

**Rapper Jin (歐陽靖) and *ABC*:  
Acquiring Spoken Cantonese and Transnational Identity  
Through Restaurant Culture and Hong Kong TV**

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Jin (Jin Au-yeung) is a twenty-five year old Asian American rapper born and reared in Miami, and currently known for his rap song supporting Barack Obama. He sells himself as a transnational Chinese and an Asian American who has carved a successful career in American hip-hop and rap, a cultural medium long dominated by African American artists. Jin's unique style has been throwing one or two Cantonese phrases, or even a stanza, into his mainly English freestyle battling and rap lyrics, but he recently released *ABC*, a CD claimed to be 98% in Cantonese. My primary purpose in this paper is to analyze *ABC*'s ten songs, written and performed by Jin, from two perspectives: his acquisition of Cantonese from his parents and from Hong Kong television, and the construction of his identity as a transnational Chinese in multi-ethnic America.

In the past decade I have been intrigued by a number of Canadian-born heritage students (CBCs) in my Chinese history classes who acquired some proficiency with spoken Cantonese through watching Hong Kong TV at home. Their first spoken language was Cantonese and they could sing the theme songs of television series but could not read or write in Chinese. Mimicking parents and television personalities gave them native pronunciation in Cantonese as well as some insights into the Hong Kong movie/television industry. As their social circle broadened outside the home, they began losing both fluency in Cantonese and interest in their parents' background except for Chinese food. Mostly the parents and grandparents accept the loss of fluency and criticize them as hollow bamboo kids (of Chinese ethnicity but empty of Chinese substance). These individuals identify themselves with other American-born or Canadian-born Chinese as ABCs or CBCs.

At Chinese New Year in February 2007, the Chinese American rapper, Jin (Au-yeung Jin (1982-), dropped an album titled *ABC* and it became the collective voice of ABCs and CBCs talking back to their families about what they have retained of their ethnic heritage. Jin claims that *ABC* is 98% in Cantonese, but 85% is a more accurate figure. My primary purpose in this paper is to use the album to 1) examine Jin's

acquisition of Cantonese from his parents and from Hong Kong television, and 2) to probe his construction of his identity as a transnational Chinese in multi-ethnic America.

Jin was born in Miami in 1982 and grew up in an African American neighborhood where his parents, immigrants from Hong Kong, struggled to pay the bills in their restaurant business. His hip-hop career began in Miami and he and his family now live in New York City, where Chinatown remains a significant part of his life. In the last few years his performances have taken him to Hong Kong, Japan, and China. Set against the racial tensions of a cultural medium dominated by black American artists, Jin's position in the hip-hop world strengthened through his self-defense and assertion of racial pride as a transnational Chinese and Asian American. His unique style has been throwing in one or two Cantonese phrases, or even a stanza, into his mainly English freestyle battling and rap lyrics. The Cantonese words and phrases have given him an upper hand in the free-style battling raps, confusing his opponents because they could not understand them and could not respond. One example is seen in his 30-second freestyle competition with Sean Nicholas in 2001, where his verse ends with:

1. my pants are new, my sweater is new,  
don't make fun of Chinese kids fatter than you...  
Nei5faan2 uk1kei2 laa1 (你回家去 / *go home*).<sup>1</sup>  
that means take your sorry butt home.<sup>2</sup>

Rap and hip-hop are often heavily laced with foul language, and Jin's previous albums have seen its share in both Cantonese and English swearing. *ABC* uses clean language to string together ten songs that depict Jin's childhood and young adulthood in Miami. The album is full of phrases that he must have often heard at home, at restaurants, and on Hong Kong television. The following examples can be heard in the background noise of the *ABC* album:

2. Daai6lou2 aa1 (大佬啊 / *oh, guys*)  
Zau2 laa1 (走啦 / *go away*)  
Zau6gam2sin1 laa1 (就這樣吧 / *that's it for now*)  
Zou6mat1je5 aa1 (做甚麼 / *what're you doing/what's happening?*)

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<sup>1</sup> The romanization used is yuet6ping3 (Linguistic Society of Hong Kong Cantonese Romanization Scheme, 1993). The grouping is done to keep the rhythm of Jin's rapping. The Chinese character translation of the yuet6ping3 is in Mandarin Chinese. Translations are italicized to better bring out the original spoken lines.

<sup>2</sup> BET 106& Park, 7th freestyle battling, in 2001.

*ABC* evolved when Jin jokingly belted out short Cantonese lines at a Hong Kong venue and was asked to come out with an album in Cantonese. Jin has some fluency in Cantonese but he is not able to read and write Chinese, but the fact that he basically wrote the ten songs of *ABC* in his head and completed the recording in just two days must be counted as a high achievement in linguistic ability. Perhaps the task was easier because *ABC* is in many ways a long-suppressed response, or talking back at his parents, or responding to first generation immigrants' criticism that ABCs did not speak Chinese or know Chinese culture. *ABC* seems to be pitching at them, saying 'See, you keep criticizing me for being 'white', but I know more about the Chinese language and culture than you have given me credit for in my whole life.'

The ten songs of the *ABC* album put the spotlight on the daily life of Jin and his family in Miami, connecting it to the transnational worlds of youth hip-hop and Cantonese movie stars. The first song, 'ABC', has Jin confidently claiming his identity as an ABC with strong roots to the Cantonese language and Hong Kong culture, acquired through Hong Kong television channels that served as his babysitter while his parents toiled at the restaurant.

3. Teng1zyu3aa1 (聽住啊 / listen)  
 First name Jin  
 Zing6 hai6ngo5 zung1man1meng2 (靖是我中文名 / Jin is my Chinese name.)  
 Lap6zi6 jung6yau6 ceng1zi6 (立字還有青字 / it contains the characters 'standing' and 'youthful'.)  
 Tai2cing1co2 go3meng2 (看清楚個名 / examine the name clearly).  
 Mou4leon4hai6 hau6sang1zai2, waak6si4hai6 lou5beng2 (無論是青年人, 或是老輩 / whether you are youthful or elderly.)  
 Do1je6nei5 zi1ci4, zan1hai6 m4 easy (謝謝你支持。真是不 easy / thanks for your support; it has not been easy.)  
 Jat1go3ABC, jiu1ziu3 cing1co2 faai3geng3 (一個 A B C, 要照清楚塊鏡子 / an ABC must see clearly through the mirror.)  
 Nei5dei6 seong2 zi1, ngo5dik1 ying1man1 dim2gaai2 gam2jeng3 (你們想知道, 為甚麼我的中文那麼棒 / you want to know how my Chinese is so good?)  
 Hai6m4hai6 ceng2zo2go3 bou3zap6 lou5si1 (是否顧了位補習老師 / did you hire a tutor?)  
 Not me...

## JAY: RAPPER JIN'S ABC

*Chorus:*

ABC hai6ngo5 hai6ngo5 (*ABC 是我是我 / ABC is me, me*)

Waang6tai2 dim6tai2 dou1hai6ngo5 (*橫看直看都是我 / no matter which way you look at it, it's me.*)

Mou5co3 mou5co3 (*沒錯沒錯 / that's right, that's right.*) (Jin 2007: ABC)

Jin cautions first generation Chinese against making fun of an ABC's comparatively weak grasp of Chinese language and culture, stating that physical traits still define him as an ethnic Chinese:

4. Dik1gwai2lou2 tai2ngo5 mei6jau6hai6 wong4pei4fu6 (*老外看我還不是黃皮膚 / the whites still see me as Chinese with yellow skin*) (Jin 2007: ABC).

For Jin, being ABC can still let him be 100% American, 'having the best of both worlds, a balance of who you are, not one more than the other, and you can watch Chinese movie or order from authentic Chinese restaurants; and being in US he can appreciate hip-hop culture' (Liu 2007).

In the second song, 'It's Hip Hop', Jin walks his parents through the history of American hip-hop, taking great pride in himself winning seven consecutive BET 106 & Park freestyle battles and thereby 'wai6hua6jan4 zang1guong1' (*為華人爭光 / bringing glory to the Chinese*) in the black-dominated hip-hop world. His parents were perplexed and complained to relatives how he could get so obsessed with a seemingly un-Chinese and low-brow African American culture:

5. Tung4can1cik1 waak6peng2you4 king1can1gai2, dou1gong2 m5zi1  
go3zai2 gei2si4 bin3zo2 haak1guai2  
(*和親戚或朋友聊天都說, 不知甚麼時候兒子變成了黑鬼 / whenever socializing with relatives and friends, they always said they didn't know when their son turned into a black man.*)

Whenever his parents criticize his hip-hop obsession as indicative of someone without family upbringing (*mou5gaa1gau3 / 沒家教*), Jin takes the opportunity to build up his Cantonese vocabulary.

6. Keoi5waa6ngo5 jat1geoi3, ngo5hok6do1 jat1geoi3 (*他說我一句, 我學多一句 / whatever words they hurled at me, I would learn those words*)

Dong3keoi5 ji5bin1fung1, gai3juk6 jau6ngo5 hing3ceoi3 (當它耳邊風,  
繼續有我的興趣 / *I ignored them as passing breeze and continued to  
pursue my interest.*)  
Ngo5yeng4 loeng5ci3 nei5waa6ngo5 hou3coi2 (我贏兩次你說我運氣好  
/ *winning twice, you said I was lucky*)  
Yeng4do1 loeng5ci3 nei5go3hau2 jou6jiu1goi2 (贏多兩次你的口就要改  
/ *winning twice more, you'd better change your critical tone*)  
Yeng4do1 sam3ci3 nei5 gan1bun2 zou6mou5dak1 aau3 (贏多三次你  
根本沒話說 / *winning three more times, you are basically silenced.*)  
(Jin 2007:It's Hip-hop)

The next song, HK Supertar, plays with the cult of Hong Kong cinema and the paparazzi—a world that Jin peers into through Hong Kong television. There is a subtle use of humor as he introduces Daniel Wu 吳彥祖, an ABC enjoying a successful career as an actor in Hong Kong, China, and Taiwan.

7. Ngo5hai6 Daniel Wu, bin1go3 gau3ngo5 cool cool  
(我是 Daniel Wu, 誰比我 cool / *I am Daniel Wu, who is more cool  
than me?*)  
Ngo5hai6 au1joeng4zing6 zing6, nei5soeng2 zou6 ming4sing1 sing1 (我  
是歐陽靖、靖, 你想當明星、星 / *I am Au-yeung Jin; you want to  
be a movie star?*)  
Mou5co3 mou5co3 ngo5soeng2 zou6go3 (沒錯沒錯我想做個 / *that's  
right, that's right, I want to be a*) Hong Kong superstar! (Jin 2007: HK  
Superstar)

This song also shows that Jin's bilingual approach lies in mixing together Cantonese and English to create humor and rhyme:

8. Zuk1sing1jai2 (竹筴仔 / *hollow bamboo*)  
ABC  
That's you and me.  
Hong Kong Superstar  
Daniel Wu (Jin 2007: HK Superstar)

The fourth song, 'Speak Can't Read', deals with Jin and other ABCs struggling in Chinese language classes, arriving at the stage where they can speak but not read and write in Chinese. It is a continuing, but lighter, take on his earlier, angry song 'Learn Chinese', where he rejects the stereotype image of the Chinese minority as a food deli-

very service. Jin argues that Chinese is fast becoming a global language and the rest of the world had better learn it too (Jin 2004: The Rest is History).

The next song, 'Ape Shall Never' talks about Jin who, like other American teenagers and rappers, must have their own hip-hop dress code and wear specific clothes everyday, much to the consternation of his mother:

9. Ne1jat1gin6 hai6 ngo5ge1, m4sai2 zi2ji3 coeng2 (這一件是我的, 別  
想要來搶 / *this one is mine, don't you think you can grab it from me.*)  
Zau6syun3 hai6 tong4 jat1gin6 (就算是同一件 / *even though it is the  
same item*)  
Dou1 (都 / *still it's*)  
not the same thing. (Jin: 2007)

The next three songs are focused on the theme of food and restaurant culture. 'Yum Dom Cha' (喝口茶 / *drink some tea*) is a humorous presentation of the ritual of dimsum lunch in a Cantonese restaurant from a child's perspective. The restaurant is a socializing place where parents and grandparents embarrass the children by trading gossip and news about their children's age and marriage:

10. Nei5go3 zai2 gam2daai6go3 naa4? (你的兒子這麼大了 / *how your son  
has grown!*)  
Go3neoi5 gei2si4gaa3 aa3? (女兒甚麼時候要嫁了 / *when did your  
daughter get married?*)

The dimsum lunch ritual is noisy but the food is good and hot:

11. Jam2caa4 zing6hai6 dak1go3cou4, zeoi3gan2jiu3 dik1ye5 jit6laat6laat6  
san1sin2 ceot1lou4  
(吃點心真是吵, 最要緊的便是東西熱辣辣的剛剛出爐 / *going for  
dimsum is really noisy, what matters most is that the food is piping hot  
and just out of the stove.*)

The song is a parody of food ritual and social practice, as indicated by a child's observation of adults fighting (or pretending to fight) to pay the bill in Chinese restaurants:

12. Dang2 ngo5 jam2maai4 ne1daam6caa4 zau6giu3go3 fo2gei3 maai4daan1  
(讓我喝完這口茶就叫伙記結帳 / *let me finish drinking this tea and  
I'll ask the waiter to bring the bill.*)

Naa6, ngo5ji4ga1 zau6 heoi3jat1heoi3 sai1sau2gaan1 (哪 . . . 我現在就上洗手間 / *now I am going to the washroom*)  
Soeng6ci3 nei5ceng2, gam1ci3 dang2ngo5bei2, cin1kei4 mai5lai4  
tong2ngo5zaang1  
(上次你請客, 這次讓我給, 千萬別跟我爭 / *last time you paid, so this time let me pay, and don't you fight with me to pay.*)  
Jam2caa4 dou1jiu3 wan2gaau1 aai3 (吃點心都跟我吵架... / *you want to fight with me even at dimsum lunch!*) (Jin 2007: Yum Dom Cha)

Next, 'Wai Wai Wun Bean Wai' is a song about dating and Jin's hip-hop friends. He asks a girl out and first poses three questions. Here is the first one:

13. Ne1wai2 siuze2, zo2nei5 saam3fan1zung1 (這位小姐, 給我三分鐘 / *Miss, give me three minutes of your time*)  
Man6nei5 sam1go3 man6tai4 zau6wui5 (問妳三個問題, 就會 / *I'll ask you three questions, then*)  
leave you alone  
Dai6jat1 jau5mou5 naam4pang4jau5 waak6ze2 lo5gung1 (第一, 有沒有男朋友或者老公 / *#1, do you have a boyfriend or husband?*)  
*Chorus:*  
Leng3nei5, nei5hau2ma3 (美女, 你好嗎 / *Pretty girl, how are you?*)  
Bat1jyu4 bei2ngo5 nei5go3 din6waa2 hou6ma5... (不如給我你的電話號碼 / *why not give me your phone number?*) (Jin 2007)

'Instant Noodles' continues with the theme of dating and adds the practice of eating. Jin offers to cook the best instant noodles for his date in a romantic setting:

14. Dang2ngo5 zyu2 go3min6 (讓我煮個麵 / *let me make you noodles*)  
Dang2ngo5 zyu2 go3min6 bei2nei5 sik6 (讓我煮個麵 給你吃 / *let me make you noodles to eat.*) (Jin 2007)

In the ninth song, '1997', Jin ponders the impact of the changeover of Hong Kong in 1997, through a comparative look at his visits there as a child and now as an adult. He chats with his father about his own childhood and immigration to the United States in the 1970s. Jin remarks that three decades later, replicas of Hong Kongs and Chinas now deck the United States where the Chinese can find everything Chinese—food, movies, Chinatown, newspaper, etc. Most poignant is his reminiscence of going to the market with his maternal grandmother:

15. Ngo5gin3faan1 ngo5 ngoi6po4, to1zyu6 keoi5ge1sau2  
(我又見了外婆, 拖住她的手 / *I saw Grandma again; I was holding her hand.*)  
Hang6gaai1si5 aa2, ngo5bat1lau1 dou1 m4soeng2 heoi3  
(逛街市, 我從來不想去 / *going to the food market--I never want to do that.*)  
M4sai2 maai5coi3 dou1yiu1 dau1faan1 loeng2go3hyun1  
(不用買菜都要兜兩圈 / *even if we don't need to buy food she still wanted to make her rounds .*)  
Dik1 si1naai1 gin3dou3 zau6waa6, nei5go3syun1 aa4  
(那些太太見到了我就說, 是你的孫兒吧 / *Mrs. So and So who saw me asked, is that your grandson?*)  
Mou5co3, go3syun1 zau6hai6ngo5 (沒錯, 孫兒就是我 / *that's right, the grandson is me.*) (Jin 2007)

The last song, 'Wun Lern Chon', articulates Jin's appreciation of his parents' struggle with financial problems while running a small restaurant to put food on the table:

16. Seoi1yin4 ngo5dei6 m4hai6 kung6dou3 zou6 hat1yi1, daan6hai6 mui5ci3  
gau1zou1 dou1 houci2 zaang1dik1dik1  
(雖然我們沒有窮到當乞丐, 但是每次交租都欠一點點 ... / *although we were not as poor as beggars, but every time the rent was due we were a bit short*)

*Chorus:*

- Wan2loeng2caan1 sik6, jau5zou6caan1 sik6  
(找兩頓飯吃, 有早飯吃 / *working to put food on the table, we can eat breakfast*) ...

As a child he did not value his parents' efforts but now he tells his mom and dad that they are his heroes for teaching him to uphold morality and pride in the midst of poverty:

17. Jyu4guo2nei5 mou5ge (如果你沒有的 / *even if you don't have anything*)  
Zau6syun3 zoek3 loeng6haai4 nei5 dou1jiu1 hang6ceot1lai4 mun4hau2  
zou6yan4  
(就是穿涼鞋你都要走出門外做人 / *and you can only afford to wear sandals, you still have to walk out the door and maintain your integrity as a person.*)



Dik1 mat6zat1 ge1je5 gen1bun2 zou6 m4soei1jiu1han6 (那些物質東西根本就不必羨人 / *those materialistic things--there is no need envy others who have them.*) (Jin 2007).

As someone who grew up in a Cantonese speaking environment, I believe that the above lyrics are constructed from phrases and words of daily life in the family, in restaurants, in America's Chinatowns, and from Hong Kong television. However, it is no small feat for even a native speaker to connect these phrases and place them in new situations and contexts, as Jin did in a creative and clever manner. The bilingual use of English and Cantonese and the repetition of words often generate humor and parody, in addition to enhancing the rhyme or rhythm. Indeed, Jin acknowledges this mimicry of the adult language:

18. Keoi5waa6ngo5 jat1geoi3, ngo5hok6do1 jat1geoi3 (他說我一句, 我學多一句 / *whatever words they hurled at me, I would learn those words.*) (Jin 2007: It's Hip-hop)

Jin is fluent in the Cantonese that is spoken around him, especially in his ability to grasp idioms that escape non-native speakers:

18. Yap6coeng4faai3 sau1dak1 dik1gai1seoi3 (入場票收得一點雞碎 / *the ticket price was just chicken feed.*)  
Mou5 leoi4gong1 gam2jyun6 dou1lai4 tai2keoi5 (沒雷公那麼遠, 都來看他 / *people from where Thunder God does not reach still came to see him.*) (Jin 2007: It's Hip-hop)

In manipulating and juxtaposing phrases and words to construct meaningful lyrics, Jin's creativity is best at work when dealing with unfamiliar topics in the Cantonese language, such as hip-hop. The following two examples describe the legendary rap artist Kool Herc and Jin's success at the freestyle battles:

19. Cyun4sai3gai3 dai6jat1go3 hiphop zi1cing1 (全世界第一個 hip-hop 知青 / *he was the best hip-hop young man in the whole world.*) (Jin 2007: It's Hip-hop)...  
Ngo5zau6jiu1 jou4 BETge1 cat1gai3 toi4zyu2 (我就要做 BET 的七屆台主 / *I was determined to be the winner of the 7th freestyle battle.*) (Jin 2007: It's Hip-hop)

Despite a limited vocabulary, *ABC* serves up vivid images of daily life in the typical Chinese American family of eating, dating, living in America and Hong Kong. Jin brings into focus overlapping worlds in *ABC*, restaurant culture in America, the distant cultural and glamorous world of Hong Kong, and his love of the hip-hop world. In some ways Hong Kong television was an escape for him, and for his parents, and he integrated the two worlds with his rap lyrics in *ABC*. Jin assumes the identity of an ABC in personal life and in his performances: an American-born Chinese whose broader identity is American by virtue of the fact that his primary language abilities and formal education have been American while his ties with his family and Chinese roots are limited by his own Chinese language abilities and cultural knowledge of his ethnic heritage. Perhaps the most engaged audience of the album would be Cantonese parents and other ABCs like Jin himself, who now see that ABCs are not as rootless in Chinese culture and language as their families and the Chinese community at large have observed them. Certainly Jin's parents were totally surprised at the level of Chinese language that allowed him to bring out the album.

To conclude, I contend that Jin acquired his Cantonese from his Cantonese speaking family, the restaurant environment where the family lived, and the Hong Kong television programs that were left running in the family home in Miami during his childhood and youth. Jin's unique identity in the hip-hop world rests on his claim to Asian American and Chinese transnational cultures. For that identity and his music career to further develop in East Asia, he will need to go beyond the familiar topics of restaurant and family, and explore more extensively the culture and history of the region—Hong Kong, China, Japan, and Korea. Jin has expressed deep concerns on national and international issues such as Barrack Obama's campaign, the Virginia Tech massacre, and the Tsunami Disaster.<sup>3</sup> In order to produce lyrics for similar global issues in Chinese and to reach higher levels of interaction in the Asian world, he will have to undertake formal language studies in Cantonese and Mandarin. In sum Jin is a highly intelligent, articulate rapper whose lyrics and performance offer exciting research possibilities in Chinese sociolinguistics, the acquisition and retention of heritage language, and Asian American culture.

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<sup>3</sup> These include 'Open Letter 2 Obama', 'You're Fired' in response to Rosie O'Donnell's comments about 'chingchong', 'Response to Tsunami Song', 'Rain, Rain, Go Away' in tribute of Virginia Tech victims. They are available for viewing on Youtube.

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