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The Freshest Kids in China

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By George Zhi Zhao

June 19, 2010 I hear the voice of the late James Brown shouting over the booming speakers, and I watch a crowd of dancers move and contort to every minute rhythm and sound that is being controlled and manipulated by the DJ. The energy in the air is tense, as different b-boys (breakdancers) take turns stepping inside a circle of bodies, all asserting themselves in back-to-back solo performances of gravity-defying sequences of dance movements. The competitive performance of breakdancing happens all over the world, in metropolises ranging from New York City to Tokyo, from Moscow to São Paulo. Today, it's happening in Shanghai, China at the Korean National Pavilion of the 2010 World Expo, with seven of China's best crews competing for a chance to represent China at the R16 World B-Boy Master Championships in Seoul, South Korea on the fourth of July.

Luckily, I had the opportunity to compete at the event as the organizer of one of these seven crews. Being a Chinese-American b-boy who came out of the Boston and Washington, DC dance scenes, I have been blessed with the opportunity to live and study at Shanghai's Fudan University over the course of the past year, all the while being immersed in the street dance community in Shanghai and meeting dancers from around the world. My crew, the Art of War (named after Sun Tzu's book on military strategy), consisted of a mixture of foreigners and native Chinese, with Bureheine from
Ukraine, RW from the Netherlands, Jingyu from Shanghai, as well as four members from Beijing’s Forbidden City Rockers. I had met Bureheine and RW at practices at Caster Dance Studio in Shanghai, and the Forbidden City Rockers on a previous trip to Beijing. The Forbidden City Rockers had been trained in part by another Chinese-American b-boy named Ticky from an internationally renowned Boston crew named the Floorlords; the four of them joined our crew at the last minute, only meeting the other three members of our crew on the morning of the competition. Lastly, Jingyu, a slightly overweight b-boy that I had met during my first weeks in the Shanghai scene, had been featured under the name Kung Fu Panda (功夫熊猫) on the nationally televised song and dance competition 全家都来赛 (Quan Jia Dou Lai Sai), and will be featured on this season of Shanghai Television’s 中国达人 (Zhong Guo Da Ren). A language barrier did exist, and I found myself constantly translating so that my crewmembers could communicate with one another.

The Forbidden City Rockers

The diverse composition of our crew, not to mention the emergence of greater hip hop culture in China and across the globe, has been made possible by decades of transnational cultural exchange. Hip hop, an urban youth culture consisting of four individual art forms (rapping, DJing, breakdancing, and graffiti), emerged out of the poverty and vast unemployment of the South Bronx during the 1960s; by 2010, hip hop has become a global culture practiced by young people all around the world. The commercialization of the culture began in the late 1970s and early 1980s, with the release of the first widely-popular hip hop single “Rapper’s Delight” in 1979, and films such as Wild Style in 1983 and Breakin’ in 1984. With the global dissemination of these cultural products, hip hop quickly spread to the rest of the world; on the Asian continent, the genesis of the breakdance scene first occurred in Tokyo in 1983, when Japanese b-boy pioneer Crazy-A was inspired to learn the dance after watching Flashdance (1983), which featured the Rock Steady Crew, a pioneering group of b-boys from New York City.
Carl Douglas, American Cultural Icon

*Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting!* Breakdancing has come full circle in its journey to China; early African-American and Puerto Rican-American innovators of the dance form cite various sources of inspiration, ranging from the numerous styles of Latin dance, to traditional African and African-American dances, to the Afro-Brazilian war dance known as capoeira. Particularly influential in the formation of breakdancing was the popularity of Chinese martial arts films in 1970s America, a trend that helped to shape the cultural landscape of the decade. B-boy DOZE of the Rock Steady Crew describes how he and his crew would imitate the movements and styles that were featured in the Xia Brothers movies that they watched all day every Saturday in Times Square.

Pioneering b-boy Ken Swift, also a member of the Rock Steady Crew, comments on the influence of a Xia Brothers film on his choice of naming his crew the "Seven Gems" in an interview with the South Korean b-boy internet forum koreanroc.com:

"I started the chapter called the 'Seven Grand Masters,' a throw back from a Kung-Fu cinema movie from the Xia Brothers Films called the 'Seven Grand Masters,' and in the movie these people went around challenging people in the movie. Kung-Fu cinema played a big part in inspiring a lot of b-boys back in the 70's. But to shorten it out, 'Seven Gems' ... the gems that we possess deal with the history and the knowledge of the art forms of hip hop culture."

This martial arts aesthetic was evident at the R16 China regional final competition at the World Expo; one Chinese b-boy sported a baseball jersey with the name of his crew, 36 Chambers, displayed in Old English type prominently across his back, a tribute to the 36 training chambers of the Shaolin temple fictionalized in the 1978 Xia brothers film *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin*. Another b-boy from a Beijing crew named Dragon Style performed a solo incorporating drunken boxing (*zuiquan*). Chinese b-boys offer different opinions regarding the integration of martial arts with breakdancing, with many being unaware of the initial influence of martial arts on the formation of breakdancing. According to Cosmos, a b-boy from the Forbidden City Rockers, "it's cool to incorporate wushu into breaking if you do it without going overboard, but we're in a breaking battle, not a wushu competition." During our conversation, he also mentioned the importance of the South Korean scene in the formation of Chinese breakdancing.
China’s breakdance scene has been shaped by the Korean Wave of breakdancing, a ten-year movement in which South Korean crews have dominated international competitions such as the Battle of the Year event in Germany, the UK B-boy Championships, and the Red Bull BC One solo competition. The international success of Korean b-boys has been directly facilitated by the South Korean government, which has taken an active role in sponsoring breakdancing and promoting it as a part of its soft power initiative. R16 Korea 2010 is sponsored by the Korean Tourism Organization, which promotes the competition as the “World Cup” of breakdancing “that surpasses all of the four major international B-Boy competitions: ‘Battle of the Year’, ‘Freestyle Session’, ‘Red Bull BC One’, and ‘UK B-Boy Championships.’” Relying on the talent of its b-boys, the South Korean government hopes to establish itself as a pioneer in its support of global youth culture. The R16 website states that the R16 World B-Boy Championships were created in 2007 as a grand experiment to see if through the support of the government and a nation as a whole, youth created grassroots cultures like hip hop and b-boying can become a profitable and self sustaining industry that can embed itself within society and culture and maintain relevance in the minds of the mainstream and mass media here in Korea and the rest of the World. ... We can show through this event and through our dedication and passion, that while the rest of the world is embroiled in conflicts caused by prejudice and an inability to overcome their differences, we have come to settle our differences, unite ourselves and DANCE.
I had the chance to speak briefly with John Jay, the Korean-American organizer of the R16 event, who told me that his goal at the World Expo event was to “help bring up the Chinese scene.” Many Chinese b-boys have cited the importance of watching internet video footage from South Korea as a source of inspiration and education since the early development of the Chinese scene, learning and imitating the clothing, movements, and gestures of Korean b-boys; one b-boy from Guangxi has even mentioned to me that his crew is modeled after South Korean world champions Gamblerz Crew. At the R16 China Regional Finals, the judges panel consisted of three Korean b-boys, representing Korea as the international authority on the dance, at least in Asia.

After an initial period of stretching and warming up on the main stage underneath the Korean National Pavilion, the b-boys began to form circles of bodies with individuals taking turns dancing in the center (in hip hop culture, this type of exchange is known as a “cypher”, and can be applied to rap culture as well). The interactions between the dancers were sometimes hostile, with informal, competitive “battles” taking place within the cypher circle. One such battle took place between Shanghai’s Caster Evolution (a Chinese all-star team composed of some of the best b-boys from across the country, organized by Shanghai’s Caster Dance Studio) and Guangzhou’s STO Crew over a previous dispute. Within hip hop culture, personal disputes are often settled within the realm of the cypher battle, which takes place without judges, a set number of turns, or an official set of rules. This cypher battle culture is primarily understood and performed by the elite circle of b-boys in China, as amateur b-boys and fans seem to shy away from these types of informal confrontations and prefer to stay within the more structured framework of the competition battles.

After the competition battles began, the two MCs at the event, Korean-American New York native Superman Ivy and the boss of Shanghai’s Caster Dance Studio, Shitou, spoke to the audience in a mixture of Chinese and English. Ivy spoke in English about the event representing “my dance, my music, my people,” identifying himself with hip hop as a global culture that transcends traditional national and ethnic boundaries. The format of the battles was three rounds of tournament-style single elimination competitions, with approximately fifteen-minute battles occurring between two crews, which sometimes went into short tiebreaker rounds when the judges could not reach a decision. Our crew, the Art of War, lost to Guangzhou’s STO during the first round. Another crew from Yunnan named KGS lost in the first round as well; by coincidence, KGS was the only other crew to include a
foreigner. I had met Sonny, a very talented 15-year old b-boy from England, the night before at Caster Dance Studio; he had been traveling through China and happened to meet and practice with KGS, who then decided to include him in the R16 battle.

What ensued was a competition that was both very Chinese and very hip hop. In reverence of the classical Confucian ideal of filial piety, Ivy stated “we want to show the elders that what we’re doing can be positive, so that they’ll have respect for what we’re doing and living.” This respect for hierarchy was also exemplified in the awards ceremony of the event, following the final battle between Shanghai’s Caster Evolution and Beijing’s Dragon Style. Mr. Park, the director of the Korean pavilion, and Mr. Jung, from the Korean Tourism Organization, were introduced and invited onstage to declare the winner of the event and China’s representative at the R16 World B-boy Championships: Caster Evolution from Shanghai. At the conclusion of the event, I did hear some b-boys complaining about the judging, that Caster Evolution didn’t actually deserve their win against Dragon Style; other individuals also pointed out that the crew that won the battle was affiliated with the dance studio that organized the event. In this respect, the battle was a prime example of global hip hop culture — I hear the same rants about judging and politics at almost every competition I attend, whether in DC or over here on the Far East Coast.

All in all, the R16 China Regional Finals revealed a community of b-boys that is rapidly developing in number and skill, following in the footsteps of Japan and South Korea and facilitated by the involvement of foreign dancers and promoters. After the competition was over, our crowd of b-boys, b-girls, fans and friends were allowed to cut in front of the never ending lines at the World Expo to check out the Korean National Pavilion. In July, Caster Evolution went on to battle Phase-T of France at the R16 Korea World Finals.

George Zhi Zhao is a student in the English-Instructed Master’s Degree at Fudan University. He was a member of the research group organized by the instructors of the course, Zhu Jianfeng and Susan Brownell, which brought together undergraduate and graduate students and faculty, both from China and from other countries, who were doing research on various aspects of the Shanghai World Expo.

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