

Title of Research Project: Breakdance and hip-hop feminism in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China

Authors: CHEW, Matthew Ming-tak and MO, Sophie Pui Sim

Publications: Chew, Matthew M. and Mo, Sophie P.S. (forthcoming). B-girling in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China: Contours of a Chinese hip-hop feminism and a signpost to assessing hip-hop through breakdance instead of rap music. *Asian Studies Review*.

Key implications

1. There is considerable gender inequality in the profession and subculture of breakdancing in Chinese societies. (Breakdance is one of the core elements of hip-hop).
2. But hip-hop and breakdance also offer great opportunities of empowerment for female practitioners and fans of breakdancing (i.e. Chinese b-girls).
3. Our findings point to the possibility of using breakdance practice as a tool of education for young girls in Hong Kong.

Background

Assessments of hip-hop's implications for women began in the 1990s. Most of these studies assess hip-hop as a misogynous and vulgar culture that hurts women. Shortly after, the concept 'hip-hop feminism' emerged. Hip-hop feminists argue that hip-hop is valuable as a tool of empowerment for black women. In the context of highly successful globalization of hip-hop in the new millennium, scholarship on hip-hop outside North America is swiftly accumulating. Yet scholarship on women and hip-hop has not followed such a trend. This research project is the first that is dedicated to investigating how hip-hop impacts on women in Chinese societies.

Focus of study

We interpret, with a global and hip-hop feminist perspective, the experiences of professional b-girls in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China. On the one hand, we aim to identify the locally specific gender inequality that Chinese b-girls confront. On the other, we focus on uncovering the unfamiliar ways through which breakdance empowers Chinese b-girls.

Research methods

Data collection was carried out in 2010, 2014, and 2015. Formal, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 15 professional b-girls in Chinese societies were conducted. The main interviewing sessions were conducted in face-to-face settings in Hong Kong, Taipei, Beijing, Zhengzhou, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen. Participant observation was mainly carried out by this study's co-author, a veteran professional b-girl based in Hong Kong. She observed b-girls' practice, interactions, and conversations as she participated in training sessions, performed on stage, hang out with b-girl groups, and joined and organized dance competitions in Hong Kong, Taipei, Zhengzhou, and Beijing. Informal interviews were conducted during participant observation and through online means. These interviews lasted between 10 to 90 minutes. Among these secondary informants were two globally established b-girls, 30 professional and non-professional b-girls, and 15 professional b-boys.

Key findings

We find that gender inequality associated with hip-hop in the Chinese context is different from that in the American context. Cultural inequality is a key part of the matrix of domination on which Chinese hip-hop-based gender politics focuses, but that racism is not. The embodied experiences of breakdancing compel Chinese b-girls, sometimes even against their will, to defy major Chinese patriarchal and cultural inequalities including i) thin-body ideals, ii) the moral burden of fertility, iii) dress code, and iv) the norm of submissive Oriental women. We also illustrate that the practice of breakdancing can be used to ‘remake hip-hop and redo gender’: the remaking of hip-hop in a way that is fairer for women and the redoing of gender by b-girls for themselves, their audiences, and society at large.

Significance of findings for practice and policy

Based on our findings, we designed a hip hop feminist education program. We test-ran the 6-week education program in two secondary schools and hosted a one-day public event 2016-17. Response to our programs was enthusiastic. We plan to run a similar program with a different audience (ie. young white-collar workers) in the future. We believe that breakdancing can be adopted more broadly in primary, secondary, and tertiary educational programs for young women.