

## Outcome Report: “Training And Research On Funk-Style Dancing”

### **Project Overview**

In my initial proposal, I planned to gain a deeper understanding about funk-style dance, a branch of Hip Hop dance prominently known as popping and locking, by training myself at the ZAHA Dance Club in Beijing and interviewing some of the first- and second-generation dancers in the city, many of whom have won various titles at world championships in the last decade. However, the project took a surprising turn as soon as I began taking classes. These unexpected changes indeed caused me some frustration, but with the surprising developments also came unexpected lessons and insights, which in the end proved incredibly beneficial to my growth as a Hip Hop dance artist.

### **Training in Studios**

As intended, this past summer I spent one month studying at ZAHA club and immediately realized that it was not what I wanted. Because the deep and insightful teaching on funk-style dance I imagined I would receive was not what was being offered. The majority of the classes ended up being more commercialized, focused on pure physical exercises and an overall look as opposed to teaching the philosophy behind Hip Hop moves. The second month of my training took place at Hip Hop Gang (despite their terrible English translation, they are actually a legitimate dance studio), a dance institution endorsed by Mr. Wiggles, one of the first-generation Hip Hop dancers in America and the most knowledgeable Hip Hop artist today. However, the class structure and the poor teaching efforts remained the same (because the ones teaching were not the renowned dancers who endorsed the studio), and once again the philosophical journey seeking the essence of Hip Hop dance I desired did not come to reality.

### **Urban Dance Choreography Rising in China**

While my experiences taking funk-style dance classes at ZAHA and Hip Hop Gang were disappointing, I did acquire some interesting observations while I was in those two studios. As Urban Dance choreography <sup>1</sup> is rising rapidly in mainstream media and dance studios in America, I decided to conduct my training and research on funk-style dance in China, where the trend of Urban Dance had not yet risen to power before I left for school in Fall 2014 semester. But when I finally arrived in China and revisited the local Hip Hop scene last summer, I discovered that the majority of dance events promoted shifted from Hip Hop battle events to Urban Dance showcases and workshops, and that the majority of classes in studios were dedicated to Urban Dance choreography.

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<sup>1</sup> Named after “Urban Dance Camp,” an international educational dance institution in Germany, the term Urban Dance specifically refers to a choreography-centered dance form that resembles Hip Hop and emphasizes rapid and precise movements. However Urban Dance choreography, from its dance philosophy to its styles, is not a branch of Hip Hop. Source: <http://www.urbandance.eu/camp/>

This was when I realized that the rise of Urban Dance choreography was not merely an American phenomenon, but rather a result of our increasing global connections via Internet and social media - the dance form that meets the aesthetics and needs of contemporary youth results in popularity and further commercialization of the form. As Hip Hop dance was once chosen by mainstream media to be a prominent part of pop culture, now Urban Dance choreography has moved to the forefront: its image of a young urban idol in fashionable clothes doing rapid and flashy movements to music about cool “swag,” money, and emotions of young adults seems to better fit the taste of youth today than the image of a soul-oriented Hip Hop dancer dressed in baggy clothes passionately dancing to beats does. Surely, the rise of Urban Dance choreography and the decline of Hip Hop dance, including funk-style dances, are at least in part due to the choices made by the market and the pop-culture consumers.

### **A New Understanding of Commercialization**

As a Hip Hop artist who is witnessing the decline of his beloved culture my experiences from this past summer leave me inclined to blame commercialization for the suffering of the art form. Ironically, from the mouths of the very Hip Hop dance artists who suffered from this decline, I gained a new perspective regarding the possible impacts of commercialization on the world of the arts.

During the summer, hoping to learn more about Hip Hop dancing, I interviewed a few renowned Hip Hop dancers in Beijing, many of whom were second-generation dancers who contributed immensely to the survival of Hip Hop in the 90s. To my surprise, most of them had ended their careers as professional dancers and now settled themselves with demanding and poorly paid jobs, such as milkmen or clothes retailers in dingy department stores. Just as I was lamenting the waste of talents and resenting the cruelty of reality, the interview I had with master Jinglin Yang<sup>2</sup> offered me new perspectives. As he was sharing his story of how he became a Hip Hop dancer, he mentioned several important events in the history of Hip Hop in China. Those events, surprisingly, all shared a direct connection to commercial success, and all resulted in increasing attention from the mainstream media and an increasing number of studios teaching Hip Hop dance. He also gave me a list of Hip Hop dancers who were still striving to maintain their careers and told me that, “The society does not stop a man’s dream. It’s always the man himself who kills his own dream” (translated).

I did not realize this almost commonsensical causal relationship between the arts and commercialization until that interview with master Yang. The declining popularity in Hip Hop dance forms indeed makes Hip Hop artists suffer, but blaming commercialization is not the way to move forward, especially given that there are still many Hip Hop dancers fighting to protect their passion and career. Besides, even though generally at a cost to the original form, the essential role commercialization plays in bringing certain subcultures to light should never be overlooked, and artists should consider this point before they demonize commercialization as the sole cause of their suffering.

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<sup>2</sup> Master Jinglin Yang, aka Crazy Dog, was one of the most renowned second-generation dancers in Chinese Hip Hop history. Besides the numerous awards he won in international Hip Hop battles, he also performed in various TV shows during the early 2000s and inspired a whole generation of young Hip Hop dancers in China.

## The Way Forward

My training last summer, however disappointing, nevertheless enhanced my skills and understanding in funk-style dancing. During that long process of training I also gained a new understanding of my passion for dance, that the funk-style dance I have been doing for so long was not the only way of dancing that I love. Indeed, the sensation of popping to the beats and locking to orchestra hits has given me great joy and a sense of accomplishment, but often times my body also desires to move differently. As I immersed myself in pure funk-style dancing and frequently sensed a secret rebellion from my body, the fear that once I add something foreign to my dancing my funk-style dance will no longer be “authentic” was finally gone. I do love Hip Hop, and I do love funk-style dance, but what I love the most is dancing itself. At the end of my summer experience, I finally admitted that the only things that had been caging me were my own excuses and fears. Then, extremely fortunately, the improvisation class I enrolled in for the fall semester in 2015 immediately provided me with the journey of self-exploration I sought so badly. I have finally met the dancer within my body.

I would like to take a moment to thank a few people who have made this project possible. Thank you to the all of the supporters of the Miller Arts Scholars program, with a special thanks to Sandy and Vinie Miller and Evie and Stephen Colbert. Also, I would like to thank Kim Brooks Mata for patiently guiding me with this project and providing me with incredibly helpful feedback, as well as the inspirational improvisation class she taught. I would also like to thank Master Yang, Mr. Bingo, Funky Tong, and many other Hip Hop artists in Beijing for sharing their journeys and providing important information about funk-style dance for my project.

My final presentation will focus on a video that contains a brief compilation of my recent works and a selected work that best represents my personal style. I also hope to perform a freestyle piece in the arts scholars annual showcase. Below is the link to my temporary personal website that features some of my recent works:

<http://kingstonliu.weebly.com/>

