Research Article

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Co-operative actions in Chinese freestyle rap battles: a case of *Iron Mic*

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Abstract: Rap battles are a growing phenomenon in China, but few studies have examined their interactional structure, especially from a multimodal perspective. In this paper, I conducted a microethnographic analysis of the sequential and simultaneous co-operation in Chinese rap battles from the national finals of *Iron Mic*. Results showed that in sequential co-operation, rappers accumulated the pre-existing end rhymes and created situated rhyming patterns in different rounds of battle performances, which helped them to outflow their opponents. Rappers also transformatively adapted lyrics and bodily movements from their opponents, demonstrating their ability to improvise and their superior lyricism over others. Moreover, battle emcees simultaneously used hand gestures to rebut their opponents' accusations or show respect to the rap community. The study demonstrates that co-operative action is a viable theory to account for the interactional structure in rap battles and potentially other similar genres, highlighting the importance of a multimodal approach to social interactions.

Keywords: co-operative action; hip-hop; Mandarin; rap battles

1 Introduction

Rap battle, together with rap cipher, is one of the two main subgenres of improvised freestyling in rap music (Newman 2005). Although the origin of rap battles can be traced back to as early as the ancient Caledonian art of "flyting" that was later brought to the U.S. by slave owners (Szasz 2008), the modern precursor of freestyle rap battles is often credited to ritual insults practiced in African American communities (Bacon 2018; Labov 1972; Perkins 1996). In their present form, rap battles are characterized by lyrical improvisation that the lyrics in the performance are not written down nor prepared beforehand (Hisama 2016). Against a preselected beat or in *a cappella* (i.e., without instrumental accompaniment), rap battles are "almost always performed before a crowd, between two individuals in which the objective is to outwit, outflow and outdiss one's opponent" (Mavima 2016, p. 93). Some common strategies of outperformance include belittling the opponent's appearance, rhyming style, and place of origin as well as performing ritual insults directed at their family members and rap communities (Cutler 2007; Jia and Yao 2021). The wins and losses are mainly judged against rappers' ability to demonstrate their superior lyricism (e.g., creative and consistent rhyming) and display their authenticity over others (e.g., expressions of true emotions and identities or others' fake identities) (Bacon 2018; Cheuk 2021).

Following the tide of global hip-hop (Alim et al. 2008, 2018; Singh 2022; Terkourafi 2010), rap battles in China have also received growing attention and have developed at least two research agendas. The first line of research is centered on macro and critical analyses of Chinese rap battles and their relation to Chinese cultural, social, political, and historical environments (e.g., Amar 2018; Barrett 2012; Cheuk 2021; Sullivan and Zhao 2021; Zhang 2019). The second line of research is centered on the microscopic interactional patterns of Chinese

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freestyle battles by examining how rappers use various linguistic strategies to display superior lyricism (e.g., Jia and Yang 2021; Jia and Yao 2021). What seems to be missing, however, is research that examines the interactional organization of battling performance from a multimodal perspective.

A multimodal approach to Chinese rap battles is important for two reasons. First, past research has documented the key role of nonverbal behaviors in rap and hip-hop performances, such as using face as a choreographic device (Dodds 2016), displaying a tough-looking posture (Mavima 2016), and enacting emblematic gestures to embody rhymes and pay homage to other rappers (Diallo 2019). In addition to their separate use, nonverbal behaviors are often coupled with the lyrics, the surrounding environment, and the audience at large, all of which require a multimodal perspective. Second, the interactional rules in rap battles also warrant a multimodal analysis. The rules in rap battles stipulate that rappers should not verbally interrupt their opponents' performance. This, however, does not imply that silent rappers would wait and only respond in a subsequent turn. In fact, they often create new meanings by using their nonverbal behaviors to simultaneously evaluate their opponents' lyrics and performance.

In this paper, I adopt Goodwin's (2013, 2018) theory of Co-Operative Action to unpack the granular interactions in Chinese rap battles because this framework explains the coupling of verbal and nonverbal cues as well as their transformative use in social interactions (Goodwin 2018). Section 2 reviews previous research on rap battles in verbal and nonverbal modalities. The framework of Co-Operative Action and its connection to rap battles are explained in Section 3. After introducing the data and method in Section 4, Section 5 presents and discusses instances of sequential and simultaneous co-operation in Chinese rap battles. The final section summarizes the major findings and discusses limitations as well as future directions.

2 Rap battles as multimodal communication

Prior research has examined various verbal and nonverbal strategies employed in freestyle rap battles (e.g., Alim et al. 2018; Diallo 2019; Edward 2009). One salient verbal strategy is reusing lyrics (as well as rhymes and styles) produced in earlier rap performances, which has been captured by various terms such as borrowing (Williams 2013), intertextuality (Diallo 2019), biting (Vernon 2021), and sampling (Rose 1994). Nevertheless, people's attitudes towards lyrical reuse are mixed. On the one hand, appropriating rhymes from other emcees (or biting) goes against hip-hop's fundamental law of being creative and showing respect for others' work (Vernon 2021). On the other hand, adopting prior lyrics is not a "lazy man's way", but is "about paying homage, an invocation of another's voice to help you to say what you want to say" (Rose 1994, p. 79) and is the fundamental way to solidify communities in the hip-hop culture (Williams 2013). For example, Diallo (2019) recounts that in the final battle of the movie *8 Mile*, the celebrated rapper Eminem borrowed lyrics, tone, metric cadence, and melody from two famous rap records to damage his opponent's street image and, in turn, build up an image of his privileged upbringing. More importantly, referring to the pre-existing elements of rap music serves as a call to the audience that can consequently create cohesion between the rapper and the audience. Rappers would be regarded as worthless if they do not have an entourage who responds to their rhyming performance with cheers and responses (Keyes 2004).

Research on language and social interaction has witnessed an embodied turn that favors a holistic analysis of verbal language, facial expressions, body movements, gestures, and other sensorial cues (Mondada 2016, 2019; Nevile 2015; Streeck et al. 2011). This is also the case for research on rap battles (Alim et al. 2010, 2011). While lyrics are a major component in rap battle performance, nonverbal behaviors are also essential in determining the wins and losses in the competition. For example, laughter, smile, and other playful gestures are not mere descriptions of interactions, but they are fundamental parts of the rap battle that maintains its playfulness (Lee 2009). Based on his interview with battling rappers, Mavima (2016) reported that rappers displaying a tough-looking "cool pose" can intimidate their opponents and earn credibility from their audience. Diallo (2019) observed that rappers often used hand gestures to interact with the audience, even if their intrinsic expressivity was limited by holding the microphone with one hand.

Moreover, the multimodality of battle performance is also demonstrated by the co-production of insults between rappers and their audience. For example, Alim and his colleagues (2011) showed that black normativity was coproduced by the close monitoring of verbal and nonverbal behaviors of emcees on the stage and the audiences off the stage. In a subsequent study, Williams and Stroud (2014) showed how South African rappers coproduced Whiteness with verbal and nonverbal language, such as pointing to the white spotlight on the roof while referring to the whiteness of their opponent. More recently, Alim et al. (2018) demonstrated the striking similarities of how the U.S. and South African hip-hop emcees used language, gestures, and bodily movements to coproduce cisheteropatriarchy in these two cultures.

Embodied interaction is not only a feature of rap battles but is also prevalent in other hip-hop battling genres such as breakdancing (b-boying or b-girling depending on the gender of the dancers) (Dodds 2016; Johnson 2011; Singh 2022). Similar to rap battles, breakdancing honors breakers' skills to perform innovative and entertaining styles and moves to outdance their opponents, indexing the shared meanings of cultural, ethnic, or racial groups (Johnson 2011). Based on ethnographic observations, Dodds (2016) found that facial expression constitutes an important choreographic device to comment on their significant bodily actions in the dance, constructing dialogic exchanges between breakers and their opponents as well as breakers and their audience. In a recent study, Singh (2022) problematized the overemphasis on spoken lyrics in hip-hop and explored the embodied voices in breakdancing. His observations revealed that silent participants used their bodily actions to make positive evaluations of their own crew members and negative evaluations of their opponents.

Unlike the multimodal approaches reviewed above, research on Chinese rap battles is mainly centered around rappers' verbal dueling strategies. For example, Barrett (2012) showed that the Chinese rapper Tang King adopted the African American rhetorical device of signifying to brag his superior origin from Shanghai, which is the most economically prosperous region in China. By analyzing the linguistic insults that rappers used in *Iron Mic* competitions, Jia and Yao (2021) demonstrated that Chinese rappers belittled their opponents by drawing on the salient characteristics of Confucianism. For instance, rappers claimed their superiority over their opponents by characterizing themselves as mentors and aiming to "teach" their opponents how to behave properly. Moreover, they also attacked their opponents' morality by relating their frequent use of profane language to their lack of proper upbringing. Indeed, rappers can win a competition without swearing; for example, in a classic battle Max (Ma Jun) defeated his opponent Dawei without using any of the curse words commonly appeared in Chinese rap battles (Fan 2019). More studies, however, are needed to explore the multimodal organization of Chinese rap battles by jointly examining their verbal and nonverbal components.

3 Co-operative action and rap battles

Co-Operative Action (Goodwin 2013, 2018) emerges as a unified framework to account for the transformative reuse of verbal and nonverbal battling elements from a multimodal perspective. Two propositions of the framework provide the theoretical basis for the present analysis. First, building on earlier work on human cooperation (Boyd and Richerson 2005; Tennie et al. 2009), Goodwin (2018) postulates that interlocutors often reuse conversational materials (e.g., words, prosodies) provided by others to achieve their own communicative objectives. For example, a man who suffered from aphasia remained to be a powerful speaker by making evaluations of others' talk with a limited vocabulary of *and*, *yes*, and *no* (Goodwin 2004). Such a process of "building something new through decomposition and reuse with the transformation of resources placed in a public environment by an earlier actor" is defined as co-operative action (Goodwin 2018, p. 3). And all the available semiotic resources (e.g., talk, objects, and shared memories) that people can modify to carry out their co-operative actions are referred to as substrates (Goodwin 2013; Ingold 2011).

Second, co-operative actions not only happen between verbal interactions, but they are also coupled with the immediate and accumulated communicative environments (Goodwin 2018). In the immediate environment, for example, preadolescent girls used gestures and speech to index upper-class and working-class identities (Goodwin and Alim 2010), and archeologists pointed at the inscriptions on the ground to teach young researchers about how to develop a professional vision in archeology (Goodwin 2007). Moreover, individuals

could also co-produce an action by relying on the products made available by others who were not physically present on site. For example, scientists can use a Munsell color chart to determine the color of a dirt sample (Goodwin 2000) and foreign tourists can complete their food order by reading a menu that has been translated into their own language. All these actions highlight the importance of co-operation between different modalities and conversational resources.

Although not directly applied to the rap battle context, Co-Operative Action is pragmatically useful to explain dueling contexts. For example, Goodwin (2018) notes that recipients of ritual insults are expected to use substrates from the prior turn to construct new and even more outrageous insults. Since rap battles are a modern extension of ritual insult, co-operative action constitutes a viable theory to represent rappers' sequential and simultaneous reuse of others' lyrics and styles when displaying their superiority over their opponents and their mastery of rap music. To be co-operative, the rhyming emcee would transform the linguistic and non-linguistic resources produced by anyone else in and outside of the setting for their own use. More importantly, for the emcee who needs to remain silent and listens to their opponent, they could gain leverage by transforming their opponents' attacks into their own defense, highlighting their rap skills.

4 Data and method

Video recording data came from *Iron Mic* which is the first major Chinese rap battle competition. It was founded by Showtyme in Shanghai in 2001 and later developed into the most well-known Chinese underground freestyle rap battle competition (Rap in China 2019). Each year, rappers first competed in regional trials, and the winners were invited to battle in the national finals. Nationals have been held in Beijing, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Nanjing, Wuhan, and many other major cities of China, attracting a diverse population of rappers and audiences across China. These videos were recorded by the audience and were made public on major video-sharing platforms such as Bilibili, YouKu, and YouTube.

The analysis was based on recordings of two *Iron Mic* national finals in 2011 and 2018. These two competitions were selected mainly because the uploaded videos captured both dueling rappers and their audiences throughout their performance, which enabled me to analyze the bodily interactions between the two rappers and the audience's reactions. Although some other battles were also high in quality, they were not selected because the recordings did not capture the nonverbal behaviors of both rappers. Eventually, the mini corpus analyzed in this study contained five rounds of battles from the 2011 competition (about 17 min) and two rounds from the 2018 competition (about 6 min). The author watched all the recordings carefully and noted the critical moments when rappers showed sequential and simultaneous co-operation. Lyrics in these critical moments were transcribed by the author, following the general rules listed in Jefferson (2004).

The data were analyzed using microethnography, which is grounded in ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, and praxeology (the study of practices) (Streeck and Mehus 2005)[1]. Relying on detailed transcriptions of video recordings, microethnographers seek to understand the human organization of interaction by examining the moment-by-moment development of participants' verbal, visual, and physical cues in a designated environment (Tracy and Muñoz 2011). Following the next-turn proof in conversation analysis (Sack et al. 1974), this multimodal analytic method interprets actions by examining how interactants responded to each other's prior actions with their subsequent verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Since video recordings can document the actual interactional sequences that are expected for analyzing dueling strategies (Dundes 1970), a multimodal approach has been employed to analyze various genres of hip-hop dueling (e.g., Alim et al. 2010; Singh 2022; Streeck and Henderson 2010) and is particularly suitable for the present study.

5 Co-operative features of Chinese freestyle rap battles

The data showed that Chinese rappers battled against their opponents by transformatively reusing various forms of substrate in both a sequential and a simultaneous manner. First, rappers borrowed lyrics from the previous performance of other renowned rappers or referred to the attacks initiated by their opponents.

Rappers also simultaneously responded to other contestants. This feature is grounded in the human ability to mutually monitor each other during social interactions (Goffman 1964; Goodwin 2018; Tomasello and Call 1997). According to the rules in freestyle battles, the silent rapper is not allowed to produce any verbal actions during their opponents' turn. To better express themselves without breaking the rules, rappers tended to use bodily actions to spontaneously interact with each other. Specifically, the performing rapper can reinterpret their opponent's nonverbal actions with verbal actions, and the silent rapper can evaluate their opponent's verbal actions with nonverbal actions.

5.1 Sequential co-operation

The national final of the 2018 *Iron Mic* competition demonstrated the transformative and non-transformative reuse of substrates in rap battles. The battle between Yang and Zhang was centered around a debate about who "stole" rhymes from others and hence produced boring repetitions. Both rappers have been observed borrowing substrates from other renowned performers. Viewers from Bilibili[2] identified that Yang used the same set of bars in a past competition (specific competitions was not named by the viewers) and repetitively used the same bar in one round (e.g., *sha* rhymed with *jia*). Similarly, Zhang borrowed rhymes from BeiBei (e.g., *diss* rhymed with *yisi*) and repetitively used the same end rhyme (e.g., *yunjiao* rhymed with *xundao*). Since the audience would become suspicious if rappers rhymed in a perfect manner (Lee 2009), they often hide their canned resources by modifying these end rhymes to describe their opponents' specific prior actions. In doing so, rappers hope to convince the audience that these lines were truly improvised (Figure 1).

(1) Extract 1

01 YAN: n nà xiē shuō shí huà – tā shuō de tài **ji**
What you said, to be honest, what he said was too fake

fig.1

Yang (left) performing and standing still

02 tā shì zài w tái shàng A zhuāng fēng mài **sh**
He was acting like an idiot on the stage

03 zhè l de MC yòu zěn néng dé dào tā de huí **yīng?**
How could the MCs here respond to him?

04 w tīng n freestyle w g n jué méi **jìn**
I listened to your freestyle and found it boring

05 nà xiē zhuāng fēng mài sh w jué dé h o ji n **dān**
Your act of craziness is too simplistic to me

06 *ĀĀ Ā Ā bú xíng le ĀĀ Ā Ā w dé le n o xuě **shuān**
AHH AH AH I can't control AHH AH AH and I just got an embolism

yan *squatting on the ground ———————— facing the audience –>>

fig.2

Yang (missing on the left) falling on the ground due to "embolism" in line 6

…

07 ZHG: su y shuō shuí zài tā ma zhuāng fēng mài **sh ?**
so to speak, who is fucking acting like an idiot?

08 ràng n zhī dào n de shuō chàng yī jiù tā ma tài **ji**
(I will) let you know that your rap is still fucking fake

09 zhēn de bú xi ng tīng *zhè gè pang z * jì xù ji ng **huà**
I truly do not want to listen to this fatty continue to talk

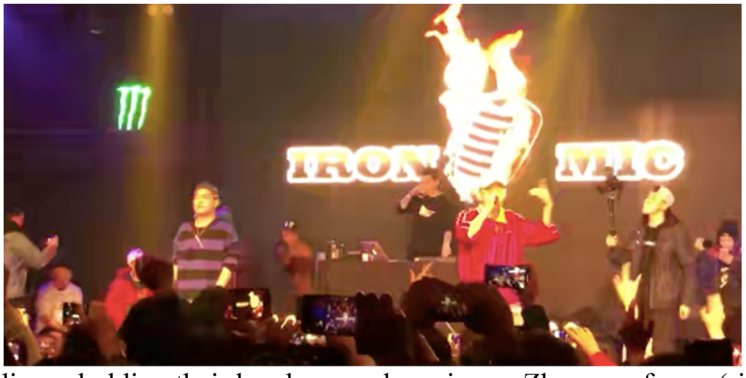
zhg *pointing at Yang*

10 shàng yī b shì shuí zhuāng fēng mài sh shì shuí t ng **xià**
Who acted like an idiot in the last round and who laid on the ground

11 n yòu tā mā lái dào zhè gè w **tái**
Again, you fucking come back to this stage

12 xiàn zài liú xià le n zhè gè féi pàng de shēn **cái**
Now what stuck on the stage is your fat body

fig.3



Audience holding their hands up and waving as Zhang performs (right)

Extract 1 showed a comparison of Yang's (YAN) segment with Zhang's (ZHG) segment in the following round. Both rappers have been accused of using prepared rhymes in their performances, but they employed distinct strategies to address the other's accusation. On the one hand, both of them produced a decent amount of rhyming in their performance (marked in bold in the transcript), showing their high rapping skills. On the other hand, Yang's lyrics were very generic and could be applied to many other contexts. For example, since framing their opponent as "fake" and claiming their own authenticity is a central theme in rap music (Zhang 2019), Yang could use the same lyrics to attack any other rapper in the battle. In lines 3 and 4, Yang claimed that Zhang was unable to gain support from other emcees (the crew). While stating that a rapper could not win respect from other rappers is an indication of low rapping skills (Mavima 2016), Yang's generic verbal attack demonstrated little creativity in his performance. This is supported by the audience's subsequent reactions

that none of them echoed Yang's attack, implying that they did not think his attack was successful. Finally, Yang also generically insulted Zhang's lyrics for being simplistic, relating to the highly valued lyrical complexity in rap ciphers (Lee 2009). It is clear that these lines all tend to address the overarching themes and could be used in other battles without incorporating the features of his opponent, the audience, or the surrounding environment in his lyrics. Therefore, the audience is likely to suspect that Yang's near-perfect rhyming is a repetition of his or others' earlier production.

In contrast, Zhang exerted multiple attempts to demonstrate that his lyrics were improvised through transformative reproduction of prior substrates. To begin with, Zhang reused Yang's accusation of being a fake rapper and acting like an idiot and redirected it at Yang. Instead of repeating the verse as it was, Zhang reorganized the two bars and transformed the generic accusation into a preannouncement that he would use his following lyrics to show why his opponent is actually a fake rapper. In line 9, Zhang used speech and pointing gestures to highlight that his opponent is overweight, which is an effective strategy to belittle the other (Cutler 2007). Similarly, line 10 connected to Yang's sudden fall on the ground as he pretended to have an embolism because he could not stand Zhang's simplistic performance. To rebut Yang's attack, Zhang reinterpreted his opponent's action as a sign of him being crazy and looking like an idiot. Indeed, Yang's pretended fall in Figure 2 was not a common behavior in rap battles and could be framed as an act of craziness. Finally, after stating that his opponent is still on the stage in line 11, Zhang reproduced the same propositional message in line 12 by reframing his body as "fat body" and his presence on the stage as "stuck on the stage". Zhang's series of transformative reproduction also won the recognition from the audience: As is shown in Figure 3, the audience held their hands up and waved with the beat.

The above comparison between Zhang and Yang's performance demonstrated two ways of sequential co-operation. First, performing rappers co-operated with other renowned rappers by tacitly borrowing their end rhymes and incorporating them in their own verses. This practice echoes previous research that borrowing lyrics from other rappers is an important way of showing respect to others and paying homage (Diallo 2019; Rose 1994). Anthropological research has also suggested that reusing materials created by predecessors is an essential part of human interaction and cooperative action (Hutchins 1995). While people may romanticize freestyle as magical improvisations, the composition of freestyle rhyming, in fact, involves constantly perfecting their repertoire of rhyming words by exchanging rhymes with other rappers and transforming them into their own (Edwards 2009; Hisama 2016; Spady et al. 1999). In Goodwin's term, rappers accumulatively take others' pre-existing end rhymes, reorganize them into their own patterns, and situate these patterns in different rounds of rap battles.

Second, sequential co-operation also satisfied hip-hop communities' expectations of being creative and authentic in rap battles (Alim et al. 2018; Bacon 2018; Spady et al. 1999), and failure to appear natural in front of the audience would undermine their performance (Lee 2009). The difference between successful and unsuccessful use of prepared end rhymes may be subtle, but one possible criterion is the extent to which rappers can produce insults based on their opponents' lyrics (Rap in China 2019). In other words, rappers who actively engaged in co-operative action in the battle scene are more likely to be welcomed by the audience. This is the case in Zhang's performance in that he created new meanings by incorporating Yang's verbal attack and overweight body in his own lyrical responses as well as reinterpreting Yang's act of squatting on the ground as a sign of craziness.

5.2 Simultaneous co-operation

In addition to the sequential exchange of ritual insults from one rapper to the other, battling emcees were mutually monitoring each other's behavior and simultaneously responded to their opponents' attacks. In Goodwin's (2018) term, rappers laminated their actions onto their opponents' actions and used their substrates to express their own stance. Although silent rappers were not allowed to make any verbal noises to interrupt their opponents, they were open to using nonverbal actions to signal their situated evaluations of the performing rapper. Moreover, since interrupting the other's turn reflects dominance over the speaker (Berger

2014), silent rappers' efforts to intervene with nonverbal actions could also be considered as an alternative strategy to belittle their opponents. Extract 2 is an example of simultaneous co-operation.

(2) Extract 2

01 DIN: w tīng n gāng cái diss tài duō wán – shuō chàng de rén
I heard that you dissed far too many rappers
pac >>dance with the beat ---------->
02 n jué dé yòu biān zhè j gè rén
You think that the people on your right
pac ---------->
03 gēn běn jiù bú shì wán shuō chàng de
that they are not real rappers at all
pac ---------->
fig.4

Silent rapper Pact (left) standing still in lines 1–3

04 n jué dé* zì j shí lì gāo
You think you are an experienced rapper
pac -------->
pac *hand waving —>
fig.5

Silent rapper Pact (left) waving hand in line 4

05 *n kàn bú q nà xiē xīn rén**
And you despise the other rookies
pac ---------->*
fig.6

Pact's gestures from the beginning of line 5 to the end of line 6

06 *su y dào le xiàn zài - w q ng dà jiā yào j n shèn
So up to now, please be cautious
pac * holding fist at the chest level ————————————>
07 *w bù xi ng shuō >tā de rén p n<
I don't want to talk about his character
pac * dance with the beat ————————————>
08 yīn wéi tā gēn běn méi rén p n
because he doesn't have any
pac ------------------------->>

Extract 2 demonstrated how the silent rapper (Pact, PAC) laminated his actions onto his opponent's (Ding Fei, DIN) with hand gestures and transformatively expressed his own opinion. Through lines 1–3, Ding recounted Pact's prior performances of dissing other participating MCs and reinterpreted them as showing disrespect to other members. According to Spady et al. (1999), showing respect to others is one of the four basic characteristics of maintaining rappers' street consciousness. Ding's reframing of Pact as being disrespectful to others threatened Pact's relationship with the rest of the rap community, undermining the crucial support that Pact could get from his audience or the crew. Therefore, Pact needed to respond to Ding's attack immediately. Figure 4 showed that Pact was closely monitoring Ding's rap by leaning slightly towards him and positioning his left ear closer to Ding. Shortly after Ding started line 4, Pact put his hands up around his chest and waved rapidly, indicating his strong disagreement. Pact's immediate reaction to Ding's accusation enabled him to laminate his evaluations onto Ding's original line, suggesting that he was not intending to be disrespectful to others. After line 5, instead of putting his hands back to his original position in Figure 4, Pact grasped his hands together as fists and held them at almost the same position as in Figure 5. Such a position would allow him to quickly change back to the denying position in Figure 5 if Ding continued to antagonize his relationship with the audience. After several lines, Pact put his hands down as he realized that Ding has gone back to performing ritual insults directed at his rap skills (Figures 6 and 7).

In addition to expressing disagreement, silent rappers could also inhabit their agreement with the rhyming rapper's line. Excerpt 3 showed that after Ding expressed his ultimate respect to the entire Chinese hip-hop community, Pact placed his hand on his chest (Figure 8), signifying his respect for Ding's comments and in turn expressing his own respect for the hip-hop community. These two excerpts demonstrated that silent rappers could laminate their opinions onto their opponents' more detailed verbal descriptions, co-operatively expressing their opinions.

(3) Extract 3

01 DIN: n shuō de zhè xiē dōng xī,
All the lyrics you said
fig.7 
Silent rapper Pact (left) standing still through lines 1–4
02 tā mā bī de n kàn bù q shuí
who the fuck you despise
03 n zhī dào w kàn de q >zhōng guó shuō chàng< de **m**ěi yī gè rén
You know that I respect everyone in the Chinese hip-hop community
04 AUD: (cheering)
pac (1.9) *putting hand at heart*

fig.8

Silent rapper Pact (left) placing his hand on his chest after line 4

05 (music out)

While the silent rapper could make spontaneous responses to the rhyming rapper, the rhyming rapper could also immediately respond to the nonverbals displayed by the silent rapper. Extract 4 showed how Ding Fei reinterpreted Pact's hand gestures as an insult to Pact himself. According to Mavima (2016), outflowing their opponent is one of the three main objectives in rap battles. Before reaching excerpt 4, Ding and Pact have extensively competed with each other about their ability to outflow the other. Pact bragged about his skill of composing highly smooth flows which Ding would never capture. To prove that he could follow Pact's flow, Ding used his hands to gesture the variation of Pact's flow in Figure 9, magnifying the flow change to the audience.

fig.9

Ding's (right) gesturing of Pact's (left) flow change

(4) Extract 4

01 DIN: h o xiàng tā men de y n shén yī zhí zài dīng zhe w kàn
It seems that they are staring at me
pac >>wandering with the music ----------*

fig.10

Pact (left) listening to Ding' (right) performance in line 1

02 >ràng tā men gēn zhe w zài z(h) uo<
and let them follow my hand gestures
pac *using hand to gesture Ding's beat ——————————>
fig.11

Pact gesturing Ding's flow from line 2 through line 5

03 ràng n men tīng - d ng le w de flow
You audience can listen, and understand my flow
pac ——————————————————————————>
04 tā gēn běn zhuā bú zhù
He cannot catch my flow at all
pac ——————————————————————————>
05 su y tā de sh u - bú zhī zhe zài n l zài d u
so his hands are just shaking randomly
pac ——————————————————————————>*

In a similar vein, in extract 4, Pact also intended to gesture Ding's flow change to the audience. Compared to Ding's broader body movement (Figures 9 and 10), Pact gestured in a smaller magnitude (Figure 11). Having observed Pact's gesturing, Ding immediately referred to Pact's gestures as inaccurate at capturing his flow change and were merely shaking randomly (Line 4). Ding's situated response reinterpreted Pact's action to the audience, transforming it from a challenge to Ding's flow changes into his failure to successfully follow Ding's flow change. To sum up excerpts 2–4 showed that battling rappers can mutually monitor each other and situationally manifest their evaluations by reinterpreting the other's verbal and nonverbal behaviors. These findings provide novel evidence that interactants can concurrently express their evaluations even in interactions that are designed to be verbally sequential.

These analyses also demonstrated that interactions could progress both sequentially and simultaneously when examined from a multimodal perspective. While overlaps impede smooth turn-by-turn transition (Levinson 1983; Sacks et al. 1974), Goodwin and Goodwin (1987) observed that both the speaker and the recipient can concurrently produce an assessment of the same material. In a more recent synthesis, Goodwin (2018) contends that the simultaneous organization of actions is a result of interactants' close monitoring of each other in talk-in-interaction and can be achieved by languages, gestures, and many other bodily actions in a co-operative manner. Similarly, Mondada (2016, 2019) argues for the care of multimodality and multiple temporalities in the organization of actions. Since the rules in rap battles do not allow verbal overlapping, talk is no longer seen as a principled mode of communication for the silent rapper. Instead, gestures and body positionings become more salient in rap battles. Making concurrent comments with embodied actions is also commonly found in other hip-hop dueling genres such as breakdancing and b-boying (Dodds 2016; Singh 2022).

6 Conclusion

This paper demonstrated that Goodwin's (2013, 2018) theory of co-operative action can provide a unified explanation for the sequential and simultaneous organization of Chinese rap battles. From a sequential perspective, rappers transformatively reused pre-existing sets of end rhyme to compose their lyrics and refer to each other's lyrics and styles in previous turns. Specifically, they often simultaneously laminated their evaluations onto their opponents' performance when they were silent and incorporated others' actions and the surrounding environment into their lyrics when performing. During these battling exchanges, rappers opted to

create new meanings by offering alternative explanations for and new evaluations of others' verbal and nonverbal actions.

This paper contributes to the existing literature in two ways. First, this study helps address the research exigence that few studies have systematically explored the nonverbal behaviors in Chinese rap battles. Previous research on Chinese rap battles has been centered around their sociopolitical environments (Zhang 2019) or their linguistic strategies of performing ritual insults (Jia and Yao 2021). Examining Chinese rap battles from a multimodal perspective not only helps capture the interactional dynamics that were not reflected in verbal expressions but also exemplifies the benefits of adopting a holistic approach to research on language and social interaction (Mondada 2019; Streeck et al. 2011).

Second, this study demonstrates the utility of adopting Goodwin's (2013, 2018) framework to analyze hip-hop dueling. Findings seem to suggest that actively performing co-operative actions is an important strategy to show respect and creativity in rap battle performance. Future studies could test this hypothesis in other dueling contexts in and outside of hip-hop communities by examining the correlations between individuals' quality of performing co-operative actions and their dueling outcomes.

Nevertheless, the present study also bears several limitations and could be improved in future research. First, the videos analyzed in this paper were recorded from a fixed angle and may not capture all the semiotic resources that were available to the rappers and the audience's facial expressions during the performance. Future studies could analyze recordings that have multiple shooting angles to better reflect rappers' performance and the audience's uptake. Second, the present study only analyzed two cases of battles and does not have enough data to explore diachronic changes in rappers' performance. Future research would benefit from comparing the interactional dynamics across times and different battling contexts. This is particularly intriguing because the sociopolitical landscape of hip-hop in China has drastically changed since 2017 (Cheuk 2021). Taken together, it is hoped that this paper can serve as a signpost to encourage more research on the interactional dynamics of Chinese hip-hop performance from a multimodal perspective.

Notes:

(1) The method is also commonly referred to as multimodal conversation analysis and has been used to study the co-operative human actions (Goodwin 2007, 2018).

(2) Bilibili comments can be found at https://www.bilibili.com/video/av40632661?from=search&seid=15684643790487089844.

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