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"Yo I am Superman, You Kiddo Go Home": ritual impoliteness in Chinese freestyle rap battles

Abstract: Introduced by African American communities, Chinese rap battle features an intensive ritual exchange of impoliteness, aggression, and vulgarity, but its linguistic realizations have not been systematically examined. Taking *Iron Mic* as a case study, this paper explores how advanced and novice rappers perform ritual impoliteness in Chinese underground rap battle competitions. Using mixed methods of discourse analysis and content analysis, we analyze the ritual impoliteness strategies in 51 rounds of Chinese freestyle rap battles. The findings show that advanced and novice rappers employed comparable instances of taboo language, threatening, and insults on their opponents' superficial qualities and rap skills. Moreover, advanced rappers performed significantly more boasting and ritual insults on the others' moral qualities. Their use of ritual impoliteness is warranted by hip-hop community norms of authenticity and creativity as well as Chinese social values of reciprocity, filial piety, and moral educators. This paper contributes to the research on Chinese ritual impoliteness and rap battle competitions.

Keywords: authenticity; Chinese rap battle; creativity; *Iron Mic*; moral order; ritual impoliteness

1 Introduction

In this study, we aim to explore how advanced and novice Chinese rappers perform ritual impoliteness in underground freestyle rap battle competitions. Ritual impoliteness is used as an umbrella term to cover ritualized performances of insult, self-praise, swearing, aggression that do not conform to general social norms but

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are evaluated as appropriate within certain groups, i.e., the Chinese underground rap battle community. Originated from African American communities, the free-style rap battle features an argumentative display of the rapper's supreme lyricism, inventiveness, clever wordplay, and exceptional command of rhythmic flow (Alim et al. 2011; Bacon 2018; Cutler 2007; Tinajero 1997). Against the backdrop of music, rappers spontaneously produce rhythmic lyrics to "belittle some aspect of the opponent's appearance, rhyming style or place of origin, and [perform] ritual insults directed at his or her mother, sister, or crew" (Cutler 2007: 9).

In the past several decades, rap battles in China have developed from an exclusive underground performance to a popular genre embraced by the main-stream culture. While hip-hop music entered China's mainland in the 1980s, rap battles have not been appreciated by the mainstream Chinese culture due to its vulgar language use that goes against core socialist values and represents "negative energy" (Amar 2018; Sullivan and Zhao 2021). Until very recently, versions of rap performance have gained popularity among a broader scope of audience in China. In the summer of 2017, *The Rap of China* (中国有嘻哈), an Internet-based talent show, was released on the online video platform *iQiyi*, marking the first mainstream exposure of this underground art (Zhang 2019). The literal translation of the show's title "China has rap" implies that rap music deserves its own place in mainstream Chinese popular culture (Sullivan and Zhao 2021). The linguistic realizations of rap battles, however, have not been systematically explored.

Examining ritual impoliteness in Chinese rap battles could contribute to the emerging pragmatic research on Chinese ritual practices. Chinese communica-tion style is traditionally marked by normative politeness (Gao and Ting-Toomey 1998; Gu 1990), and "impoliteness is almost equal to lack of good upbringing" (Bargiela-Chiappini et al. 2007: 135). Recent studies have shown the legitimacy of ritual impoliteness in various contexts, such as (reciprocal) jocular abuse in face-to-face conversation and online interaction (Chen 2019; Zhao 2020), and public shaming during dispute mediation (Ran et al. 2020). The present study builds on this line of research by exploring ritual aggression in an understudied context of Chinese rap battles. Specifically, we propose two research questions:

RQ1: What are the common types of ritual impoliteness performed by Chinese rappers?
RQ2: How do advanced and novice rappers differ in their practice of ritual impoliteness?

In the following sections, we first present a review of literature on ritual impo-liteness and its connection to Chinese rap battles in Section 2. Section 3 introduces the data corpus and the methodology in our study. Section 4 presents the

qualitative and quantitative findings. Finally, Section 5 discusses the implications and the limitations of our study.

2 Literature review

The antagonistic nature of rap battles can be best understood within the framework of ritual aggressions (Kádár 2017). Rites of aggression have been extensively discussed in various historical and contemporary contexts, such as ritual challenges between Dutch Medieval knights (Bax 1981), flyting in the Old English heroic poetry (Hughes 1998), ritual cursing among the Romani (Kádár and Szalai 2020), and reciprocal jocular abuse (互怼) among Chinese online users (Zhao 2020). Such a call-response exchange is often regarded as the precursor of freestyle rap battles (Perkins 1996). In this section, we describe features of rap battles that are associated with ritual impoliteness.

First, rituals in rap battles are antagonistic in nature. In the historical context, Hughes (1998) points out that flyting in the Old English heroic tradition is designed to be deliberatively provocative. Antagonistic rituals were also documented in ritual challenges between Medieval knights, such as requests for information, requests for action, and accusations (Bax 1981). In Tuscan *Contrasto*, expressions of aggressiveness are expected whereas linguistic politeness is considered face-threatening (Pagliai 2010). Rap battle competition is also antagonistic in that its objective is to "outwit, outflow and outdiss one's opponent" (Mavima 2016: 93). For example, Barrett (2012) showed that Chinese rappers commend self-aggrandizement by bragging that they come from economically more prosperous places in China than their opponents. Jia and Yang (2021) found that Chinese battle MCs attack their opponents' face by accusing the other of disobeying the Confucianist morality and teaching their opponent appropriate mannerism.

One of the hallmarks of rap battles is the use of swear words and taboo language (Mavima 2016). Past studies on swearing and slurs have shown that the perception of taboo language is contextual in that they are often evaluated as appropriate among in-group members (Croom 2013; Jay and Janschewitz 2008). Specially, these words can achieve positive social outcomes when used among "jokes and humor, social commentary, sex talk, storytelling, in-group slang, and self-deprecation or ironic sarcasm in order to promote social harmony or cohesion" (Jay 2009: 155). In the context of rap battles, Lee (2009) notes that rappers often use taboo words as fillers for their freestyle flow whenever they cannot think of the actual words to say, but the use of these canned aggressions has to appear natural to receive positive evaluations.

Second, ritual impoliteness is self-propelled in that "once a multi-performer ritual kicks off, the performers tend to participate in it in an increasingly active (or 'excessive') way" (Kádár 2017: 119). Although not in the rap context, Labov (1972) observed that African Americans often perform a variety of ritual insults entitled the *dozens*, *sounding*, and *signifying*; although personal insults are often responded by denials, excuses, or mitigations, ritual insults are responded to by long sequences of insults that will induce further insults. This self-propelled ritual impoliteness applies to the rap setting. During a rap battle, rappers take turns to belittle each other. For example, Chang (2007) observed that a Beijing-accented rapper scolded their opponent for not speaking proper Mandarin, and their opponent rebutted with a mixture of different languages and dialects, stating that the Beijing accent cannot represent all Chinese accents.

Third, ritual impoliteness should appear to be apparently untrue when judged against a set of beliefs and values shared by in-group members (Culpeper 1996; Labov 1972; Jucker and Taavitsainen 2000). This is especially salient among communities that are shaped by "counter-culture norms" such as the hip-hop community (Croom 2013: 191). Therefore, advanced rappers insult their opponents on community-approved topics, such as belittling their appearance, their rap skills, their reputation, their race and ethnicity, and even threats of inflicting pain and death (Alim et al. 2010; Johnson and Schell-Busey 2016). Failure to adhere to these topics may transform ritual insults into genuine personal insults. For example, although slurs generally can be used non-derogatorily among in-group members (Croom 2013), using racial slurs in a rap battle can induce negative evaluations from the audience (e.g., a White rapper referring to a Black rapper as "nigga", Morgan 2009).

The basis of evaluation also extends to norms of the Chinese society in general. For example, a core component of Chinese interpersonal communication is the management of relationships (关系) (Gao and Ting-Toomey 1998). Ma (2011) points out that Chinese *guanxi* (relationship) involves "moral obligation and appropriate performance, in addition to its materiality such as gift and favor exchange" (p. 25). Favor and face are inseparable within reciprocal relationships (Ran and Zhao 2018) and failure to reciprocate would breach interpersonal harmony and result in face loss (丢脸) (Hwang 1987). For example, Ran et al. (2020) show that the conflict mediators invoke filial piety as an essential moral order in Chinese reintegrative shaming rituals, but in the meantime, mediators stay within their ritual frame as a moral educator to avoid further conflict.

Finally, while ritual aggression is formulaic, it can also be creative within generic boundaries (Bax 2010). This is particularly salient for in-group rituals because these rituals are not necessarily codified and rely on the dynamic co-construction with other performers (Kádár and Bax 2013). In an interview with

battle rappers, Newman (2005) reported that what makes a rapper a good battle MC (Master of Ceremonies) is their ability to be creative. The emphasis on creativity is also discussed in rap battles across various cultures (Alim et al. 2018; Chang 2007; Sykäri 2019). More importantly, the emphasis on creativity dictates that simply borrowing lyrics from others indicates low rap skills. When prepared rhymes and canned resources are used, rappers need to make them appear natural in front of the audience (Hisama 2016; Lee 2009).

The above review shows that rap battle is an important form of ritual impoliteness and has been studied in many lingua-cultures. In recent years, more scholars have started to examine Chinese rap battles (e.g., Barrett 2012; Chang 2007; Jia and Yang 2021; Zhang 2019), but few have systematically explored their realizations in underground battle scenes.

3 Data and methodology

Data were extracted from *Iron Mic*, the first and the most well-known Chinese underground freestyle rap battle. It was founded by an American rapper, Showtyme, in Shanghai in 2001 and later developed into an annual national competition. Each year, rappers will first compete in regional trials, and the winners will be invited to battle in the national finals which have been held in many major cities in China such as Beijing, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Nanjing, and Wuhan.

Each battle usually includes two rounds with the music beat and one round of *a cappella*, in which rappers perform without any background music. After all three rounds, the host will ask the audience to make loud noises to decide the winner. If the win or loss is hard to tell, the audience can request additional rounds from the rappers. The battle videos were recorded by the audience and uploaded on major Chinese video-sharing websites, such as *Bilibili* and *Youku*. Since these data are publicly avaliable to all online users, a formal approval from the Institutional Review Board is not needed. Eventually, we collected 18 videos with 51 rounds of battles, including 26 rounds from 6 advanced rappers and 25 rounds from 10 novice rappers. These videos span from 2008 to 2018. Similar to the male dominance in North American rap competitions, all the rappers in the collected data are male. Most of them appear to be in their 20s and 30s. Figure 1 presents a typical stage display in *Iron Mic*. The two competing rappers are surrounded by peer rappers and judges (the crew).

Since the wins and losses of the battle are determined by audience evaluations, we operationally treat winners of national semi-finals and finals as advanced rappers who could represent the appropriate performance of ritual impoliteness in rap battles. In contrast, losers of regional and the first elimination

Figure 1: Stage of a typical rap battle in *Iron Mic*.

round of national competition were considered as novice rappers who display inappropriate and poor performance of ritual impoliteness.

Our unit of analysis is the common musical measure of bars. Each bar typically includes "four quarter-note beats" (Bradley 2009: XIX) and was transcribed into one line of lyrics for analysis. In some cases, to meet the rhythmic requirement, rappers separate parts of speech (e.g., subjects, objects) and noun phrases and place them in different bars. For analytical purposes, we transcribed these words to their semantically more coherent line. If the lyrics were inaudible, the corresponding line was left blank. Eventually, we identified 549 semantically meaningful lines (7,784 words) produced by advanced rappers and 450 lines (5,618 words) produced by novice rappers. Fewer lines were produced by novice rappers because they may end their performance earlier due to their poor rapping skills. In contrast, the advanced rappers produced more lines during the untimed *a cappella* rounds.

Our data analysis proceeded as follows. First, the two authors watched the full videos of the collected battle competitions, getting familiar with the content and some necessary background information. Then, based on previous typologies of rap battle aggressions (e.g., Johnson and Schell-Busey 2016; Mavima 2016), the two authors looked for patterns that conform to and diverge from these traditions. After revising the coding scheme based on reviewing several rounds of battles, the two authors independently coded all data and then differences were discussed and resolved.

4 Data analysis

In this section, we present the distribution and types of ritual impoliteness performed by advanced and novice rappers (Table 1).

Table 1: Type and distribution of ritual impoliteness between advanced and novice rappers.

Types of ritual impoliteness	Advanced group	Novice group	Chi-squared *p*-Values
Swearing and taboo language	78 (3)	93 (3.58)	0.219
Insults on rap skills	35 (1.34)	39 (1.5)	0.215
Insults on superficial qualities	17 (0.65)	24 (0.92)	0.565
Insults on moral qualities	59 (2.27)	12 (0.46)	0.021
Boasting	75 (2.88)	9 (0.35)	0.001
Threatening	15 (0.58)	25 (0.96)	0.075

Mean occurrence of ritual impoliteness in each round is presented in parenthesis.

Overall, the findings in Table 1 show that advanced and novice rappers use a significant amount of swearing and taboo language and ritual insults on the opponent's rap skills. They also perform comparable amounts of insults on their opponents' superficial qualities (e.g., appearance, ethnicity) and produce ritual threats on their opponents. Apart from their musical performance, what potentially separates advanced from novice rappers is their ability to perform ritual insults on their opponents' moral qualities and boast their qualities. These findings suggest that ritual impoliteness is an important feature in Chinese rap battle competitions. The following sub-sections will illustrate the linguistic realizations of the six types of ritual impoliteness identified in our data.

4.1 Swearing and taboo language

Taboo words in rap battles are highly conventionalized and are restricted to a few expressions such as motherfucking/motherfucker (他妈; 你他妈), fuck/fucking (操), penis/dick (鸡巴; 屌), and pussy (屄;逼). These expressions are short and easy to rhyme with the rest of the lyrics. Lee (2009) notes that rappers often use taboo words as fillers for their freestyle flow whenever they cannot thinking of the actual words to say, but the use of these canned aggressions has to appear natural to receive positive evaluations. Consistent with Jay and Jay's (2015) claim that taboo words are strategically chosen to make the speech more fluent. Our rap battles data also show that rappers tend to improve their fluency by adding taboo expressions. Consider example 1 (the transcription conventions can be found at the end of the paper).

(1)　　Advanced round in 2015
　　　1.　鸡哥你知道韵脚我太压得
　　　2.　你不是虫你是条菜花蛇 **!!!**
　　　3.　我在这里跟你说
　　　4.　你知道我的逼话特别的多
　　　5.　所以 你说 昆明教会我认同
　　　6.　昆明人从来不认怂
　　　7.　当然你觉得我很礼貌
　　　8.　所以说老子绝对不是一个穷屌
　　　1.　***Brother Chicken**, you know I'm really good at rhyming*
　　　2.　*You are not a worm, you are a king rat snake !!!*
　　　3.　*I'm telling you right here*
　　　4.　*You know I ramble a lot of **pussy talks***
　　　5.　*So you said Kunming taught you to embrace differences*
　　　6.　*Kunming people never cave!*
　　　7.　*Of course you feel I am really polite*
　　　8.　*So **daddy** is definitely not a pure **dick***

In excerpt (1), the advanced rapper started his beat by addressing his opponent as *Brother Chicken*, which is derived from the opponent's name "pheasant" (山鸡). Since "chicken" is a Chinese slur that connotates female prostitutes, attacking the other with a variant of their rapper name reflects a situated off-record impoliteness to entertain the audience (Culpeper 2011). Moreover, the rapper also strategically used a series of conventional taboo language to perfect his flow and express his strong emotions. In line 8, the rapper stated that he is not a 纯屌 (*chún diǎo*, 'pure dick'), defending himself against the accusation from his opponent. In the meantime, *chún diǎo* also rhymes with *lǐ mào* ('politeness') that appeared at the end of line 7. Taking lines 7 and 8 together, his use of taboo language is semantically coherent with his lyrics. In line 7, the rapper claimed that he is a polite person. Although he swore in line 8, it was used to defend himself rather than impose face-threat on his opponent, satisfying the general expectation of face management (Brown and Levinson 1987). By adding an instrumental goal of defending himself and a relational goal of not harming the other's face, the rapper made his use of canned impoliteness appear natural to the audience and successfully saved his flow.

　　Although advanced and novice rappers did not statistically ($p > 0.05$) differ in their use of taboo language at the individual level, overall, novice rappers tended to use more swearing and taboo language. What may separate the advanced from the novice is their ability to make swearing appear natural in front of the audience. Example (2) shows a deliberate and awkward instance of swearing by a novice rapper.

(2)   Novice round in 2015

1.   让你知道 我他妈对你非常有礼貌
2.   我敲着你的头 就像他妈架子鼓
3.   让你知道 我是说唱的萨达姆
4.   我在这里他妈尽情发威
5.   你他妈在这里他妈吓的流尿
6.   我看你他妈继续装逼
7.   你骄傲得差点饿死在街头那里
8.   所以你他妈没有任何程度

1.   *I'll let you know I am **fucking** polite to you*
2.   *I am knocking your head,*
       *like I'm playing the **fucking** drum set*
3.   *I'll let you know, I am the Saddam in hip-hop*
4.   *I'm **fucking** showing my power here as much as I want*
5.   *While you're **fucking** here **fucking** scared and pissed*
6.   *I see you **fucking** continue to be **damn** pretentious*
7.   *You're so proud*
       but you almost starved to death on the street
8.   *So you are **fucking** not of any high level*

Contrary to the natural use of taboo language in excerpt (1), the performer in excerpt (2) used many epithets in places where emotional stress is semantically incoherent or redundant. For instance, in line 1, it is paradoxical to claim that he is being polite to his opponent while using swear words in the same line. The use of swear words in line 4 becomes redundant because the performing rapper has already conveyed his wholehearted emotion with the phrase *as much as one likes* (尽情). Moreover, the constant use of the same taboo word *motherfucker* (他妈, literally *his mother*) as fillers made it explicit that the performer was unable to produce a smooth flow and had to rely on conventionalized fillers. Since improvisation is a core element in freestyle rap battles (Hisama 2016), a failure to vary in their expressions would be negatively evaluated by the audience as having poor rap skills.

4.2 Insults on rap skills

As the centerpiece of rap battle competitions, both advanced and novice rappers tend to perform ritual insults on their opponents' rap skills, which has been documented in previous studies (Alim et al. 2011). In these episodes, rappers insult each other by pointing out that they have defeated their opponent before or teasing

that their opponent cannot produce coherent lyrics, articulate their lyrics, or follow the beats.

(3)   Advanced round in 2009
1.   我赢你不止过三年三盘
2.   This is hip-hop 我从来就不怕
3.   哪怕你跟我面前说的什么你代表北京
4.   你能代表北平 我代表中国
1.   *I defeated you more than three times over three years*
2.   *This is hip-hop, which I've never been afraid of*
3.   *Even if you are standing in front of me*
       telling me something that you represent Beijing
4.   *If you can represent Peking*
5.   *Then I can represent China*

In the above excerpt, the advanced rapper highlighted that he had defeated his opponent at least three times in the past three years, using evidence to express his contempt towards his opponent. Moreover, in lines 3 and 4, to show his superiority over his opponent, he metaphorically compared himself to China and his opponent to Beijing (北京), or its old name Peking (北平), which is his opponent's hometown. Combining the evidential and metaphorical insults, the rapper constructed an image that he is much more powerful than his opponent and the competition is not a balanced match. Similar to this example, novice rappers also strive to show that they are much more skillful than their opponents in terms of styles, lyrics, and experiences.

Moreover, rappers also perform ritual insults that center around creativity. On the one hand, they tease their opponents' use of canned resources or prepared lyrics for going against the nature of improvisation and creativity in rap battles (Sykäri 2019). For example, one rapper referred to their opponent's rap style as "filling in the blank" (填空) because they relied heavily on prepared chunks, equating the use of canned resources to the unwillingness to perform good rap music. In doing so, the rapper constructs an immediate evaluation criterion for the audience that whoever uses the most prepared lyrics will lose the battle. Anchored by this strategy, the audience is very likely to notice the rapper's opponent regarding his use of canned lyrics in his performance. Nevertheless, these insults are considered ritual because using canned resources is a common practice in rap battles (Lee 2009). In fact, rappers frequently adapt their rhyming style by incorporating rhyming words from previous rappers, thus constituting an essential way to consolidate the hip-hop community (Williams 2013). Additionally, battle MCs produce situated responses to their opponent's prior performance, propelling the previous insults to a higher level.

(4)   Advanced round in 2012
    1.   说实话, 我刚才听了你所有说的话
    2.   我觉得你是一个假的 rasta
    3.   还跟我说 one peace one love 但是都是废话
    1.   *To be honest, I just heard everything you said*
    2.   *I think you are a fake rasta*
    3.   *You told me one peace one love,*
       but those are all nonsense

In this excerpt, the rapper and his opponent were battling reggae music. The word *rasta* refers to the specific reggae music that follows Rastafarianism, a Christian religion that originated in Jamaica (Blazin_Assassin 2011). By pointing out that his opponent is a fake rasta singer, the winning rapper attempted to undermine his opponent's expertise in reggae music. Moreover, while his opponent engaged with the central theme of peace and love in rap battles, the winning rapper situationally connected the novice's hypocrisy to his fake identity as a rasta singer.

4.3 Insults on superficial qualities

In addition to attacking each other's rap skills, battle MCs also perform ritual insults directed at each other's physical appearance and place of origin. Consider the following example.

(5)   Advanced round in 2018
    1.   真的不想听这个胖子继续讲话
    2.   上一把是谁装疯卖傻, 是谁 (在场上) 躺下
    3.   你又他妈来到这个舞台
    4.   现在留下你这个肥胖的身材
    1.   *I really don't want to listen to*
       this fatty talking anymore
    2.   *Who was acting crazy last time,*
       who lied down (on the stage)
    3.   *Now you are **fucking** on this stage again*
    4.   *Leaving nothing but your fat figure*

In excerpt (5), the winning rapper is relatively slim, whereas his opponent is overweight. Taking this as a vantage point, the performer not only showed contempt by stating that he did not want to listen to his opponent but also attacked his opponent's body shape as fatty, thus bragging his fitness in contrast. Insults based on place of origin can also be found in excerpt (3) when the rapper tried to

show his superior rap skill over his opponent. These findings are consistent with the findings documented in previous studies of English and Chinese rap battles (Barrett 2012; Chang 2007; Culter 2007).

4.4 Insults on moral qualities

Our findings show that advanced rappers performed a significantly higher amount of ritual insults on their opponents' moral qualities. First, the rappers performed ritual insults on their opponents' ill practices as unethical rappers. Excerpt (6) presents how an advanced rapper performs ritual insults by invoking values of reciprocity and gratitude to each other's help.

(6)   Advanced round in 2011
  1.   就是想让你知道 我以前也给你
  2.   做过好多 beat 但是你承诺我
  3.   就像放屁 **what the fuck** (!!!)
  1.   *I just wanted to let you know that*
  2.   *I used to write a lot of beats for you, but you broke your promise*
  3.   *Just like farting, **What the fuck** (!!!)*

In the preceding round, the rapper's opponent employed many canned beats to supplement his flow. Instead of directly attacking his opponent's excessive use of canned expressions, the rapper recounted their shared history of coming from the same rap battle society in the city of Xi'an and their past experience of composing rap music together. The rapper revealed that they promised each other to work on real hip-hop, as opposed to writing trite beats. By explicitly pointing out that his opponent did not keep his promise, the winner MC invoked a due moral sanction on his opponent, highlighting his opponent's ill practice of not returning his favor to write beats. As a result, his opponent is framed as an immoral person who could not keep his promise and who failed to reciprocate earlier favors, which is a serious moral breach in Chinese society (Hwang 1987; Ma 2011; Ran and Zhao 2018). Such an insult received ovations from the audience. Although MCs are not expected to know each other in rap battles (Wald 2018), invoking shared history to depict the other's misdemeanor constitutes a more severe form of rap insults for damaging the other's reputation (Johnson and Schell-Busey 2016), conforming to the self-propelling feature in ritual aggressions (Kádár 2017; Labov 1972).

In rap battles, performers also ritually insult their opponents' family relatives and significant others (Mavima 2016). Labov (1972) notes that in ritual sounding, it is crucial to involve a third-person (usually the opponent's mother), which is a sign of playfulness. Example (7) below is illustrative.

(7)   Advanced round in 2010
1.   为什么每次都是下半身的说唱
2.   为什么每次都要想方设法干别人的娘
3.   你的视频敢不敢给你妈妈看
4.   她看了之后会想把你的逼脸扇
       ……
5.   子不教父之过
6.   孩不孝母之错
1.   *Why is hip hop always about the lower half of the body*
2.   *Why do you always want to **fuck** the other's mother*
3.   *Do you dare to show the video to your mother*
4.   *After watching it,*
      *she is going to slap you in your **pussy face**.*
      …
5.   *It is the father's fault not to teach his child*
6.   *It is the mother's fault that*
      the child does not obey filial piety

To rebut his opponent's constant swearing, the performer in excerpt (7) initiated a series of insults involving his mother (lines 1–4). The advanced rapper also intended to highlight his opponent's breach of Chinese moral orders of filial piety (lines 5 and 6). While swearing and using derogatory language are presumed to be ritual in rap battles, the advanced rapper highlighted the social moral order of filial piety over situational rudeness, thus portraying his opponent as a person who brings shame to his family, which is a severe breach of Chinese morality and the core Chinese value of family unity (Chen 2019). Similar ritual aggression is also documented in reintegrative shaming in Chinese public dispute mediation (Ran et al. 2020).

In addition to explicit face attacks, advanced rappers also employ subtle linguistic rudeness to attack their opponents. In rap battles, rappers can associate negative values to their opponents without damaging their image as moral agents. Since unconventional indirect messages require more cognitive efforts to recognize than the conventional ones (Holtgraves 1997), employing these indirect insults imposes more cognitive burden on the opposing rapper, reflecting a clever design in rap lyrics.

(8)   Advanced round in 2010
1.   我建议你认真地看一下超人这部电影
2.   知道为什么S纹在胸前
3.   有种责任意志存在心里面 (!!!)
4.   不是下半身 是能够呼吸的尊严

1. *I suggest you watch the movie Superman carefully*
2. *and know why the S is engraved on his chest*
3. *It is the responsibility and willpower in his heart* (!!!)
4. *Not the lower body, but the dignity to breathe*

At its face value, the rapper in excerpt (8) was recommending the American movie *Superman* to his opponent. In fact, the movie represents an upright figure of strong responsibility and a vindicator of justice. Bringing about a righteous figure to an emcee who used excessive rude language creates a sharp contrast that the rapper's verbal vulgarity is unjustified. This is made explicit in line 4 in that rap battles are not about using sexual referents but expressing dignity. By juxtaposing a morally charged figure with their contestant, the rapper implicates that their opponent has low morality and poor rap skills.

Across the above types of moral insults, rappers tend to adopt a didactic delivery style, such as stating "let me teach you some real lessons". Under the Confucian ideology, teachers enjoy a high social status and can be used to refer to people in power even if they are not in the education industry (You 2014). Positioning themselves as a moral educator is commonly practiced in Chinese ritual interactions (Ran et al. 2020). Using such a didactic style, the speaker rectified himself as a moral educator and constructed higher power status over his opponent.

4.5 Boasting

Advanced rappers also significantly differed from novice rappers in their frequent use of boasting. As a form of ritual impoliteness, boasting forms a strong contrast with the maxim of modesty in Chinese normative politeness (Gu 1990). In rap battles, bragging about one's physical appearance, rap skills, and moral ground is community-approved within these battle competitions (Mavima 2016). For example, a rapper can brag about his physical shape, and, in turn, ridicule his opponent as overweight (see excerpt 5 in Section 4.3). What is more common, however, is to brag about their high rap ethics and rap skills, as can be seen from the following example.

(9)   Advanced round in 2010
1.   让他们知道谁才是真正的牛逼
2.   谁能站在这个舞台上真正地拼
3.   我是一个种子, 现在崛地而起
4.   这个照相机的主角, 是我永远不是你
5.   这个奖金永远在我口袋里

1. *I'll let them know what a real badass looks like*
2. *who can really put all his efforts on the stage*
3. *I am a seed, and it's time for me to sprout*
4. *The focus of this camera is always me, not you*
5. *The prize will always be in my pocket*

Excerpt (9) reflects hip-hop music's central theme of "keep it real", such as staying true to rappers themselves and resist the mainstream social, financial, and political pressures (Cheuk 2021; McLeod 1999). In lines 1 and 2, the advanced rapper presented himself as a real MC who puts all his efforts on the stage, despising those "fake rappers" who use prepared rhymes and steal punchlines from others. On the basis of his high moral ground in rap practice, he metaphorically compared himself to a sprouting seed (line 3) and claimed that he is the focus on the camera (line 4) and the prize will eventually fall in his pocket (line 5). The consistent bragging conforms to the braggadocio tradition in Afro-based storytelling and rap battle (Mavima 2016). In contrast, novice rappers only focused on attacking their opponent and rarely praised themselves, which could be interpreted as a sign of lacking confidence. In fact, in several rounds, the novice rappers explicitly expressed that they are overwhelmed and may have already lost the competition.

4.6 Threatening

Finally, both novice and advanced rappers opted to attack the other's negative face with apparently untrue threats (e.g., 老子杀了你, 把你他妈的尸体丢到哪里去; I will kill you, and where should I dispose your fucking body). These exaggerated threats are forms of ritual impoliteness and are often used when responding to an earlier face attack with a severer threat. Consider the following example.

(10)   Advanced round in 2010
    1.   你可以割了我的头卡住我的喉
    2.   但是我死的时候也会永远握住你的手 (!!!)
    1.   *You can chop my head and choke my throat*
    2.   But I *will always hold your hand when I die* (!!!)

In the above case, to respond to his opponent's threat of killing him, the winning rapper metaphorically conceded that his opponent might take some advantage over him, but he would still fight back. This is particularly frightening when the rapper associated his rap performance with death and created a vivid description of grasping the other's hand after death. Such an exaggerated statement imposes a strong face threat to his opponent's negative face, thus boosting their own morale.

These self-propelling attacks conform to the rules of ritual insults in that an attack is responded with another more severe attack (Labov 1972).

5 Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we present the major types of ritual impoliteness performed by Chinese underground MCs in the prestigious *Iron Mic* rap battle competition. The findings show that the Chinese rappers perform rites of using swear words and taboo language, insulting their opponents' superficial qualities, rap skills, and moral qualities, boasting their qualities, and exerting death threats on their opponents. Compared to the novice rappers, the advanced rappers employed significantly higher amounts of insult on their opponents' moral qualities while self-boasting. These findings contribute to the study of ritual impoliteness and rap battles in two ways.

First, our findings show that ritual impoliteness in Chinese rap battles stems from in-group norms approved by hip-hop communities and social values upheld by Chinese society. Within the hip-hop community, rites of impoliteness are warranted by rap battle's central aims of contesting "who is the better man or woman" (Mavima 2016: 99) and its mentality of authenticity and "keep it real" (Cheuk 2021; McLeod 1999; Sullivan and Zhao 2021). Therefore, taboo language is used to express sincere emotions; various forms of ritual insult are performed to accuse their opponents of being "fake"; and self-bragging and threatening are employed to construct a more powerful and authentic identity for self. The argumentative comparisons of the self and the other legitimize the rappers' departure from Chinese social norms of being modest and polite. It is worth drawing attention to Kádár (2017) who state that routinized verbal aggression are subject to social sanctions and can be reinterpreted in specific contexts. To respond to their opponents' insults, the advanced rappers tend to explicate the moral order in rap battles and highlight that they possess higher morality than their opponents. Using a didactic preaching style, the rappers argumentatively placed themselves as the moral educators of their opponents, accusing their opponents of failure to reciprocate, uphold filial piety, and shoulder responsibility. The situationally constructed moral orders could be adopted by the audience as the evaluative base of appropriateness. In contrast, the novice rappers failed to direct their audience to specific norms of practice, resulting in negative evaluations of their verbal impoliteness.

Second, this study adds to the growing body of research on Chinese ritual by examining ritual impoliteness in a new context. To address Ran and Kádár's (2019) call for further explorations of Chinese mock impoliteness phenomena, recent

studies have explored antagonistic rituals in various online and face-to-face contexts (e.g., Kádár and Ning 2019; Kádár et al. 2021; Ran et al. 2020; Zhao 2020). While most of the existing Chinese studies examine rituals of everyday interactions and public events, fewer studies have examined rituals performed in marginalized groups, such as the underground Chinese hip-hop community. To our knowledge, no study has systematically examined Chinese rap battle interactions from the perspective of ritual impoliteness. Therefore, this study serves as a first attempt to address this gap. The comparative findings concerning the novice and advanced rappers suggest that rap battle does not only contain vulgarity and offensive language, but it embodies an artistic language use that values creativity, authenticity, and morality. Such a dynamic view of ritual impoliteness in rap battles helps to debunk the myth that hip-hop embodies the worst of language incivility (Mavima 2016).

The present study bears several limitations that need future explorations. First, Bacon (2018) pointed out that rap battles have undergone transformations from improvised battles to prepared and researched written battles. The televised mainstream battles on *The Rap of China* have abandoned the Afro-based traditions and their emphasis on authenticity (Lee and Su 2019; Lu 2021). Therefore, future studies can compare the linguistic and topical features of underground and mainstream rap battles, contributing to a deeper understanding of in-group ritual impoliteness. Second, apart from the verbal aggressions examined in this study, battle MCs can also defeat their opponents by displaying superior rhythmic flow without performing ritual insults. Future research can examine rap battles in adopting a more holistic view of ritual aggression, nonverbal behavior, and musical performance. Finally, the current data only included male performers in rap battles. Since gender is an important factor in impoliteness research (Mills 2005), it would be conducive to examine male-female and female-female battling contexts. For example, in *underground 8 miles*, a regional battle competition held in Xi'an, some male rappers are reluctant to belittle their female opponents, arguing that swearing at a female would undermine their image as gentlemen.

In conclusion, this paper has explored ritual impoliteness in an understudied context of Chinese rap battles. Our findings demonstrate the various realizations of insults performed by advanced and novice rappers, focusing on explicating how staying within ritual frames help rappers to dominate the competition. We hope this paper can help generate more research on linguistic impoliteness and interactional rituals in traditionally marginalized or overlooked contexts.

Transcription convention

让你知道	indicates original lyrics in Chinese
I'll let you know	indicates translation to English
(!!!)	audience ovation
bold	swear words and taboo language

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