

Type 3: Chinese Rappers, Embodied Animations, Worlding Cyborgs

by

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#### 1. Introduction:

In early 2018 rappers were banned from appearing on network television in China. And while hip hop is widely recognized as a global form, Chinese rappers are still not free from accusations of cultural appropriation. And yet, the Higher Brothers, a group of four rappers from Chengdu, have emerged as icons both at home and abroad. In the course of two and a half years, they have become the first Chinese rap group to sign to an American record label, tour extensively inside and outside of China, and gain significant worldwide recognition for their work. The Higher Brothers have accomplished this feat despite the heavy hand of Chinese censorship and American ideas about hip hop, race, and cultural appropriation.

In a segment on HBO Vice, a reporter posed a question to the Higher Brothers: “I’ve seen this on some of the Youtube comments, people say ‘here’s some Asian dudes, they’re stealing black culture...’ What ya’ll think about that?” Masiwei, one of the Higher Brothers, responds: “it’s black culture, so we study from them. And now its 2017. The world is more close. Black people watch Japanese cartoons. We listen to [hip-hop]. We’re more close.” What do cartoons have to do with hip hop and how were the Higher Brothers able to gain worldwide popularity all while navigating Chinese censorship and American cultural sensitivities?

This thesis, which is part written portion and part film, is a situated ethnography of the global rise of the Chinese icons known as the Higher Brothers. I illustrate that the Higher Brothers are celebrity artists. A celebrity is part person and part image. The Higher Brothers have created their image by playing with many of the same techniques found in animation—remediation, creator/character ratios, human-object relations, replication, motion, eyes, sound, and worlding. In other words, they have used animation to bring their *image* to life, effectively animating themselves in the process. In this way, the Higher Brothers are what I call embodied animations.

By animating their image, the Higher Brothers have created a fluid world around themselves made up of continuously assembled and re-assembled parts borrowed from the pop-culture imaginary. These parts are lifted from cartoons, logos, games, movies, other rappers, fans, and even the Chinese corporate world. As embodied animations, the Higher Brothers are part human and part technology (animated image). This makes them digital cyborgs embedded in self-made worlds—what I call “worlding cyborgs.” I argue that it is in their capacity as embodied animations and worlding cyborgs that the Higher Brothers have been able to creatively open up new possibilities, maneuver difficult terrain, and weave in and out of different domains.

The worlding cyborg is neither human nor machine, but a heterogeneous mix of both. It represents a novel, third possibility—a third type, which is constantly changing and moving. This resonates with “Type 3”, a critical component of the Higher Brothers’ self-created identity. “Type 3” is the title of their newest EP and also how they describe themselves. The Higher Brothers define “type 3” in relation to “type 1” and “type 2”. According to the Higher Brothers, “type 1” refers to average people who go to school, get a job, get married, have kids, etc. “Type 2” refers to bad people who resist all societal constraints. “Type 3” refers to people who resist conforming to either category

by incorporating elements of both. It is by being “type 3s”, by being embodied animations and worlding cyborgs who oscillate between categories that four boys from China’s interior have transformed themselves into global icons.



## 2. Methods

My methods are classically anthropological—participant observation and ethnography—and yet they diverge from the traditional single-sited approach. The Higher Brothers are both creators (Ma Siwei, Ding Zhen, Yang Junyi, Xie Yujie) and creations (Higher Brothers: Masiwei/DZKnow/Psy.P/Melo). They remediate bodies into song, image, and other “objects”; their creator/character ratio is complex; they are constantly in motion. Like the object of my research (the Higher Brothers), my field site moves across spaces, challenging the hard line between virtual/actual, local/global, here/there. Ultimately, my “field-site” moves through networks centered around the Higher Brothers.

When I first met the members of the Higher Brothers six years ago, they were barely rappers, let alone celebrities or embodied animations. And at the time, I was not yet acquainted with anthropology. The Higher Brothers were the ones who encouraged me to pursue academia. Over the six years I’ve known them, they have become my colleagues, my best friends, and my family. We’ve also become characters in our own assemblage.

I first met Psy.P, Melo, and Masiwei when I was living in China. Not long after I met them in 2012, I moved to Chengdu to intern for their rap crew CDC, a clique of twelve rappers who play shows and create music together. I stayed in Chengdu for four years after the internship, and continued to help my friends advance their career in anyway I could. I translated song lyrics, bought beats for them online, managed their social media accounts, sold tickets at concerts, and eventually became their visual artist. I animated the images projected behind them during their live performances.

For two years while living in Chengdu, I worked as a creative manager at Tap4Fun, which has now become China’s most successful mobile game developer. At the time, I created the concepts for game worlds (characters, plot, environment), which were realized by teams of Chinese programmers, designers, and artists and consumed by players all over the world. After two years in an office, I was “discovered” and pushed into Chinese reality television. I quit my day job to become a career celebrity. And although I had not met him yet, DZKnow was one of my fans. Not long after, DZKnow met Masiwei online, joined CDC, and moved from Nanjing to Chengdu. My television career was cut short by a stunt gone wrong, and I made my way to graduate school just as Masiwei, DZKnow, Melo, and Psy.P were forming the Higher Brothers. In retrospect, I conducted four years of participant observation before coming to Berkeley. Visual art, animation, game worlds, China, Chengdu, and the Higher Brothers were critical constituents of my selfhood before beginning this project. Anthropology has been a productive tool for organizing many of my intuitions.

Since beginning my academic work at Berkeley in 2016, I’ve joined the Higher Brothers as they’ve toured across China, Asia, and most recently, North America. My role has varied. I have been translator, videographer, VJ, photographer, anthropologist, “mom”, and most recently, manager. I am often many of these roles at the same time, but I see translation across mediums—transmutation, a trope I return to in the literature review section—as the common thread. I translate English into Chinese and vice versa for various mediums: song lyrics, contracts, speech, etc. I transmute song into visuals at their concerts, creating and projecting moving images on the screens behind the

stage. I transmute persons into images by taking photographs and recording videos. I make sure money owed is converted into money paid. I also translate intentions, desires, and emotional states between the Higher Brothers and their American record label.

Transmutation is closely related to animation. In one sense, transmutation is movement between people, across mediums, and across boundaries. It is also a process by which meaning is disassembled and reassembled. It requires replication and motion, and often remediation (song to translated lyrics, performance to live visuals, person to image, etc.). In this way, transmutation captures intersections and processes with a focus on both sameness and difference.

In order to frame my object within animation, I follow the movement of signs across various media. I ask, how are signs transmuted and how does their movement across boundaries seek to destabilize the very boundaries transgressed? My materials are as heterogenous as the embodied animation and the cyborg. I draw from experiences, songs, lyrics, recorded sound and image, bodies, "objects", and other media artifacts.



Fig. 1 The author, collecting data in the field. Photo taken March 2018 in New York City by DZKnow of the Higher Brothers.



Fig. 2 The Higher Brothers, clockwise from left: Melo, Masiwei, Psy.P, DZKnow. Photo taken March 2018 in New York City by the author.

### 3. Background: The Higher Brothers and the Scene in Chengdu

The Higher Brothers were all born in the 90s. DZKnow, the youngest Higher Brother, is from Nanjing, near the east coast. The other three Higher Brothers are from Chengdu, which is the capital of Sichuan province, located in the interior of China. All four of the Higher Brothers grew up listening to Chinese pop music until around middle school when they discovered hip hop. They listened to American artists like Eminem, 50 Cent, and Big L, and Taiwanese artists Zhou Jielun (Jay Chou) and MC Hot Dog. Although Zhou Jielun is not a rapper per se, he was the first Chinese artist they heard who used rap-style delivery in his songs. When they got to high school, the Higher Brothers liked to dress in baggy clothes and play basketball, both of which they saw as important elements of hip hop culture.

A major moment for the three Chengdu-born Higher Brothers was the first time they heard a rap song in their local dialect. The song was called “Chengdu Gangsta” (成都街娃儿, literally Chengdu Street Kid) by AnsrJ. After hearing this song, they realized that they too could rap in their own dialect. Not long after, they joined the local rap crew CDC, of which AnsrJ was also a member. Some of the rappers in CDC include Ty. (now signed to Taiwanese label HunXue’er), SleepyCat, Lil’White, and Fat Shady. Fat Shady quickly became a star within China in 2014 after performing his now famous Chengdu-dialect song ‘I’m Not Going to Work Tomorrow’ (老子明天不上班) on network television channel CCTV. While most of the artists in CDC rap in Chengdu dialect, the Higher Brothers were the first to blend the local language with Mandarin and English.

Chengdu dialect, also known as Sichuanese, is a sub-dialect of Standard Mandarin. While much of the pronunciation and vocabulary remain the same between the two languages, there are a few key differences. On the whole, the tones are inverted. Rising tones in Standard Mandarin are falling tones in Sichuanese, and vice versa. Pronunciation also varies in interesting ways. For example, retroflex sounds in Standard Mandarin are flattened in Sichuanese (‘zh’, ‘sh’, ‘ch’ become ‘z’, ‘s’, ‘c’). By combining elements from Sichuanese, Mandarin, and English, the Higher Brothers were able to achieve a loose flow which sounded similar to trap artists in the US, like Future and Migos.

Another major source of inspiration for the Higher Brothers was Li Bei’qing (李伯清, note: in local dialect the second character is pronounced ‘bei’). Li Bei’qing, affectionately known as “Teacher Li”, is a performer in Sichuan province credited with creating a new performance style called “freestyle storytelling” (散打评书). These performances are often held in tea houses. Li Bei’qing wears traditional Chinese clothing, sips tea, and plays with a locally crafted folding fan as he analyzes Chinese literature and local Chengdu language to poke fun at Sichuanese people and their behavior. While he is called a teacher and a storyteller, in reality, he is a brilliant comedian. He only speaks in local dialect and his punchlines often hinge on Chengdu-dialect specific words and phrases. His success is often credited to his playful style and his interest in topics centered on daily life. The rappers in CDC wrote a song about Li Bei’qing, and he even appears in one of Fat Shady’s music videos. Like Li Bei’qing, the

rappers in CDC re-craft local language into lively performance, centered around daily life.

Chengdu is a city known for its love of leisure. “Chengdu people know how to play” (成都人会耍); “Chengdu people know how to live” (成都人懂得咋个生活); “Chengdu people know how to talk” (成都人爱摆龙门阵). I heard these phrases hundreds of times while living there. While older people often spent their time shuffling between mahjong parlors and teahouses, the younger crowd liked to hang out in bars, clothing shops, and gaming-cafes (网吧). The younger crowd is roughly divided into three, relatively homogenous subcultures centered around music: the rock scene, the electronic scene, and the hip hop scene. Many of the young people that I spent time with in Chengdu did not work steady jobs and were able to do so because the cost of living was so low. Some people made money as DJs, craftsmen, or bartenders, and some lived entirely on credit or money given to them by their parents.

Masiwei and Psy.P both worked at 7-11 for a brief period of time. DZKnow worked as an insurance salesman in Nanjing. Melo was forced by his father to work a government job at the Chengdu Zoo until he quit in the summer of 2017 to become a full-time rapper. The four of them spend the majority of their leisure time playing video games with friends. Their favorite video game is Grand Theft Auto, although they also play battle royale style shooter games, racing games, and sports games. They play online games with old friends and even ex-girlfriends. Several of the members of CDC even met while playing games together at cafes. Gaming is not just a leisure activity, it structures social activity and world views, and it is a major conduit for American culture—as I discuss later, the Higher Brothers were well acquainted with LA before stepping foot on American soil.

## 4. Literature Review

In the following section I will provide a schematic overview of the anthropology of animation, outline three of Teri Silvio's characteristics of animation (remediation, object-human relations, character/creator ratios), and add five of my own characteristics (replication, motion, eyes, sound, and worlding). I then apply these characteristics to the Higher Brothers, arguing that they are embodied animations of their own creation. Lastly, I argue that the effect of embodied animations is similar to Donna Haraway's cyborg in its ability to gracefully weave in and out of different domains.

### 4.1 The Anthropology of Animation

Teri Silvio broadly defines animation as “the projection of qualities perceived as human—life, power, agency, will, personality, and so on—outside of the self, and into the sensory environment, through acts of creation, perception, and interaction” (427). Animation is both an art form and a technique, which breathes life into “objects.” The focus of the anthropology of animation is a comparative study of its *techne*. *Techne* is defined as the art or craft in which new new worlds are created (Boellstorff 2008). As Foucault pointed out, *techne* is also the mechanism by which “new *selves* are created, working as an ‘art of existence’, implying an intentional and creative process in which new selves may be formed” (Foucault 1985, 138–39; qtd. in Boellstorff 2008, 151). Linking *techne* to digital media, Boellstorff notes that *techne* “is the articulating concept linking humans and virtual worlds, reflecting the importance of the ‘technological imagination’ to culture” (152). The *techne* of animation refers to the craft by which life is given to things, new selves are formed, and new worlds are created. What are the characteristic of animation's *techne*?

First, animation always remediates. In the arts, animation refashions drawing, collage, painting, photography, and other mediums to create the “illusion” of life. Another word for this refashioning is remediation, or a “complex kind of borrowing in which one medium is itself incorporated or represented in another media” (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 45). Remediation may also be understood as a type of intertextuality, for example, when one film borrows from another (Bolter and Grusin 1999). Remediation is also transmutation, which Roman Jakobson (1959) defines as “intersemiotic translation.” For example, writing is the remediation of speech. It is in this way that “the process of remediation makes us aware that all media are at one level a ‘play of signs’” (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 22). Animation's core component, then, is *translation* across mediums. It is for this reason that I will use translation as a guiding method in the final section of this paper. Note that my use of translation is broad, more akin to Jakobson's transmutation than a direct translation between languages.

Performance, with its roots in theater and ritual, “involves embodiment, introjection, mimesis, and self-identity”; it would seem then, that animation implies the opposite —“disembodiment, projection, alterity, and the object-world” (Silvio 2010, 432). Puppetry studies, for example, defines live theater and animation in opposition to one another: in theater, people perform, in animation, objects perform (Silvio 2010, 426). Similarly, if performance finds its religious roots in ritual, then animation finds its counterpart in “the investment of icons, effigies, talismans, and natural objects with divine power” (Silvio

2010, 426). But as a theoretical model, animation implies the movement, deconstruction, and reconstruction of categories (e.g. human/non-human). Animation does not replace performance, but *remediates* it, bringing it into its fold.

Animation transgresses the boundary between humans and objects. Silvio notes that the most well-articulated theory of human-object relations is laid out in Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency* (1998). Gell's thesis is that objects, especially "works of art, images, icons, and the like have to be treated, in the context of an *anthropological* theory, as person-like; that is, sources of, and targets for, social agency" (emphasis in the original, 96). He cites Frazer's theory of sympathetic magic in which a sorcerer influences a person by manipulating an object which shares some likeness with that person. Why is it that mutual likeness acts as a conduit for mutual influence? Gell explains that it is because "as social persons, we are present, not just in our singular bodies, but in everything in our surroundings which bears witness to our existence, our attributes, and our agency" (103). In short, persons are distributed into the milieu. Where do we draw the line?

Animation also questions the one to one correspondence of character and creator. While performance focuses on the dichotomy between actor and role, animation recognizes that people play multiple roles and that works of art are collective enterprises. Fans also have a hand in creation, and Silvio sees that in terms of fan contribution, celebrities are increasingly becoming collective works. Similarly, the Higher Brothers' fans influence them in provocative ways. In one example in the results section I discuss how fans prompted Melo to get a new tattoo. Character/creator ratios are highly variable. For example, in puppetry, the puppet master may control all the characters, or as in Bunraku, one character is manipulated by several performers (Silvio 2010). Looking to these relations between creators, characters, and consumers opens up networks of social relations. Animations are simultaneously artwork and network.

Chengdu has a long history of puppetry and opera, specifically shadow puppetry and face changing opera. In face changing opera ('bian lian' 变脸), performers wear ostentatious costumes and bright masks, which are layered over the face. Performers dance to music and suddenly switch between masks, almost as if by magic. During my fieldwork I found that the younger generation hardly partook in traditional forms of entertainment. However, they often talked about how their grandparents still liked to go to the opera. My friends spent most of their free time listening to music, watching movies and shows, perusing Weibo (the Chinese version of Twitter), and playing games. Gaming is similar to puppetry and opera in that one player manipulates multiple characters and has the ability to switch character skins. Gaming is everywhere in Chengdu: in cafes, in homes, in pockets (on the mobile phone). Gaming is in the "virtual" world as much as it is in the "real" world.

Mass production is another key component of animation. Mass production extends an artworks' network: "reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself. *Above all, it enables the original to meet the beholder halfway*" (Benjamin 1969, 4, emphasis in the original). With the proliferation of social media, images no longer just meet viewers halfway, viewers interact with, influence, and reproduce images. Are these reproductions or something more? Following Donna Haraway's insights, I would argue that in the current age of information, replication replaces reproduction. Replication implies both sameness

and alterity, space for mutation, and the movement across mediums. Animated characters replicate across TV screens, trading cards, action figures, t-shirts, and even airplanes (Allison 2006).

This movement across mediums brings us to motion—another critical component of animation's techne. In cartoons, motion is achieved by juxtaposing replicated characters, that is characters with slight differences. Cartoons also achieve motion on a larger scale through remediation and circulation.

Another dimension of animation is the eye. As Gell points out, animacy is accomplished once we surmount the difference between an image and a living being. Eye contact allows us to surmount this difference. "Animacy takes its origin from his ocular exchange, because, even if one does not take a mystical attitude towards images, one is nonetheless entitled to apply action verbs like 'look' (or 'smile', 'gesticulate', etc.) to them. A perfect sceptic can say, in fact is obliged to say, that an idol 'looks' in a particular direction; the remark would pass unnoticed because everybody accepts that the criterion for idols 'looking' is that their eyes should be open and pointed in a particular direction." (118) There is nothing like the power of an eye to anthropomorphize an object. The Higher Brothers animate themselves by looking directly into the camera, thereby achieving an ocular exchange with their viewers.

Ears are important too. Music has immense potential to animate. In the Higher Brothers' world good music demands motion—at the very least, a nodding of the head and in most cases, total body movement (dance). Pop music also has an amazing puppeteer-like quality which can move the listener to sing along with the lyrics. Karaoke is a prime example of music's potential to animate: "The word means empty (kara) orchestra (oke). In practice, though, karaoke empties the 'orchestra' of certain bodies as much as it fills this space up with new ones. Giving an elasticity to the borders of musical performer/performance, karaoke allows anyone to be a singer and the stage to be a restaurant, bar, or family room. Body and space are both malleable, reshaping the experience and production of performative singing" (Allison 2006, 150). Songs are replicated and inserted into new contexts, animating new performers while bringing others' songs into personal bodies.

As Lisa Stevenson points out, "it's difficult to contain photographic and filmic images as straightforward representations, because, in a certain sense, they drag the world along with them" (11). An image is always part of a world, and animators create worlds. Animated worlds, which are multiple and heterogeneous, contain places, possibilities, constraints, characters, storylines, aesthetics, and affect. Although these worlds are constantly in flux, they are often quite insular. This is why character crossovers between worlds is so enchanting. This is part of Disneyland's magic—it is a space where fractured character worlds come together remediated into physical space. Worlding implies the "production of emergent spaces from the flows of ideas, actions, and objects... Worlding exercises are those laterizing micro-processes that remap power by opening up new channels or reconfiguring new social universes" (Ong 2006, 12). Worlding occurs across localities and at different scales where borders between virtual/real, creator/consumer, public/private may be made malleable. The Higher Brothers create their world by mixing diverse elements from song and dance, the Chinese corporate world and Atlanta's trap scene, catch phrases and tattoos—just to name a few.



In summary, animation is the collection of techniques, skills, methods and processes used to create lively worlds, and the act of animating assembles and re-assembles worlds. Animation is recursive—it is a technology which requires technology for its existence. Its techne involve the use of media and remediation, the transgression of human-object boundaries, complex character/creator ratios, replication, motion, eyes, sounds, and worlding. In what follows, I will show how human icons have been remediated as embodied animations in the digital age. Celebrities are now emergent, collective artworks that build worlds as much as they deconstruct them.

## 4.2 Embodied Animations

In her monograph *Global Icons* (2011), Ghosh defines bio-icons as real people “whose images and lives saturate mass media” (12). Similar to performance, which finds its roots in ritual, and animation with its roots in effigies and idols, the term icon also has a religious genealogy. “In liturgical practice, where the icon is a material image referring back to the divine, the anthropomorphic likeness is regarded as the most excellent form of the icon: saints, leaders, heroes, and all manner of exemplary persons, embodying the best of human qualities, interceding with the divine on our behalf” (Ghosh 2011, 54). Ghosh argues that like the religious icon, the bio-icon is revered by a “public,” who worships its image. How might we compare this “public” image to an animated artwork?

I would argue that Ghosh’s bio-icons are no different from today’s celebrities, both of which require a medium and circulation (motion) in order to become famous. In *The Frenzy of Renown*, Braudy suggests that “fame is made up of four elements: a person and an accomplishment, their immediate publicity, and what posterity has thought about them ever since” (15). Robert van Krieken posits that celebrity is the updated version of fame, that is, “fame plugged into networks of mass communication, themselves circuits of desire and commerce” (5). The term celebrity, like icon, also has religious origins, its first use appearing in 1565 to refer to the baptism practices of the Apostles (Krieken 2012). While there is an ongoing debate about the merit of celebrity (Ferris and Harris 2011; Ghosh 2011; Turner 2004), scholars agree that the celebrity is constructed by its image and circulation of the image. From this perspective, celebrities are artists and their work of art is a mass reproduced self. In other words, a celebrity is a self-created bio-icon. The celebrity remediates their body into a mass-replicated self which moves across markets and mediums, picking up connections, ultimately gaining a life of its own. Thus, *the celebrity is an embodied animation*, part image and part human, an elastic being which oscillates between animator and animated, artist and artwork.

### 4.3 The Cyborg

Intended as a feminist critique, Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* confronts the categories of 'race', 'gender' and 'class', presenting the cyborg as a figure which highlights the elasticity of these categories and the permeability of dualisms (self/other, mind/body, whole/part, truth/illusion, maker/made, class, etc.). The cyborg is not an empowered female, but rather, represents a third possibility, a mix of machine and organism (150). The cyborg transgresses boundaries, constructing and deconstructing these boundaries in the process.

As an assemblage that resists totalization, "the cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self" (163). In the same way that Gell proposes the idea of distributed personhood, Haraway poses the question: "why should bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?" (178). Rather than isolating people from each other, cyborgs "signal disturbingly and pleasurably tight coupling" (152). The cyborg lives in a play-centric networked society, a "polymorphous, information system" (161) in which "the home, the workplace, market, public area, the body itself—all can be dispersed and interfaced in nearly infinite, polymorphous ways" (163). In this system, "communication technologies and biotechnologies are the crucial tools redrafting our bodies" (163) and the network replaces monads. For it is the network which affords "the profusion of spaces and identities and the permeability of boundaries in the personal body and in the body politic" (170). Similarly, the Higher Brothers have relied on networks and mass media communication technologies to animate their image.

Moreover, cyborgs are not related to others through blood, but through affinity, by choice. That is to say, the identity of the cyborg is one that self-consciously constructs "the capacity to act on the basis of... conscious coalition, of affinity, of political kinship" (156). Lastly, "cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly" (176). The cyborg does not speak a common language. It speaks "in tongues," "a powerful infidel heteroglossia" (181). The Higher Brothers' world is organized around fans and creators who participate based on choice. They do not have one common language—they speak in English, Mandarin, Sichuanese and multiple modalities refracted across mediums.

How do the Higher Brothers wield the techne of animation? How do these techniques allow them to create a heterogenous world which is constantly in flux? In what follows, I will illustrate the process by which the Higher Brothers have created and become embodied animations in a global network entangled with meaning, media, and mediators.

## 5. Ethnography

### 5.1 Haier-Higher (Image to Identity)

It's 2015, and four rappers are sitting in a room in Chengdu. They are creating a song and are in need of inspiration. They notice the Haier logo on the air conditioning unit hanging above them. Haier is a Chinese company specializing in household appliances, and the logo appears on every product sold in China. The logo is ubiquitous in China because Haier products are ubiquitous.

The Haier logo depicts two animated boys. Together the boys are called Haier Xiongdi. In the 90s, the logo was remediated into an animated series about the boys adventuring around the world with their friends. The cartoon was broadcast on TV and watched by millions.

The four rappers in Chengdu see the logo and start to imagine a world where they are just like the animated boys. They see themselves in every household across China (like the logo), traveling around the world with their best friends (like the cartoon). Inspired by the idea, they write a song called "Haier Xiongdi." The lyrics in the song describe a world where they are the boys in the logo. The four rappers continue to make songs together, and eventually they create a group. They take the name Haier Xiongdi and translate it into English, translating Haier for its sound and Xiongdi for its meaning: Higher Brothers.

Just the name alone is already starting to do the work of animation. It is sparked by a prospective imagining of the self in a future world and the craft of creating that world. It is a remediation and a replication (from logo to animation to song to name), and it builds off the preexisting networks of Chinese people who are already well acquainted with the Haier Xiongdi. Translating the name into its English counterpart not only saves the Higher Brothers issues with copyright, it picks up new meanings ('high' and all its entanglements) and opens them to global networks unfamiliar with Chinese.

But the Higher Brothers' borrowings don't stop at the name. Not long after the group forms, a graphic designer located in Wuhan (who they know through the internet) creates a logo for the group. It is a replication of the original Haier Xiongdi logo with one key difference: the characters are "dabbing." Dabbing is a dance move which originated in the Atlanta trap scene. The "dab" move, of course, always comes with a drop or hit in the song. It is music brought into the body, remediated into dance.

In the media, the rap scene in Chengdu is often compared to that in Atlanta, and the Higher Brothers are compared to Migos, the biggest rappers to come out of Atlanta. Migos credit themselves with creating the "dab," although it is difficult to determine precise origins because it replicated so quickly and so widely. One of the Migos' biggest hits at the time was "Look at my Dab." Taking from this idea, the Higher Brothers wrote a song "Bitch Don't Kill my Dab." The title of the song, which is repeated many times in their lyrics, is a patchwork of Kendrick Lamar's line "bitch don't kill my vibe" and Migos'

song. In this way, the Higher Brothers are animating a heterogenous world with parts drawn from China and America, rap music and cartoons, song and dance, image and body.

In the next replication of the logo, the two Haier Xiongdi are replaced with images of the four Higher Brothers, remediating their bodies into animated characters. Like the original logo, these images are drawn with simple lines, albeit with more detail. In the new logo, we see their hair, jewelry, and tattoos. By refashioning the logo with themselves as a dancing Haier Xiongdi, they bring their bodies more fully into the object. They have used an assemblage of signs (original logo, dance, tattoo, etc.) to plug themselves into pre-existing networks and make their person/image go viral.

Lastly, these logos are portable, which afford motion on a grand scale. The logos are replicated indefinitely—printed on merchandise, used as visual components of their live performances, and widely circulated on the internet. In this way, the logo is not just an icon of the Higher Brothers' selves, but also an avatar for fans' "online" personas and "offline" personas. That is, fans use the logo as their profile photos on Weibo, Instagram, etc. and wear the logo on their bodies (on t-shirts and towels). Thus, the logo is a technology which animates the self, making malleable the boundaries between mediums, between self/other (Higher/Haier, performer/fan), and between local/global.

Haier 海尔

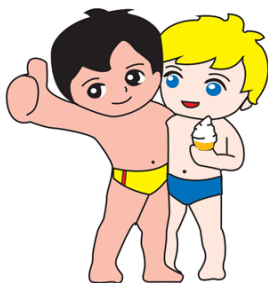


Fig. 3 The Haier logo: the Haier Xiongdi



Fig. 4 The Higher Brothers' first logo: dabbing Haier Xiongdi

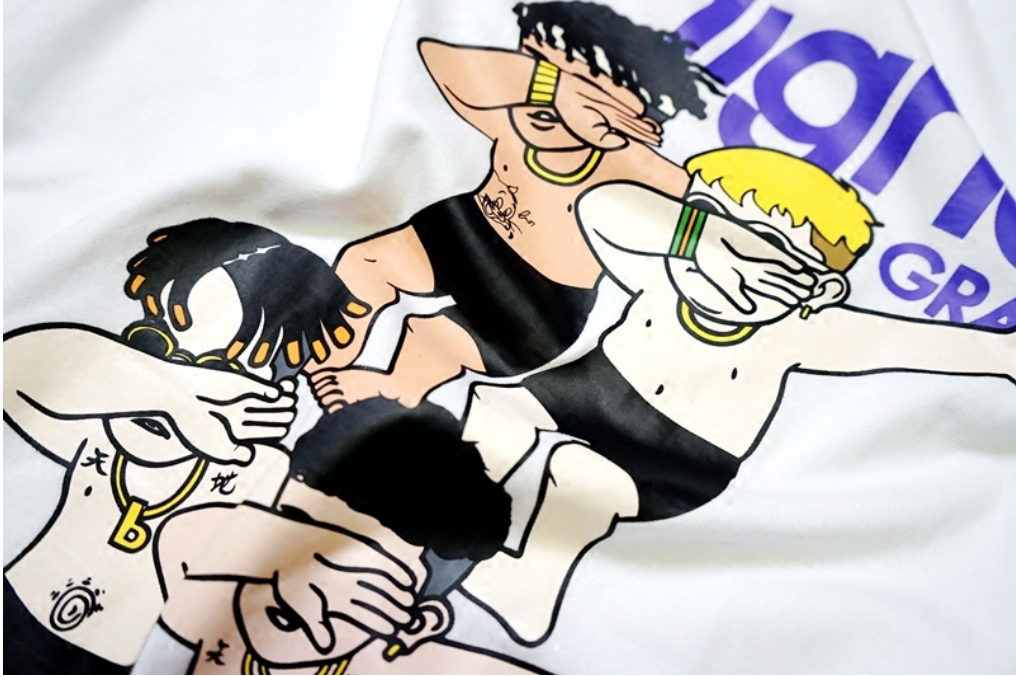


Fig. 5 The Higher Brothers' second logo remediates their bodies into image.



Fig. 6 A fan in Seattle wears the Higher Brothers logo and poses with a Higher Brothers' towel. Photo taken by the author at a meet and greet before the Higher Brothers concert, March 2018

## 5.2 Ye'Zhu'Er-Black Cab (Traversing the Great Firewall)

One of the most impenetrable boundaries for a Chinese rapper is “the Great Firewall.” “The Great Firewall” is the collective name for Chinese censorship practices which insulate the local internet from outside networks. In China, the major platforms which artists in the United States (and elsewhere) use to reach and grow audiences are blocked, including Youtube, Instagram, Soundcloud, Spotify, and Twitter.

A critical component to the Higher Brothers’ global success is their polyvalent relationship with 88Rising, who has helped them circumvent internet censorship. 88Rising is a record label, an artist management firm, and a media company with a Youtube channel with over 1.6 million followers. 88Rising’s relationship with the Higher Brothers began with a music video titled “Black Cab.”

Before it became a music video, “Black Cab” was a song called “Ye’Zhu’er.” A Sichuanese word literally meaning “wild pig”, “ye’zhu’er” refers to gypsy cab drivers—hustlers who pick up riders on the street and deliver them to their destinations off the meter. In the song, the Higher Brothers rap as if they are a “ye’zhu’er” who is trying to convince imagined potential riders to get into their car. The imagined “ye’zhu’er” does not replace the Higher Brothers, rather, both identities are incorporated at the same time: “we need one more rider/ hop in/ our song is playing in the car/ you can even take a picture with us for free.” This is not the dichotomy of actor and role or self and other, but a play between multiple perspectives—a characteristic of animation. The Higher Brothers are simultaneously self and other and listeners are both potential customers and fans. Multiple realities are incorporated at once as a real-life scenario is remediated into song.

When the Higher Brother transformed the song into a music video they asked me to publish it on Youtube and give it an English title. I translated the name from Sichuanese to Mandarin and then into English. This not only renders the name intelligible for English-speaking audiences, but also incorporates the Mandarin meaning (black car), amalgamating audiences rather than separating them. It is difficult to say now whether this name is local or global. This is the heteroglossic, boundary dissolving nature of the cyborg who builds worlds by weaving together multiple constituents.

The team at 88Rising saw the “Black Cab” video and decided to purchase it and publish it on their Youtube channel. While they had no idea what the Higher Brothers were rapping about, they were impressed by their skill and their liveliness (they dab dozens of times, although this is not the only animation technique they use). The Higher Brothers are alive and moving at multiple scales. On a larger scale, creating a song led to creating a video, which led to 88Rising picking it up, which led to a management contract, which led to a record deal (their first album was titled “Black Cab”), which led to a China tour (the “Black Cab” tour), an Asia tour, and most recently, a North American tour. Motion at the micro-scale was translated into momentum, leading to physical movement across space and internet circulation at the macro-scale. This movement all began with the image of the car, itself a representation of mobility.





Fig. 7 The Black Cab tour takes the Higher Brothers to Taiwan. July 2017



Fig. 8 The image of the black cab is shown transversing the Great Firewall in the “Ding Mogu” music video, produced by 88Rising.



### 5.3 Los Santos-Los Angeles (Making it to America)

The language the Higher Brothers use to describe their lives is the same language used in gaming. The progression of their lives is called “plot” (剧情), important people are “characters” (角色), life events are “leveling up” (升级), clothing, jewelry and accessories are “equipment” (装备), and desires are “objectives” (目标). Masiwei once told me that he is on his fourth life. He frequently describes his job as “playing a game” (玩游戏). “I understand this game. I’ve been playing it a long time,” he loves to say. His hook in one of their new songs is “I’ve been in the game for a long time.”

I recently met up with the Higher Brothers at LAX for the start of the US tour. It was their first time in America. Getting here wasn’t easy. So many of our friends in Chengdu had been denied visas to come to the States. Making it to US soil was indicative of traversing major physical and symbolic boundaries. “Are you happy?” I asked DZKnow. “I am so happy! This is the airport in GTA.” He was referring to the game Grand Theft Auto V: San Andreas. He’d been to LA before, but in a game world.

GTA V: San Andreas is a video game centered around urban crime and violence, which incorporates driving, shooting, action, and story elements. The world is set in Los Santos, a fictional city based on Los Angeles. The Higher Brothers wrote and recorded a song titled “Franklin” about one of the protagonists in GTA V, which sums up the gameplay quite well:

[Hook 1: MaSiWei]  
Y’all need the practice  
Y’all need the practice  
Driving like Franklin  
Shooting like Franklin  
Y’all need the practice  
Y’all need the practice  
Working like Franklin  
Smoking like Franklin  
Franklin, Franklin, Franklin, steal  
Franklin, Franklin, Franklin, steal  
Steal a Maserati then steal a Ferrari  
Living in Los Santos  
Bitches, I’m Franklin

[Verse 1: MaSiWei]  
Let’s go on a journey  
Let’s fall in love  
She likes Asian faces  
But she can’t say why  
I don’t need to go to Bangkok to walk on the beach  
Ocean breeze fills the room, but it’s through the screen  
I gotta buy an airplane hanger  
I gotta buy a submarine

I gotta get a mansion with a pool in Hollywood Hills  
I deserve it all, you won't hear it when I shoot  
Don't think I'm soft, I'm motherfuckin' Franklin

[Hook 2: MaSiWei]

Franklin, Franklin, Franklin, steal  
Franklin, Franklin, Franklin, steal  
Steal a Maserati and then steal a Ferrari  
Living in Los Santos  
Bitches, I'm Franklin

[Verse 2: DZ]

Franklin, Franklin, taking risks for riches  
Franklin, Franklin, drunk again wow  
Franklin, Franklin, an admirable asshole  
Franklin, Franklin, wants to eat good tonight  
The boss comes to my shop, listens to a song, pays money, holds someone up, talks  
shit  
Can't get a grip on the steering wheel, a Gatling on every street, close my eyes, 3  
bangs, 3 lives  
Breaking into your house with a ski mask on, telling you I'm so poor that I can't afford  
ice cream  
Send me a message, I'm waiting for your instructions, nightmares awake Franklin  
My friends call me funny man, my bathrobe on, I love to start shit  
Westpac broke the siren, there ain't no cops  
I got a gun to your head, I'm chillin', who's gonna listen to your bullshit?  
Get a good look before you die, bitch, I'm Franklin

[Verse 3: Psy.P]

I do what I say, don't feel bad about robbing or killing  
Lock myself inside with no trace, the diamonds sparkle in the cabinet  
I put it all in the trunk, all in order to get where I'm going  
For family, for my brothers, for money, if you don't wanna die, comply with me  
In the beginning with the first character, it was all fucking, kidnapping and fighting  
But now I'm already a household name just like Tony Montana  
I'm driving my car when the phone rings, my buddy's got a plan  
I'll steal it all, it doesn't matter if it's hidden in your house or underground  
Danger gets closer when darkness falls, do you want money or life?  
He gets a hard lesson, it happens to be karma  
He wasted all my time, but I've gone from soldier to general  
Replaced my body with cement and rebar, don't love me 'cause I'm doomed to  
disappoint

GTA V may be played in two modes: single player mode and online multi-player. In the single player mode, the player, like a puppet master, switches freely between one of

three characters. Moreover, the player can switch between first and third person perspectives at will, with the first person perspective simulating an experience closer to an actor playing a role, and the third person perspective simulating an experience more akin to a puppeteer (the player) looking at his puppets (the characters). Character/player co-presence and the shift between first and third person perspectives is transmuted into the Higher Brothers' lyrics. In one moment they are rapping about Franklin—"Franklin, Franklin, Franklin, steal"—and in the next, they are Franklin—"Bitches I'm Franklin." Then they shift into themselves—"She likes Asian faces."

Gameplay takes place mostly on foot and by car. Stealing cars and cruising around is a major element of the game. During the five weeks the Higher Brothers and I were in Los Angeles, we rented cars, and I drove us everywhere we went. It was an everyday occurrence for me to turn a corner and hear a voice in the backseat say, "oh, I've been here before," or "I've sold drugs on drugs on that hill," or "this landscape is so GTA." The first Airbnb we stayed in was off of Franklin Ave. The Higher Brothers were tickled pink to drive down a street named after their favorite GTA character. The environment was infused with life for them, life that was projected from the virtual world back into the physical world. Life was remediated into game, which was remediated back into life.

GTA V also has an online multiplayer format, and I spent the last day of the China tour sitting with DZKnow, watching him and asking questions as he played. He told me that he often plays multiplayer with his fans. Together they formed a team called "Black Cab" and drive around in a black car as they cooperate to kill enemies and complete missions. DZKnow told me he often spends real-life money in order to buy virtual items that increase the power and skills of the team. He said it's his responsibility to make sure his "Higher Gang" is the best they can be. Outside of the game world, I have never seen DZKnow spend five minutes with a fan let alone buy them something. This "virtual" world remediates the Higher Brothers' world and affords new connections and social interactions with fans that would not otherwise be possible.

After the US tour was over and the boys were back in China, DZKnow sent me a WeChat message: "Look, I found our house." He sent through a gameplay screenshot from GTA depicting the street next to our last Airbnb. For DZKnow, the game was remediated into life when he was in LA. Going back to Chengdu and seeing LA was life translated back into game. The longer the Higher Brothers are back in China, the more they miss the US and the more time they spend in GTA accessing LA from the game world. They like to post screenshots of gameplay on their social media accounts with captions like "back in LA."

An obvious fluidity emerges between the "virtual" world and the "real" world. The gameplay mechanics are also applied to the "real" world insofar as the Higher Brothers are able to adopt multiple, conflicting perspectives and identities at once (switching between characters/first person Franklin/third person Franklin/self). This is also what Haraway's cyborg does. Part of the cyborg's power stems from its ability to adopt multiple perspectives at once.



Fig. 9 While in Chengdu, DZKnow plays GTA and finds our Airbnb from Los Angeles

## 5.4 No Love Cash Only (Fan Interactions)

The Higher Brothers often talk about the difference between the fans on the two sides of the Great Firewall. In general, they say the fans in China are “haters.” I’d argue that the users on Weibo are not just “haters”, they are powerful. Chinese netizens recently created a scandal over rapper PG One and his alleged extramarital affair with a Chinese actress. Not only did the users ruin PG One’s career (brands will no longer work with him), it led to a nationwide hip-hop ban which prevents rappers from appearing on network television. Weibo users also frequently accuse rappers of using drugs, another major taboo in China that can lead to imprisonment and career death. The Higher Brothers have now turned off commenting functions on their Weibo posts in order to mitigate risks and maintain power over other users.

Internet users can also play a role in creation. “No love cash only” is Melo’s catch phrase. Originally used to describe his relationship with women, the phrase quickly made its way into his lyrics, and then into the “bio” on his Instagram (a platform blocked in China). He frequently uses it as a caption under his Instagram photos. Recently, he posted a picture of himself and his new girlfriend, which he captioned “I N F A T U A T E D” (the spaces between the letters is another technique replicated from Migos). This sparked a frenzy of fans commenting on the obvious disparity between his catch phrase and his newest update. “What happened to no love cash only?” Instagram users asked.

Melo didn’t understand the interaction that was happening with his non-Chinese fans, so he sent me a WeChat message. “Is it really that serious?” He was worried they were attacking him. “They’re teasing you, just playing with you,” I explained. His attitude quickly turned from solemn to enthusiastic. “Wow, these fans sure are fun!” Within three days Melo tattooed “no love cash only” on his neck, posting a photo of it on his Instagram. His catch phrase had gone from life to lyrics to song to social media to fans, back to his body and back on Instagram. This shows how components of the body are socially mediated, challenging the lines between artist/fan, artist/artwork, virtual/real, and mind/body.



Fig. 10 Melo with his catchphrase. Photo taken March 2018 in Vancouver by author.



Fig. 11 Melo's new (April 2018) tattoo, accessed via the artist's Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/melo0729/?hl=en>

## 5.5 Camera as Transmutation of Perspectives

When I asked DZKnow my original research question—what is the place of the camera in the matrix of social relations?—he answered with an enthusiastic screech: “the camera? Us rappers need that thing to eat!” While watching the footage I had recorded in the field, I noticed the presence of a camera truly *animates* the Higher Brothers. Similarly, Silvio (2010) observed that Taiwanese cosplay characters “did not try to stay in character if a camera was not present” (433). What is the animating work that the camera is doing? When the camera is on, the Higher Brothers sing and dance, gesture and make jokes, direct each others’ actions, and most importantly, they look directly into the lens. Why?

Again, DZKnow had the answers. As a former insurance salesman, he is very concerned with the mechanics of making a sale. “It’s all about seeing the situation from the other person’s point of view.” We were sitting in the studio one day when he suddenly gasped—“I’ve figured it out!” “What?” “Why rappers on Instagram love to smack their watch against the camera.” “Why?” “They’re not just hitting the camera, they’re hitting thousands of people in the face!” His insight reveals that an interaction with a camera is not an interaction with an object but rather, with an audience. It also reveals that seeing is a lot like touching, something that Gell observed in Hindu image-worship. As Gell points out, “seeing creates a bridge between one being and another” (117).

This example also illustrates how DZKnow picked up this behavior by watching other rappers on Instagram and embodied it through mimesis. This is a habitus that is not only social mediated, it is deliberately chosen, like an artist who chooses a paintbrush to achieve a specific brushstroke. His achievement was making a tactile connection with thousands of viewers in a single stroke.

Similarly, DZKnow’s Instagram stories (15-second videos that are posted on the platform and disappear after 24 hours) float between first and third person perspectives. Sometimes he looks directly at the camera, other times he will mimic the first person perspective in GTA, tilting the camera from his feet up to eye-level. In this way, animation is achieved by making eye-contact with a fan and also by allowing the fan to experience life from DZKnow’s perspective. Again, this multiplicity of perspectives harks back to Haraway’s self-assembled cyborg.

Fans are not only observing the Higher Brothers, they are also mimicking them and creating their own Higher-inspired worlds. New hip hop groups are popping up in Chengdu and across China everyday. Other rappers are copying the Higher Brothers’ tattoos and even tattooing “Higher Brothers” on their own bodies. Fans recreate their likenesses in drawings, on objects, and through cosplay. They sing their songs and translate song into dance. Students (myself included) are writing essays and giving class presentations about the Higher Brothers and their work. They are an inspiration that is quickly becoming a conduit for others.





Fig. 12 DZKnow slaps the camera with his watch. Stills taken from video provided by DZKnow.



Fig. 13 Masiwei poses with a camera. Photo taken by author.



## 6. Conclusion

Like their projection into the Haier Xiongdi logo and the notion of “worldwide Chinese rappers”, the Higher Brothers are able to create new selves that contest the boundaries between pre-existing categories. Just like the cyborg, they are a “local possibility taking a global vengeance” (Haraway 1999, 181). The cyborg’s power lies in its ability to adopt multiple perspectives simultaneously, assembling elements and people from diverse places into a new world which is constantly in flux. The Higher Brothers borrow elements from China and America, the corporate world and the game world, themselves and their fans. And they exist in their bodies as much as they exist online. In this way, the Higher Brothers represent a new kind of global artist birthed from the fertile ground of digital media.

The Higher Brothers are both artist and artwork. And they continue to go higher. Just like their songs have made it to almost every corner of the globe, they too are moving and picking up momentum in the process. This year they’ll perform in new venues across Japan, Australia, and Europe, and go on a stadium tour across North America. What is the future of Chinese rap music and how will the Higher Brothers’ world change as they continue to create it? And what possibilities does this open for others?

In the introduction, I mentioned the Higher Brothers’ new album, which is titled “Type 3”. Type 3 represents movement and fluctuation between categories, it implies the freedom to create a new self, and it points to new possibilities for the next generation of Chinese youth. Inspired by the Higher Brothers and this idea, Chinese students have started to write essays about their desire to be “type 3s”, posting these assignments on Weibo. How have the Higher Brothers played a part in the creations of others? How do these students envision their future selves? And what new worlds will the next generation create?



Fig. 14 Kids in China cosplay the Higher Brothers. Photo provided by Masiwei.

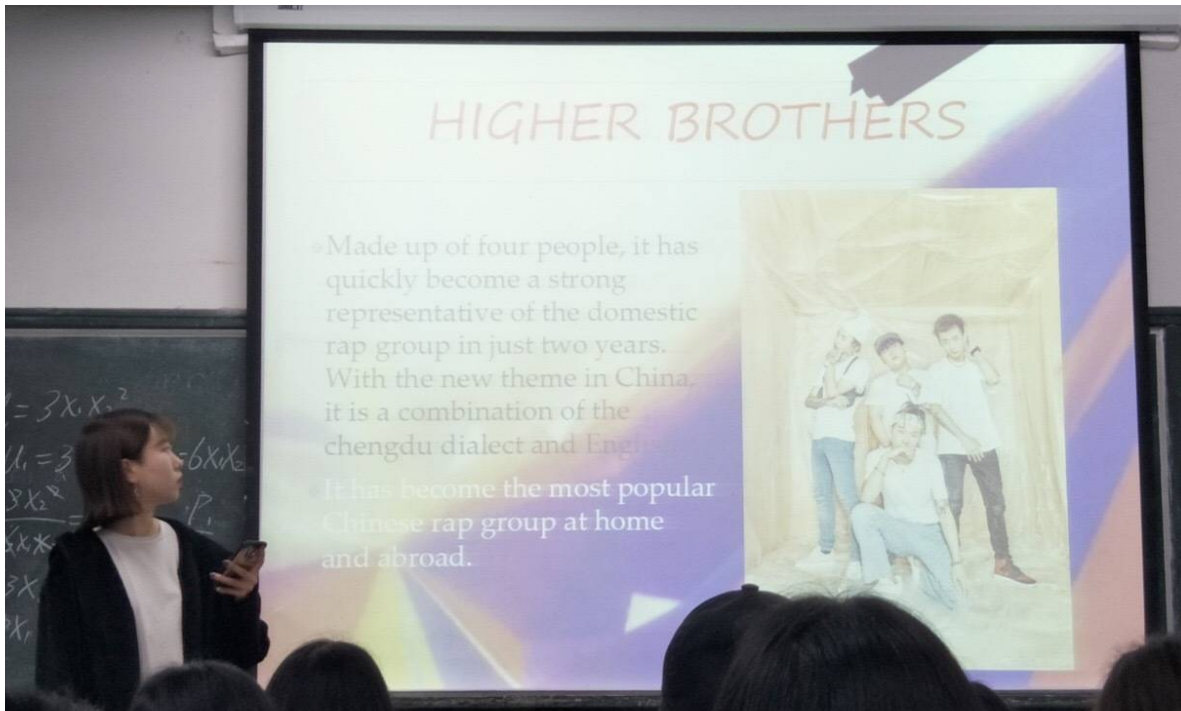


Fig. 15 A student in China gives a class presentation on the Higher Brothers. Accessed via Weibo, April 29, 2018. [https://weibo.com/u/2010106961?refer\\_flag=1001030103](https://weibo.com/u/2010106961?refer_flag=1001030103)



Fig. 16 "Type 3": Masiwei's newest tattoo. Photo provided by Masiwei.



Fig. 17 The Higher Brothers pose with British-born producer Harikiri at Universal Studios in LA. Photo taken by author.

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## Appendix 1

So I have footage of DZKnow saying the n-word, and I made it into a film. I made the film for myself, and mostly for school, but I have come to the conclusion that I cannot release it on the internet anytime in the foreseeable future. The film started as one shot—a 10 minute long take that begins with DZKnow saying the controversial word. It's important to say why he was using it. It wasn't hateful. This word is one of the most commonly used words in rap. He was animating the word and using it playfully in a way to connect with his black peers. In an attempt to contextualize his utterances, I made the film into a 20 minute long piece—the film accompanying this thesis—that buries the n-word so deep in a world of other content that it no longer becomes the center point. All the clips in the film are from a single day taken behind the scenes of a music video shoot in Malibu. It was also the last full day the Higher Brothers spent in America. In the 20 minute version of the film, I include Masiwei talking about the importance of American culture and rap music, I try to hint at a love story that unfolds between DZKnow and an American girl, I show DZKnow helping out with the caterer, I reveal him listening to a song in which the n-word is repeated over and over (the song is titled “Trap Niggas”), and I demonstrate DZKnow interacting with his other manager, Sean. After I made the film I shared it with the Higher Brothers. They loved it, and interestingly enough, DZKnow was not concerned with the images of him saying the n-word, but rather with the images of him with a girl. Why was he so concerned about the girl?

The Higher Brothers recently released a music video for their song “Room Service.” It was made in Shanghai over five months ago but wasn't released until recently. The music video depicts DZKnow and Masiwei in a hotel room, dancing and playing with a group of women. The Higher Brothers' record label, American-based 88Rising, produced the video just before the China hip hop ban came into effect. By the time the video was complete, Chinese rappers were having their careers killed over sexual promiscuity (the infamous “hip hop ban”), so 88Rising decided to hold off on the release. It took a few months of the Higher Brothers and I demanding that the music video come out before 88Rising agreed to upload it on Youtube only, meaning a non-China release. While the video was well received internationally, there was still some backlash within China, especially from DZKnow's lady friends.

After the Malibu music video shoot and before heading back to China, DZKnow told me that he doesn't want girls to appear in anymore of his music videos this year. “I am the star,” he told me, “why do I need these girls to make myself look better? I don't need it.” There is this stereotype in America that asian men are unattractive. So part of what the 88Rising team wanted to do with the Malibu music video shoot was get their asian male artists together with a bunch of pretty, multiracial models. The artists were simultaneously performing a rap-star identity and one which attacks the stereotype that asian men are undesired by non-asian females. At the same time, the one asian female artist signed to 88Rising, Niki, an 18 year old from Indonesia, got taken to town in the comments on Youtube when she appeared in a music video with a white man. She was accused of perpetuating stereotypes, of sexualizing herself for the white male gaze. In both cases, women are being denied agency in the name of “attacking stereotypes” and everyone is still very concerned with race and its representation. So I agree with

DZKnow—let's quit trying so hard to sexualize (and racialize) these artists and instead just focus on the artists and their art. What is just as important as the films we do show the public, are all the films which we do not show the public. I am choosing to not release the film I made on Youtube because I do not want to spark a conversation about race and cultural appropriation. To do so would be taking a giant risk for the Higher Brothers, who are just starting to make it big in the United States. While I think the film has a great potential to start conversations in the classroom, the classroom is not a Youtube audience. I am including it with this thesis because it was a critical step in coming to my conclusions about animation.

Human Subjects Research Approval was obtained for this thesis.  
Protocol ID: 2017-04-9795