyming into its unique style. This style relies on moraic elements in which “rhymes should consist of the agreement of at least two moraic elements” (Tsujimura and Davis, 2009, p. 183). Below is an example provided by Tsujimura and Davis (2009) that illustrates this principle, where the bold moras are pronounced identically:

Soshite te ni ireyooze satsutaba  
Mitero ore no sokojikara (p. 183).

It is seen in this example that the rhyming scheme that has been developed in Japanese Hip-hop relates closely to the American style, where the last syllable of the line rhymes with the last syllable of the next line. Another example of the Eastern Asian language being adapted to North American Hip-hop conventions can be found in the lyrics of the Hong Kong artist MC Yan, through his use of *chou-hau* (Cantonese vulgar expressions). MC Yan inserts a vulgar word, into a bi-syllabic/bi-morphemic compound word, in order to form a tri-syllabic/tri-morphemic compound word that synchronizes well with the commonly used three-beat drum patterns of the music (Lin, 2009), according to Lin (2009), “[t]his is a conscious poetic strategy employed by MC Yan to tightly integrate the rapping with the music” (p. 169). Through these examples it is shown that each linguistic style has incorporated its own elements into Hip-hop music that makes it distinct to the culture that has adapted it.

Moreover, Condry (2001, 2007) notes that, despite Hip-hop culture being imported from overseas, Eastern Asian countries must still retain elements from their own culture in order for the music to be accessible to the audiences that will essentially consume it. The subject matter of Hip-hop music is one of those factors that help link the audience back to their specific culture by making the music relatable to events or people they are familiar with. Condry (2001) and Lin (2009) also note that what would be considered ‘real’ Hip-hop in the Eastern Asian countries is not what is in the spheres of popular music. Most of the authentic rappers and deejays remain as an underground genre that can be found performing in nightclubs. With ‘real’ Hip-hop remaining in the underground circuit, it has created, out of necessity, a subculture that is “against the mainstream in time and space” (Condry, 2001, p. 376), due to the fact that the trains, that take those who wish to attend Hip-hop performances, only run from 1 a.m. at the latest and then start back up at 4:30–5:00 a.m. By not being able to return on the trains whenever one wishes, there is a strong sense of community that is created by attending these performances.

This isolation is helping Hip-hop artists develop the unique styles in their own countries (Condry, 2001). Within these communities there are those who display their devotion to the subculture in various ways, such as, frequent tanning in order

to darken their skin, and dreading their hair. By doing this—according to these individuals—they are paying homage to the African-American origins of Hip-hop (Condry, 2007). Through these examples, it can be seen that Hip-hop culture has drawn from a variety of sources and influences to make it what it has become today, and without the technique of sampling and adapting other styles, Hip-hop may not have been able to gain such a foothold in the popular culture of America and other nations of the world.

By examining the development of Hip-hop cultures in Eastern Asian and the history of American Hip-hop culture, a commonality seems to bridge the gap between the differences of location and culture. This commonality is the need for an expressive, creative outlet for youths to voice their concerns and frustration about the situations that they have been placed in by society. As previously mentioned, the South Bronx was less than ideal for the lower class citizens that found themselves trapped in the oppressive conditions created by the government. From this, Hip-hop was born to relieve the frustrations of the under-privileged youths. By examining the cultures of Eastern Asian countries, at the times when Hip-hop first began to make an impression, we can see a similar theme of oppression and subjugation. For example, in the 1980s Japan's economy was in a major recession that is commonly referred to as the 'burst of the bubble economy,' which led to the loss of job security for many of the younger adults who were just beginning their life-long careers (Condry, 2001, 2007). In the midst of this recession, along with frustrations over a constrictive education system, government injustices, and racism, many youths uncertain about the stability of their futures turned to Hip-hop as a way to vent their frustrations and make their troubles known to the general population (Condry, 2007). McLeod (2013) quotes Ian Condry stating it is "the 'affinity between African Americans as disenfranchised citizens in the United States and Japanese youth unable to see their concerns adequately addressed in their own political system' that has characterized some of the popularity of rap music in Japan" (p. 263). These conditions can also be seen in Hong Kong where the working class is distinctly separated from the English-speaking middle class in terms of educational, social, and political opportunities (Lin, 2009). Emcees use the tools that Hip-hop affords them to speak out against these injustices in an attempt to create widespread awareness and affect social change. Also, the emcees use *chou-hau* as a marker to distinguish themselves from the middle class citizens who view such utterances as "a highly marked, transgressive act, violating middle-class etiquette and sensibilities" (Lin, 2009, p. 163). MC Yan, one of the pioneers of Hip-hop in Hong Kong, uses *chou-hau* in his songs "to be more lively, to speak in the real voice of *siu-shih-mahn* (literally: 'little-city-people'; the expression refers to the underprivileged and powerless people in society)" (Lin, 2009, p. 168). Another example of poor social conditions that have inspired change can be viewed in Korea, particularly Um (2013) cites Seo Taeji, a Korean rap artist, and states that his

“rap began to pay attention to various social issues: for example, his 1994 song ‘Classroom Ideology’ (Kynosil Idea) critiqued the education system in Korea. The fact that Seo Taeji left high school without a diploma made this song ‘real’ and its message powerful, and it therefore appealed to young Korean audiences as the authentic, defiant expression of youth culture” (p. 54).

Another example that can be drawn from the relationship between Eastern Asian and African-American subjugated cultures is the ideals that are portrayed through Kung Fu movies. McLeod (2013) explains that “[t]he affinity of many African Americans for Kung Fu movies, in particular those of Bruce Lee, can be seen to lie in the desire, shared by many minorities, for a creative form of self-defense that exercised and liberated both mind and body” (p. 264). McLeod (2013) also quotes the film scholar Stuart Kaminsky stating “the fantasy resolution for the ghetto kid is not through the law. The fantasy is of being able to right the wrongs of one’s personal frustration through one’s own limited ability” (p. 264). These examples of liberating one’s personal frustrations directly relate Hip-hop and Kung Fu in a way that shows the relationship as one that relies on the other at the most fundamental level of values. Through these examples it is shown that the poor social, political, and economic conditions have inspired youths from across the world to reach out to Hip-hop and release their frustrations in constructive, non-violent ways that have benefitted many youths with inspiring messages and reassurances that they are not the only ones facing such hardships.

Throughout this paper it has been revealed that there exists a complex relationship between African-American and Eastern Asian Hip-hop cultures that is more than simple imitation and adaptation. By examining how Western cultures have been imitating and adapting aspects of East Asian cultures long before the birth of Hip-hop culture, and have continued doing so even in today’s society, we have seen that modern art movements from the 1850s, the induction of Buddhism in the 1960s, and the rise in popularity of anime in the 1990s all influence the attitudes held by many in the Hip-hop community. Also, through explaining how many Hip-hop artists have drawn from Eastern Asian cultures and incorporated these influences into their work, it has been demonstrated that African-Americans use these influences to create unique works that would not be possible without the global network that allows artists to share and collaborate by incorporating elements from other cultures. Finally, by exploring how Hip-hop often starts with people that are marginalized or subjugated and how the genre is used as a creative outlet for these people to express the struggles that they face, we can see how a commonality that spans across borders has brought different races, socio-economic classes, religions, and political affiliations come together to create something that is able to inspire and challenge the perceptions of the norm.

With these ideas, it has been shown that Hip-hop is more than just music or dancing, it is a movement that is often misrepresented in the media and by popular culture. It is something that has the power to provide under-privileged youth with the tools to improve their lot in life and expand their creative minds. Although some

of the negative aspects of Hip-hop—violence, misogynistic attitudes, and drug distribution and use—are perpetuated by those in the Hip-hop community, there are those who spread messages of peace, love, and unity. It is these positive messages that should be the focus of the Hip-hop community, in any country or region of the world, in order to reach the true potential that this type of music has.

#### References

- Arnason, H.H. & Mansfield, E.C. (2010). *History of modern art: Painting sculpture architecture photography* (6<sup>th</sup> ed). Prentice Hall, New York University: Pearson.
- Broder, C.J. (2006). Hip hop and identity politics in Japanese popular culture. *Asia Pacific: Perspectives*, 6(2), 39-43. Retrieved from: [www.pacificrim.usfca.edu/research/perspectives](http://www.pacificrim.usfca.edu/research/perspectives)
- Condry, I. (2001). Japanese hip-hop and the globalization of popular culture. In *Urban Life: Readings in the Anthropology of the City*. George Gmelch and Walter Zenner, eds. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press. pp. 357-387.
- Condry, I. (2007). Yellow b-boys, black culture, and hip-hop in Japan: Toward a transnational cultural politics of race. *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, 15(3), pp. 637-671. Retrieved from: <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/pos/summary/v015/15.3condry.html>
- Hager, S. (1984). *Hip hop: The illustrated history of break dancing, rap music, and graffiti* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.
- Krueger R. (2010). Aaron McGruder's *The Boondocks* and its transition from comic strip to animated series. *Animation*, 5(3), 313-329. DOI: 10.1177/1746847710377576.
- Leong, J. (2011). Reviewing the 'japaneseness' of Japanese animation: Genre theory and fan spectatorship. *Cinephile*, 7(1), 20-25. Retrieved from: <http://cinephile.ca/files/Vol7No1-FOR%20JEFF/Vol7No1-FOR%20JEFF.pdf#page=20>
- Lin, A. (2009). Respect for da chopstick hip hop: The politics, poetics, and pedagogy of Cantonese verbal art in Hong Kong. Alim, H.S., Ibrahim, A., & Pennycook, A. (1), *Global linguistic flows: Hip hop cultures, youth identities, and the politics of language* (pp. 159-177). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Manabe, N. (2013). Representing Japan: 'national' style among Japanese hip hop DJ's. *Popular Music*, 32(1), 35-50. DOI:10.1017/S0261143012000530.
- McLeod, K. (2013). Afro-samurai: Techno-orientalism and contemporary hip hop. *Popular Music*, 32(2), 259-275. DOI:10.1017/S0261143013000056.
- Morris, D.Z. (2010). *Minzuko madness: hip hop and Japanese national subjectivity*. Iowa Research Online, PhD diss., University of Iowa. Retrieved from: <http://ir.uiowa.edu/etd/558>.
- Seager, R.H. (2002). *American Buddhism in the making*. Prebish, C.S. & Baumann, M. (1), *Westward Dharma: Buddhism beyond Asia* (pp. 106-119). Berkeley,

CA: University of California Press. Retrieved from:

<http://www.neiu.edu/~circill/hoffman/phil342b/american.pdf>

- Tsujimura, N. & Davis, S. (2009). Dragon ash and the reinterpretation of hip hop: On the notion of rhyme in Japanese hip hop. Alim, H.S., Ibrahim, A., & Pennycook, A. (1), *Global linguistic flows: Hip hop cultures, youth identities, and the politics of language* (pp. 159-177). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Um, H.K. (2013). The poetics of resistance and the politics of crossing borders: Korean hip-hop and 'cultural reterritorialisation'. *Popular Music*, 32(1), pp. 51-64. DOI:10.1017/S0261143012000542