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# Moonwalking in Beijing: Michael Jackson, *piliwu*, and the origins of Chinese hip-hop

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## ABSTRACT

During the latter half of the 1980s, a popular dance craze known as “*piliwu*” swept urban communities across China. A Chinese translation of the U.S. media term “breakdancing,” *piliwu* incorporated what were then two new styles of U.S. urban popular dance—New York-based b-boying/b-girling or breaking (characterized by inversions and dance battles) and California-based popping and locking (characterized by the robot and the moonwalk). Appearing in parks, on nightclub stages, and in popular films, *piliwu* was China’s first localized movement of hip-hop culture, preceding the introduction of rap music by more than a decade. Like other aspects of popular culture in 1980s China, *piliwu* reflected new circuits of intercultural exchange between China and the United States during the first decade of China’s Reform Era. In particular, it demonstrated the impact of U.S. popular music, embodied by stars such as Michael Jackson, and the mediating role that Hong Kong played in introducing these new cultural forms to the lives of Chinese youth. This article follows the career of Tao Jin, China’s first hip-hop dance star, and analyzes *piliwu* dance choreography recorded in Tao’s debut film, the 1988 Chinese dance film *Rock Youth*. Reading this film alongside media reports and testimonials from members of China’s *piliwu* generation, the article reconstructs the history of the *piliwu* movement. It argues for the central influence of U.S. pop culture icon Michael Jackson, the growth of China’s underground commercial dance “*zouxue*” (“moonlighting”) economy, and the agency of dancers’ bodies in transnational movements of media culture.

## KEYWORDS

China; hip-hop dance; Michael Jackson; *Rock Youth*; 1980s

## Introduction

The camera fixes on a white industrial garage doorway. As the door opens, smoke billows out from within as a tall, thin man with black wavy hair walks out and stands at the center of the frame. He is dressed in a cropped black jacket with the collars turned up over a tee shirt, slim black pants, black loafers, and bright white socks. Shot slightly from below, he appears to be on a stage, while the camera is positioned in the audience. Suddenly, the man strikes a pose: he forms a wide-legged stance with his toes facing on a diagonal, one leg slightly bent, hips cocked to the side, torso facing forward with arms hanging straight down and slightly out from the hips, head turned in profile. Then, with a high kick, three hip shakes, and quick grab of the belt, the dance begins.

This scene is from *Rock Youth* (*Yaogun qingnian*, also known as *Rock Kids*, *Rock 'n Roll Kids*, *Rock-n-Roll Youth*), a Chinese film directed by acclaimed fifth-generation filmmaker Tian Zhuangzhuang that took China by storm when it was released in the fall of 1988 (*Rock Youth*).<sup>1</sup> Starring popular dance icon Tao Jin (1961-1997) and focusing on youth angst in a time of societal transformation, the film has been hailed as an important reflection of China's late-1980s urban youth culture, especially new music and dance fads linked with the importation of Western (especially U.S.) media culture in the post-Mao period (Silbergeld 1999, 85–86; Zhu 2003, 123; Zhou 2007, 105–133; Clark 2012, 87–88; Xiao 2017, 203–207). As a historical document, *Rock Youth* offers the most vivid extant audio-visual record of a popular dance movement that swept China during the late 1980s, what was known as “*piliwu*.” A translation of the media term “break-dancing,” “*piliwu*” combined what in the U.S. had begun as distinct forms of hip-hop dance: New York-based b-boying/b-girling or breaking and California-based popping and locking (Song 1985; Johnson 2015).<sup>2</sup> Chinese dance writer Song Tiezheng explained in 1985 that *piliwu* moves can range from inverted floor spins and acrobatic battling to the moonwalk and the robot. As a highly localized form, *piliwu* also incorporated elements from a range of other movement repertoires, including Chinese classical dance, Chinese folk and ethnic dance, disco and ballroom dance (both of which had local varieties), and sequences copied from U.S. films and music videos. Critics have tended to credit *Rock Youth*'s inspiration, especially its dance sequences, to the influence of the U.S. film *Breakin'* (1984), which featured a Hollywood-style portrayal of the early 1980s Los Angeles popping and locking scene. *Breakin'* was released in China in late 1987 and achieved nation-wide visibility by early 1988, sparking what cultural historian Clark (2012, 87) describes as a “breakdance craze” by the summer of that year.<sup>3</sup> While the release of *Breakin'* certainly shaped the making of *Rock Youth* and late 1980s Chinese urban youth dance culture, the genealogy of both the film and the *piliwu* phenomenon are more complicated than previous accounts have attested (Figures 1 and 2).

One aspect of *Rock Youth* and the *piliwu* movement that has not been deeply engaged in the existing scholarship is the role that U.S. music and dance icon Michael Jackson played in these cultural phenomena. Examining the dance choreography in *Rock Youth*, the fictionalized image and story arc of its central protagonist, and the real-life background of the film's production and key dancers involved, it becomes clear that Michael Jackson was a key source of inspiration for both *Rock Youth* and *piliwu*. Jackson's music videos, album cover art, and televised performances all find reference in *Rock Youth*, informing important aspects of the film that depart significantly



**Figure 1.** Dancer performs *piliwu* in *Rock Youth* (1988). Screen capture by the author.



**Figure 2.** *Rock Youth* (1988) film poster. Internet image.

from its presumed template, *Breakin'*. Mass-mediated images of Jackson, rather than the characters in *Breakin'*, offer a more convincing model for the vision of success ultimately promoted in the film. Through the image of its central protagonist, played by the real-life dancer-turned-popstar Tao Jin, *Rock Youth* portrays a new kind of Chinese performer, one who finds self-expression through commercial performance, not high art. This new performer, like Jackson, is also a consummate crosser of boundaries: one who dances as well as sings and who creates an individual style through the fusion of diverse elements. It is no accident that, following the success of *Rock Youth*, Tao Jin was launched into overnight stardom in China, performing in popular music concerts, appearing on major television programs, and producing his own music videos (Zhao 2000). Following his premature death in 1997 at the age of thirty-six, Tao was described as “the idol of a generation” and “China’s Michael Jackson” (Wang 2012, 181).<sup>4</sup>

While many in China associate Michael Jackson with the *piliwu* movement, there has been significant controversy over the exact timing and extent of Jackson’s impact on Chinese popular culture during the 1980s, especially his connection to the early emergence of *piliwu*. Upon Jackson’s death in 2009, the Chinese press was filled with nostalgic accounts of the pop idol’s significance to a generation of Chinese youth who came of age in the 1980s (e.g. Li 2009; Ping 2009; Xu 2009; Yang 2009; Zhou 2009). However, some challenged Jackson’s role in the emergence of 1980s Chinese popular music and *piliwu*. One such challenger was music critic Wang Xiaofeng, who published an essay in 2009 provocatively titled “Did Michael Jackson Influence Us?” Wang answered “no” to this question, citing three main reasons: (1) foreign music records were highly rare and expensive in China before the “*dakou*” (“cut out,” or surplus) economy emerged in the 1990s, and as a result the majority of Chinese listeners failed to have access to Jackson’s music during the prime of his career<sup>5</sup>; (2) Jackson’s music videos did not reach China at least until after 1988, when *Bad* (Jackson’s first album to be formally released in China) was distributed by the Shanghai Record

Company, and possibly as late as 1991, when MTV had been established in Hong Kong, allowing secondhand TV-to-VHS recordings to reach China more easily<sup>6</sup>; and (3) Michael Jackson's artistic style is too original to be imitated. The last point notwithstanding, Wang argued mainly that the flows of material commodities and the establishment of formal media networks had not been sufficient in the early or mid-1980s to allow for Jackson's influence in China. In Wang's view, the widespread impact of Jackson in China cannot be established at least until after 1988, when *Rock Youth* was already released and *piliwu* was in full swing.

I argue that tracing the impact of Michael Jackson on China's popular culture—especially its dance culture—during the 1980s requires moving beyond a focus on formal media distribution networks and the large-scale flow of material commodities such as pirated tapes within China. Rather, it requires considering the importance of dancers' bodies and live performance as conduits for cultural transmission. During the mid-1980s, a time when Chinese audiences had limited direct access to Jackson's music and videos, they nevertheless "encountered" Jackson indirectly through the performances of artists like Tao Jin, who incorporated aspects of Jackson's image and movement style into their own. Through an informal concert economy known as "*zouxue*" ("moonlighting") that emerged in China during the mid-1980s, dancers like Tao Jin disseminated Jackson's dance styles before they were available widely in the mass media. It was this localized, indirect experience of Michael Jackson that found its way into *Rock Youth* and the *piliwu* movement. Through its underground status as an activity of rebellious, creative, and enterprising urban youth, the *zouxue* phenomenon had much in common with early hip-hop culture in the United States—the origin of the dance styles presented in both *Rock Youth* and *Breakin'* (Chang 2005). Although Jackson is not typically regarded as an icon of hip-hop culture in the United States, he became a leading figure in the first local hip-hop movement in China, which was embodied in the *piliwu* phenomenon and the film *Rock Youth*. Jackson's image in 1980s China as an embodiment of transgression, youth rebellion, and success made him a role model for dancers like Tao Jin—the artists who, through their own ingenuity, talent, and ambition, brought Jackson and hip-hop to China and made them their own.

### Filmic traces: finding Jackson in *Rock Youth*

From a choreographic perspective, the dance scenes in *Rock Youth* show a clear debt to three of Jackson's music videos (or short films, as he preferred them to be called) and television appearances that first appeared in 1983: *Thriller*, *Beat It* and the "Billie Jean" performance on *Motown 25*. A comparison of dance scenes in *Rock Youth*, *Breakin'*, and Jackson's dancing shows that Jackson may have had more of an impact on the film's choreography than *Breakin'*, even though the influences of both are clearly present. The most obvious aspect of *Rock Youth*'s choreography that shows a debt to Jackson is its structure: the arrangement of dancers on stage and their relationship to one another. In *Breakin'*, the hip-hop dance scenes are choreographed to look like battles, using structures that emphasize individual improvisation and the exchanging of moves between dancers within a circular crowd known as a cypher.<sup>7</sup> Typically, crews of two to three dancers each compete with one another as groups, with no clear hierarchy among the members within each crew. Rather than facing toward the camera, the dancers face their opponents as they dance, and synchronized group choreography is rare. In both *Thriller* and *Beat It*, the choreographic structure is noticeably different. In them, dancers perform synchronized movements in forward-facing large group formations, usually geometric arrangements of rows that shift into a triangle. The hierarchy of these arrangements is clear as Jackson, the star, occupies the privileged position at front and

center.<sup>8</sup> Of the six hip-hop-inspired group dance scenes in *Rock Youth*, only two use *Breakin*'s improvisational, cypher-based model, while three are choreographed like Michael Jackson's music videos, and one starts out with the former and ends with the latter. A seventh hip-hop dance scene shows Tao Jin performing solo on a stage, something that never happens in *Breakin*' but which appeared in Jackson's performance on *Motown 25*.<sup>9</sup> By far the longest dance scenes in *Rock Youth* are those that use the Jackson-style model of synchronized group choreography performed in geometric lines with hierarchical arrangements that foreground the central star. Like Michael Jackson, Tao Jin appears front and center in these group dance sequences, facing the camera as rows of dancers perform synchronized choreography in lines behind him (Figure 3).<sup>10</sup>

Apart from choreographic structure, the specific movements performed by dancers in *Rock Youth* also frequently include sequences from Jackson's performances. A clear example can be seen when the lead character Long Xiang (performed by Tao Jin) gives a solo performance at his dance ensemble, which includes two movements used in Jackson's *Motown 25* performance: the mimed hair comb and the moonwalk (Figure 4).<sup>11</sup> However, the scene with the largest amount of overlapping vocabulary with Jackson's performances is a group dance in which Long performs on a street corner with members of a motorcycle gang. In a setting that noticeably echoes that used in *Thriller*—night sky, wet-looking pavement, smoky background, street signs—the dancers perform a one-and-a-half-minute sequence that cites movements from both *Thriller* and *Beat It*. A reference to *Thriller* appears when the dancers shake their right arms with loosely grasped fists over their heads four times, while rocking their hips to the beat.<sup>12</sup> Another reference to *Thriller* appears when the dancers clap both hands over their heads, step to the side in a low lunge, shift their shoulders and heads back and forth as they rise to a straight stance, and then raise and drop their shoulders as they step together.<sup>13</sup> A reference to *Beat It* appears earlier in the scene, when Tao steps forward between two men who were previously grasping hands.<sup>14</sup> Another reference to *Beat It* appears when the dancers reach both hands forward at waist level and pull back,



**Figure 3.** Synchronized group choreography in triangle formation with Tao Jin at center in *Rock Youth* (1988). Internet image.



**Figure 4.** Tao Jin performs “moonwalk” during solo dance in *Rock Youth* (1988). Screen capture by the author.

while stepping both feet backward and thrusting their hips forward, then repeating.<sup>15</sup> Other single movements from *Thriller* and *Beat It* appear scattered throughout the choreography: a high knee lift in front of the body with the calf and ankle shaking from side to side; waist-level fist pumps with reverse hip thrusts; synchronized ninety-degree head turns; quick backward head tosses; and double- and single-handed disco points. Punctuated movement with clear lines and musical breaks separated by moments of fluidity characterize the dancing throughout, echoing the style of Jackson’s videos. Like the other synchronized dance sequences in *Rock Youth*, this one features none of the popping and locking actions or b-boy/b-girl floor spins and inversions that *Breakin’* helped popularize. Instead, these movements appear only in Long’s solo and in the cypher-based dance scenes, in which Long usually is not highlighted.

A comparison of costuming also suggests more of a debt to Michael Jackson than *Breakin’*. The clothing of the lead characters in *Breakin’* shifts between two main styles: athletic wear, such as tennis shoes, sweat pants, track suits, leggings and leotards; and street attire, such as sleeveless shirts, leather vests, studded belts and bracelets, earrings, hats, and bandanas. While some of the dancers in *Rock Youth* appear in athletic clothing during their dance scenes, the main character Long only wears this when he is rehearsing or teaching, not in the major dance numbers. The street attire that forms such an important part of the hip-hop esthetic of central characters in *Breakin’* is nowhere to be found in *Rock Youth*, except for the fingerless gloves featured in a few scenes, which Jackson also sported in his cover art and videos for *Bad*. Overall, Tao’s clothing during major dance sequences aligns with Jackson’s 1983 styles. During the outdoor dance scene with the motorcycle gang, for example, Tao is dressed in white pants, a white suit jacket with the collar slightly turned up, and a black collared shirt—very reminiscent of the clothing Michael Jackson appears in on the album cover of *Thriller* (Figure 5). In other scenes, such as the one described at the beginning of this paper, Tao appears in slim black pants, black loafers and white socks, which Jackson wore in both *Beat It* and *Motown 25*.

Apart from formal choreography and costuming, elements of Jackson’s movement repertoire also appear at key plot points in *Rock Youth*, where it serves as a form of expressive body language. A narrative turning point in the film is when Long, a soloist in a state-run dance company, quits his job to pursue a career as an independent commercial dancer and choreographer. In the scene immediately following Long’s resignation, he visits a friend to share the news. After telling his friend that he has just quit, Long celebrates with a series of turns and steps, ending in what dance historian Pugh (2015, 243) called one of Jackson’s “signature moves ... the perch on the



**Figure 5.** Tao Jin and dancers reference Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* choreography and album cover clothing in *Rock Youth* (1988). Screen capture by the author.

tips of his toes.” The camera follows Long’s movement and ends focused on his body in the toe perch position, making this the lasting visual sign of the entire scene. This sequence is particularly meaningful because, as cultural historian Zhou (2007) has pointed out, it contains two other symbolic layers. During the scene, including the toe perch, Tao is filmed through a wire cage, in relation to which he appears on the outside, while his friend is inside (Figure 6). Also, as Long performs his celebratory dance, he is humming and singing a line from “The Internationale,” a communist song widely associated in China with the Mao era. Zhou argues that the wire cage represents the state employment system, while “The Internationale” has multiple meanings, including loss of stability, excitement for the future, and irony about the unfulfilled promises of Maoism. Because of the deep meanings of this scene, Zhou argues that it “innuendoes what the overall film attempts to convey” (122-123). The fact that an iconic movement from Jackson’s repertoire serves as this scene’s bodily image implies that Jackson himself, or a locally interpreted media version of him, offered the imagined embodiment of the film’s ideals.

From the perspective of plot and themes, *Rock Youth* shares some qualities with *Breakin’* but also departs from it in important ways that make Jackson seem to be the more likely model. The most important shared theme between *Rock Youth* and *Breakin’* is their focus on a dancer frustrated by



**Figure 6.** Tao Jin performs Michael Jackson’s signature “toe perch” pose outside cage as symbol of freedom in *Rock Youth* (1988). Screen capture by the author.



the conventional divides between “art dance” and “popular dance.” In *Breakin’* the main character Kelly is rebuked when she attempts to bring “street dancers”—the term used in the film to refer to practitioners of popular dance forms such as locking, popping, and breaking—into formal dance spaces such as a professional studio and the auditions for an upcoming concert dance performance. Similarly, in *Rock Youth*, Long’s *piliwu* solo is rejected for his company’s contribution to the upcoming dance festival. Both Kelly’s dance instructor and Long’s girlfriend criticize their choice to pursue popular dance, arguing that it is a “waste of time” and not a serious art form. While this same basic conflict unites the two films, the paths each takes to resolve it are different. In *Breakin’*, Kelly and her friends resolve the artistic divide by getting popular dance forms recognized within the art dance world. A climactic scene shows them sneaking into an audition and then winning over its stuffy judging panel. The final scene of the film shows a marquis advertising a new performance called “Street Jazz” that stars Kelly and her friends, and it shows them performing their popular dance moves in a formal performance space, with their old street corners and street clothing transformed into theatrical *mise-en-scène* and designer costumes. By contrast, the solution to the artistic divide presented in *Rock Youth* is Long’s complete departure from dance as high art and his transformation into a pop star. After Long gains recognition working as a choreographer for a fashion company, the final dance scene of the film (implied to be a dream sequence in Long’s mind) shows Long performing on a giant outdoor concert stage alongside a group of pop and rock singers. Leading a group of dancers behind him, Tao sings and grooves with a microphone in hand, amidst flashing lights and smoke machines, while crowds of fans clap and dance below. A shot from on high shows Long, again in the black pants, white socks, and black loafers, rocking one ankle up and down to the beat as he soaks in the music, just like in Jackson on *Motown 25*.

### Follow the bodies: the dancers behind *Rock Youth*

The ample references to Jackson that appear in *Rock Youth* present several conundrums to the dance historian. First, if Jackson’s music and dance videos were not widely available in China until after 1988, how did they find such a strong presence in the dance choreography, costuming, and bodily repertoires presented in *Rock Youth*? Second, if *Rock Youth* was based on *Breakin’*, why do so many aspects of the film depart from its supposed model? Third, if the story told in *Rock Youth* revolves around the life of a professional dancer, why does the protagonist in the end transform into a pop singer? To answer these questions requires looking more deeply into the lives of the dancers behind *Rock Youth*. Specifically, it requires asking when and how these dancers traveled across borders where they might have been exposed to Jackson’s videos and brought them back to China via unofficial pathways. Also, it requires considering how dancers themselves acted as conduits for the dissemination of new dance and music culture within China, through their agency as performers in underground circuits of commercial dance performance and as organizers and leaders of community dance activities.

To answer these questions, I talked with dancers who participated in the *piliwu* phenomenon and took part in the creation of *Rock Youth*. As a visiting Fulbright scholar at the Beijing Dance Academy (BDA) in 2008–2009, I had the privilege of being surrounded by people who had spent their entire lives in the Beijing dance scene, and as I got to know them better, I found that many had been practitioners of *piliwu* in their youth. Zhang Ping (b. 1956), who chaired BDA’s Department of Social Dance, had been classmates and close friends with Tao Jin and was a lead collaborator in the making of *Rock Youth*.<sup>16</sup> Yang Na (b. 1968), who taught Chinese folk and ethnic dance in the BDA’s attached secondary school, was a member of one of the dance crews featured in

*Rock Youth*. Bai Tao (b. 1969), who taught in the same program as Yang, experienced the *piliwu* movement from a nearby province outside Beijing. By recording these dancers' personal stories and cross-referencing them with documentation in contemporary print sources, it is possible to piece together an underground history of *piliwu* and China's early exposure to Michael Jackson that goes beyond official media networks and the circulation of material commodities.<sup>17</sup>

As hip-hop scholars have shown, the international spread of hip-hop culture prior to the Internet age occurred largely through the physical movements of performers and the media they carried across borders in their backpacks and suitcases (Condry 2006; Fogarty 2007; Charry 2012). In China, a similar process occurred for the early transmission of the dance culture of both hip-hop and Michael Jackson. For the dance genealogy of *Rock Youth*, the story began in 12–22 July 1984, when a forty-person delegation from the Beijing Dance Academy—including two recent graduates of the Academy's prestigious Chinese classical dance program, Tao Jin and Zhang Ping—visited Hong Kong to perform in an International Youth Dance Festival (South China Morning Post 1984a; Weber 1984; Beijing Dance Academy Annals Editing Committee 1993, 326; P. Zhang, personal communication, 20 November 2009). Because Hong Kong was still a British colony at the time, this constituted an international trip, which presented opportunities for exposure to U.S. media culture long absent in China due to the ongoing Cold War.<sup>18</sup> One day during their stay, Tao, Zhang, and a few other students went to the movies and saw a dance film from the United States, most likely *Breakin'*.<sup>19</sup> According to Zhang (personal communication, 20 November 2009), the film made a deep impression on him and his friends. After seeing the film, they decided to collect as many dance videos as they could in Hong Kong to bring back with them to China so that they could begin learning this new dance style. Among these may have been the instructional *Break Dance* series produced by K-TEL VIDEO, which was on sale at the Artic Video Club in Hong Kong (South China Morning Post 1984b). From newspaper reports, we know that Michael Jackson's music videos were the most popular items in Hong Kong video rental stores during the summer of 1984 (South China Morning Post 1984c). Thus, it is possible VHS tapes of *Beat It*, *Thriller*, and *Motown 25* were also among the items they brought back.

Upon returning to Beijing, Tao, Zhang and their classmates were so excited about the new dance styles they had seen in Hong Kong that they decided to form their own performance group. Within two weeks, they had choreographed an entire show that combined, according to Zhang, “elements of ballroom dance, disco, and *piliwu*” (Zhang personal communication, 20 November 2009). Zhang and his friends felt that there was an audience for this type of performance in China, which was in the midst of a nation-wide wave of social dancing. Ballroom dance and disco had already been popular in China for a few years, and in June of 1984 their popularity reached an all-time high. A letter to the editor published in China's *Dance* magazine described the situation in China's western province of Sichuan, where more than three hundred organizations were hosting biweekly social dance classes and activities, yet “the demand is still not being satisfied, and dance students continue to come in an endless stream” (Sun 1984).<sup>20</sup> As conservatory-trained dancers, Tao, Zhang and their classmates hoped to add something new to this phenomenon by bringing dance styles previously performed socially in parks and parties to the stage. The new dance styles they had picked up in Hong Kong would be their secret weapon, since almost no one in China had seen them at the time.<sup>21</sup> Their first performance took place in Beijing, where, Zhang recalls, it created quite a stir (Zhang personal communication, 20 November 2009). Stuffing their suitcases with costumes and traveling by bus and train, the group spent the remainder of their summer vacations on tour. They performed the show in cinemas and public theaters around the country, introducing new dance styles through live performance to audiences across China. At the end of the tour,

Zhang used the money he had earned to purchase leather clothing and a bike, while others bought their first sets of furniture or got married. This was the beginning of one of China's first hip-hop dance crews.

Several factors made the formation and success of Tao and Zhang's crew possible. First, as students of the Beijing Dance Academy, China's most elite professional dance school, Tao, Zhang and their classmates had privileged access to resources and mobility—manifested in this case through their trip to Hong Kong and their connections in Beijing, China's cultural center. Zhang had prior leadership experience in a national state-sponsored ensemble (the Central Nationalities Song and Dance Ensemble, also based in Beijing), where he learned how to coordinate performance logistics and developed a strong professional network in the industry (Zhang personal communication, 20 November 2009). In terms of China's domestic politics, the summer of 1984 was also an ideal time to launch small-scale entrepreneurial business and cultural ventures, which Zhang's crew and their national tour represented. New national policies had been announced in June and July that encouraged entrepreneurship as the new direction for China's economic development (MacFarquhar 1997, 363–364). Cultural changes also accompanied these new policies, as Western styles of dress, entertainment, and personal conduct that had been previously condemned were now permitted. As they had been in other places, hip-hop and Michael Jackson were thus helped into China's entertainment and artistic spaces not only by the agency of local performers but also by the local government's new endorsement of elements of neoliberal market values and Western popular culture (Harvey 2005; Carmody 2009; Perry 2016).

The most iconic feature of this new cultural landscape in China's arts and entertainment world was a phenomenon known as “*zouxue*,” which Tao, Zhang and their crew helped to pioneer through their 1984 summer tour. *Zouxue*, roughly translated as “moonlighting,” refers to a type of commercial performance that emerged in China during the mid-1980s as part of economic reforms and the commodification of leisure. Initially, *zouxue* shows took place in movie cinemas and public theaters; eventually they expanded into new evening entertainment venues known as “*yezonghui*,” or “nightclubs.”<sup>22</sup> The *zouxue* economy worked initially as an extension of the official arts sector: professional dancers employed in state-owned ensembles and schools created and toured popular variety shows as a supplement to their regular jobs. In the case of Zhang and his classmates, for example, they used their summer vacation to carry out touring activities, then reported to their jobs as teachers in professional dance conservatories when classes started in the fall.<sup>23</sup> The lack of institutional oversight meant that *zouxue* crews were flexible to choose the styles of dance they performed. At the same time, there was large financial incentive to participate in *zouxue* shows, since the amount of money dancers could make in these performances far exceeded their regular salaries. Bai Tao (personal communication 5 October 2008), for example, who participated in a nationally-touring *zouxue* crew in 1985–1986, remembered performing three shows a day at a rate of fifteen *yuan* per show, at a time when his monthly salary as a professional dancer in a state-owned song and dance ensemble was forty *yuan*. According to an article published in the national newspaper *Guangming Daily* in early 1988, a *zouxue* performer could earn in one night the equivalent of an entire month's salary in China's top national dance ensemble (Zi 1988). In most cases, dancers could participate in *zouxue* crews without leaving their regular jobs and benefits, making the decision to do so relatively risk free.

The rise of the *zouxue* economy, combined with underground circulation of pirated music and videos, created a context for the emergence of local hip-hop dance culture during the years before U.S. films and music videos were available officially in China.<sup>24</sup> Like Tao, Zhang, and their classmates, most dance crews adapted diverse dance styles into their performance programs. Bai Tao,

whose crew was based out of Shanxi province, which borders Inner Mongolia, remembers performing eclectic programs combining Shanxi folk dances, modern dance, and *piliwu*. “Back then we would perform anything,” Bai (personal communication 5 October 2008) recalled. “It was about adapting to the market.” When asked how he learned these dances, Bai said that he and his friends got inspiration from other *zouxue* crews, as well as from foreign VHS tapes circulated among friend networks. While the *zouxue* economy was rarely discussed in official print media at the time, it is possible to find occasional references to it and to *piliwu*. In 1985, for example, the journal *Dance* published several articles criticizing the recent fad of professional dancers touring commercialized Western popular dance forms (Yi 1985; Liang 1985). The same year, *Shanghai Theater* reported on a new work of Chinese opera that incorporated *piliwu* elements: apparently, during a part in the plot when the main character eats a pearl, the actor used “currently popular *piliwu* movements” to convey the character’s pain, which was followed with great applause from the audience (Yin 1985). Other articles published in 1985–86 addressed *piliwu* in more abstract terms, discussing its global appeal and value as a form of exercise or reporting on its censure in some countries and its purported health hazards (She 1985; Music World 1986; Tiyu 1986). From these scattered references, it is clear that *piliwu* had entered China’s performance spaces and popular consciousness before *Breakin’* appeared in cinemas.

Apart from their promotion of new dance styles on the *zouxue* circuit, Tao, Zhang, and other dancers also fostered new dance communities through their roles as teachers and event organizers. Yang Na (personal communication 18 October 2008), one of the dancers in *Rock Youth*, recalled fondly the role that Tao Jin played as a leader in Beijing’s *piliwu* community in the mid-1980s. In 1986, Yang had just graduated from the BDA attached secondary school and was hired as a professional dancer in a national dance ensemble based in Beijing. That year, he recalled, the Beijing dance halls were filled with people practicing *piliwu*, one of the most prominent being Tao Jin. Yang said he started going to the halls daily to dance and have fun, describing it as “just like those scenes in the U.S. movies.” By the end of that year, Yang was being hired by pop singers who needed back-up dancers, and by 1987 he was part of a touring *zouxue* dance crew. Around this time, Tao had quit his teaching job and was working in the *piliwu* field full time (Zhao 2000, 37–61). He recruited Yang and others to perform in *Rock Youth*, serving as the film’s dance designer and coaching them for the dance scenes. After appearing in *Rock Youth*, Yang continued to perform with Tao, dancing with him in live performance gigs, *piliwu* competitions, television appearances, and other projects (Yang personal communication 18 October 2008). Because Tao was such a driving force in the *piliwu* world, however, when he passed away in 1997, Yang said that he and others simply stopped dancing *piliwu*. Other responsibilities called, and without Tao organizing things, activity dropped off. In popular dance communities, scenes often rise and fall around the talent, charisma, and organizational efforts of a few key individuals. In the case of Beijing’s *piliwu* community, Tao was one of these people (Figure 7).

### Michael Jackson: China’s first hip-hop icon?

Scholars of global hip-hop emphasize the need to examine the local histories of hip-hop communities outside the U.S. and, rather than seeing them as appropriations or replications of U.S.-centered styles or values, to recognize their agency in generating distinct forms of hip-hop culture (Mitchell 2001; Condry 2006; de Kloet 2010). Conventionally, hip-hop is understood as an interdisciplinary cultural phenomenon that combines four elements: graffiti, dance, DJ-ing, and rapping (Rose 1994). However, as of 2015, it was still true that “in the growing field of hip-hop studies,



**Figure 7.** Tao Jin and partner perform popular commercial music and dance in China, circa 1990s. Internet image, also reprinted in Tao Jin’s biography.

dance is the least written about of the four elements” (Johnson 2015, 22). Reflecting this broader trend, most of the work on global hip-hop has focused on music, with dance receiving far less attention.<sup>25</sup> In China, however, dance was the first aspect of hip-hop culture to gain a large following and develop its own local scene. *Piliwu*, the Chinese version of hip-hop dance, emerged more than a decade before what globalization studies scholar de Kloet (2010, 69) marks as the “debut” of Chinese hip-hop music in the year 2000. Thus, as film scholar Xiao (2017, 205) writes, “It should be pointed out that dance is essential to understanding the history and formation of Chinese hip hop, although its role has been generally understated and neglected by critics who have music-centric biases.” In other words, to understand the early history of Chinese hip-hop culture, dance must be central to the narrative. Within this historical narrative of Chinese hip-hop dance, a figure who cannot be ignored is Michael Jackson.

While Jackson is usually not regarded as an icon of hip-hop in the U.S., it has been acknowledged that his music and dance both adopted elements of hip-hop, forming a new synthesis that also drew on other sources. In an analysis of Jackson’s music, for example, Fisher (2009, 15) finds in “Billie Jean” a fusion of musical sounds that included “crunching snares ... hijacked from hip hop” as well as “[James] Brownian ... vocal tics” and “the *ooohs* shotgun-divorced from doo-wop’s street corner community.” In her study of the development of Jackson’s dance style, Pugh (2015, 244) locates a wide range of possible influences, among them James Brown, Jackie Wilson, Motown singing groups, Black dancers on *Soul Train*, Fred Astaire, Bob Fosse, Don Campbell, and more. Two dance moves that Jackson helped make popular on a global scale were the robot and the moonwalk, both of which came out of the California-based “funkstyles” tradition of popping and locking, one of the three main components of hip-hop dance (Pugh 2015; Johnson 2015).<sup>26</sup> According to Johnson

(2015, 24), a scholar of hip-hop and dance studies, “[P]op star icon Michael Jackson trained with Bruno ‘Pop N Taco’ Falcón for over fifteen years, ultimately inspiring Jackson’s signature dance style including the ‘moonwalk’—which was in fact a popping move called ‘the backslide.’” Jackson also hired hip-hop dancers to perform in many of his music videos.

For U.S. audiences, Jackson represented what hip-hop historian Chang (2005, 418) calls “a softened” version of hip-hop culture—a Black singer and dancer who could appear on MTV and Pepsi commercials when most others could not—but in mid-1980s China there was no “harder” version for Jackson to be compared against. Jackson himself embodied one of the strongest representations of urban youth rebellion available in China in 1984, when he first entered popular consciousness.<sup>27</sup> Jackson’s style of performance represented a completely new experience for Chinese audiences, and it significantly pressed the boundaries of what was considered artistically and socially acceptable. In 1983, one year before Jackson’s first references in Chinese mainstream media, a nation-wide campaign had been launched against what was known as “spiritual pollution,” or cultural practices that were deemed morally corrupt or dangerous, often specifically targeting new types of culture being imported from the West (MacFarquhar 1997, 356–60). The campaign had deemed the following to be unacceptable behaviors for musical performers: holding the microphone in one’s hand while singing, emitting breathing sounds while singing, combining dance and singing or singing with back-up dancers, appealing to the audience through flirtation or sensational acts, or selling sexuality through costumes and movement (Yang 2009, 22). Jackson’s mixture of dance and singing was especially novel in the Chinese context. As one critic recalled, “For Chinese audiences, [Jackson] presented a previously unknown mixture of the auditory and the visual, proving that popular singers can have the dance technique of dancers” (Zhou 2009, 39). While Jackson’s performances were also quite innovative and provocative in the context of U.S. popular music and dance—particularly the large extent to which Jackson incorporated dance into his music videos (Billman 2002)—the sense of newness was greatly compounded in China by the fact that Western rock and pop music as a whole were all unfamiliar.<sup>28</sup> As a Chinese writer reflected, “Knowing about Michael Jackson was like opening the door to another world, a world of showing off, venting, even of rebellion and temptation” (Yang 2009, 23).

From the beginning, Chinese print media portrayed Jackson as an essentially transgressive figure whose appeal came in part from his association with rebellion, controversy, mystery, and his ability to contain opposites. The first mention of Jackson in a mainstream Chinese newspaper, appearing in the *People’s Daily* in July, 1984, located the origins of his music in the U.S. blues tradition, which was described as both a Black response to the oppression of slavery and a style that had been adopted as a music of resistance against fascism (Jing 1984).<sup>29</sup> A month later, a short article about Jackson published in a Shanghai magazine described his recent U.S. Victory Tour as “the largest and most disorderly concert tour in rock music history” (Wenhui 1984). After describing Jackson waving to audiences with a “black-gloved hand,” the same article concluded: “The black glove already became his symbol, but some believe it’s not something that youth should imitate. As an American youth idol, Michael Jackson has already started many debates.” Another Chinese account of Jackson’s U.S. Victory Tour appeared at the end of 1984, complete with six photographs depicting his clothing, dance moves, brightly lit concert stage, and crowds. The author described the scene as follows:

On stage, there are electronic monsters in bizarre shapes and other special effects machines, lights, and robots, creating all sorts of fantastical scenes. It makes people feel terrified, but it also attracts them to keep looking. Jackson on stage, with his soft and childlike voice, his mysterious image, and crazy rhythms, is like an “extremely strong tornado” causing the hearts of thousands upon thousands of American youth to tremble. (Bao 1984, 26)

After recounting Jackson's background and record-breaking successes, the author summarized Jackson's boundary-crossing nature using a quintessentially Chinese metaphor: "People believe that 'he combines all the extremes of yin and yang: White-Black, man-woman, strange-coordinated, adult-child, sexy-familial, mixed into one body'" (Bao 1984, 27). By 1988, there were rumors that Jackson was planning a tour in China (Xu 1988). When the tour did not materialize, many believed it was because Jackson's requests were too challenging to the authorities. A widely circulated story later was that Jackson had requested and been given permission to perform on Tian'anmen Square, but that the discussions broke down when he further requested to have his portrait hung over Mao Zedong's while he was performing (Li 2009, 36; Yang 2009; Ping 2009, 8).

Two historical convergences took place during the 1980s that brought Michael Jackson and U.S. hip-hop dance styles to China at the same time, causing them to become intertwined in China's first hip-hop movement: the *piliwu* dance fad that lasted from the mid-1980s through the mid-1990s. The first convergence happened in the summer of 1984, when Chinese dancers creatively imported new U.S. popular dance styles they had seen in Hong Kong, as China's embrace of entrepreneurialism encouraged the emergence of an underground commercial performance economy, and Michael Jackson began to appear for the first time in the Chinese mainstream media. The second convergence took place in 1988, when *Breakin'* was shown nationwide in Chinese theaters, *Bad* became the first Jackson album to be distributed officially in China, and China's first locally produced hip-hop dance film, *Rock Youth*, appeared in theaters. The compounding of these events with a generational rift that identified youth rebellion with participation in Western popular music and dance culture led many Chinese to experience hip-hop dance and Michael Jackson as a shared cultural phenomenon.<sup>30</sup> Tao Jin, a real-life dancer who achieved temporary popstar status in China through his role in the *piliwu* movement and the success of *Rock Youth*, was a key figure in both these convergences who appears to have felt a strong personal affinity with Michael Jackson. Recalling their conversations leading to the creation of *Rock Youth*, Zhang Ping (personal communication, 20 November 2009) recalled that "Tao Jin and I really admired Michael Jackson. We had a dream to create a film that would overcome him. It sounds crazy now, but that was our goal." The fact that *Rock Youth* referenced Jackson in so many ways makes sense if we consider that Jackson was commonly associated with youth, rebellion, and transgression in China during the mid-1980s and that his dances had been a major inspiration for the *piliwu* movement, as well as its leader and local embodiment, Tao Jin.

Tao's biography, published posthumously by his wife in 2000, includes numerous visual references linking Tao to Jackson. In one photograph, Tao sits at home on his couch wearing sunglasses while listening to music on earphones. Although he is examining two unmarked CDs, a full-sized LP cover of Michael Jackson's *Thriller* sits on Tao's lap (Figure 8). The way the record is propped upright between Tao's knees with Jackson's youthful face staring directly at the camera makes it too perfectly staged to be anything other than an intentional self-portrait of Tao with his idol (Zhao 2000, 34). Another photograph shows Tao in mid-dance looking like a Jackson impersonator. He is wearing a studded leather jacket, sequined fingerless black gloves and Jackson's iconic combination of high-water black pants with black loafers and white socks, poised in a sideways toe perch. Head down, knees bent, hips forward, toes curled under, and one arm up, Tao's body references Jackson's through a clear act of choreographic citation (Zhao 2000, 55). Finally, a still from one of Tao's later music videos "Dance of the Love God" (*Aishen feiwu*) shows possible inspiration from Jackson's 1987 music video *Smooth Criminal*. Six men in suits and fedoras dance in



**Figure 8.** Tao Jin poses at home with Michael Jackson *Thriller* album. Internet image.

formation behind Tao, who is dressed in an off-white suit just like Jackson's in the video. Suggesting the choreography in Jackson's video, the dancers throw their right arms straight out to the side, their ties and coats fly out just after a spin, and their eyes stare mysteriously into the camera (Zhao 2000, 137). From these images, it seems clear that Tao's interest in emulating Jackson did not wane over time, but remained throughout his life. Ultimately, Tao himself was an agent of Jackson's early impact in China. Although Jackson never performed in China, Tao and his friends brought parts of him there and gave them local lives through their performances.

### **Coda: mourning Jackson in a Chinese hip-hop studio**

In the early morning hours of 26 June 2009, news reached Beijing that Michael Jackson had died. A pulse of shock and sadness shook China's communication media as thirty-somethings around the country lamented the passing of their youth idol. One of the groups most impacted by Jackson's death in China was the generation who had grown up with *piliwu*. However, it also impacted China's contemporary hip-hop dancers, the practitioners of what is known today as "street dance" (*jiewu*). This is what the Chinese hip-hop dance has been called since the late 1990s and early 2000s, when the *piliwu* was replaced by newer, "more authentic" forms of hip-hop dance imported through Japan and South Korea or via videos circulating on the Internet (Zhang 2001; Xiao 2017). Xiao Chuan (b. 1972), an early proponent of China's street dance movement, is one of the few people who crossed the divide from *piliwu* to street dance. He was the youngest person I met in Beijing who still remembered Tao Jin.

In the summer of 2009, I was taking daily hip-hop classes in Xiao Chuan's studio, Ji Chuan Tian Shang, located just down the street from the Beijing Dance Academy.<sup>31</sup> Thus, Xiao Chuan was the first person who notified me of Jackson's death. I received a strange early morning text message, unusual for Xiao Chuan who was normally a night owl. When I went to the studio that day, I met with an unfamiliar scene. Instead of the usual bass vibrating music and packed-in bodies practicing routines of waves, popping, and inversions, the mirror-lined room was dark and still. The woman at the front desk told me that all regularly scheduled classes had been canceled for the day. As I peeked in, I saw the usual crew was there, but they were sitting hunched on couches in the lobby, not talking. Xiao Chuan, who talked even through his smoke breaks, sat quietly in his oversized hoody and sweats staring at the ground. "I can't dance today," Xiao Chuan explained, "the person who influenced me most is gone."



## Notes

1. Video accessed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zsoj2jAEXvs>. *Rock Youth* had the largest number of pre-ordered copies of all Chinese films released in 1988 (Zhao 1989).
2. The term “*piliwu*” literally translates as “thunderbolt dance.” It first appeared in mainland Chinese periodicals in 1985, when Chinese dance critic Song Tiezheng distinguished between two popular dance styles that originated in the United States: “*disike*” (disco) and “*piliwu*.” Song (1985) provided the English term “break-dancing” as an equivalent for “*piliwu*,” following a tendency started in the U.S. media, which was based on a misunderstanding of the term “breaking” (Johnson 2015).
3. *Breakin’* was released in China under the name *Piliwu*. For a local review that confirms the film’s identity, see Du (1988).
4. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
5. On the *dakou* economy, see de Kloet (2005).
6. On the release of *Bad* in China, see Li (2009). On MTV in Hong Kong, see Funnell and Yip (2015).
7. On the cypher in U.S. hip-hop dance, see Schloss (2009).
8. Videos accessed via Youtube.
9. For an analysis of this performance and its significance in the development of Jackson’s dance style, see Pugh (2015, 239–315).
10. Although synchronized choreography performed in geometric formations was common in Chinese dance prior to this period, the specific triangle formation with rows of dancers and the star positioned at the center was not. See Wilcox (2019).
11. See *Rock Youth* 7:24, *Motown* 1:00 (hair comb); *Rock Youth* 7:52, *Motown* 4:13 (moonwalk).
12. See *Rock Youth* 34:40, *Thriller* 9:24. The dancers in *Rock Youth* move their hips in different directions from those in *Thriller*, but the overall effect of the movement is nearly identical.
13. See *Rock Youth* 34:52, *Thriller* 8:50.
14. See *Rock Youth* 34:05, *Beat It* 3:52.
15. See *Rock Youth* 35:13, *Beat It* 3:58 and 4:44.
16. Zhang’s name appears in the film’s credits as one of three choreographers, along with Tao Jin and Song Bo.
17. Here, I am following an established practice in hip-hop historiography, which aims to foreground the experiences and views of hip-hop practitioners themselves. See, for example, Fricke and Ahearn (2002); Chang (2005); Schloss (2009).
18. Hong Kong was incorporated into China in 1997, after 155 years of British rule. After 30 years of Cold War hostilities, Sino-U.S. diplomatic relations were established formally only in 1979, and the cultural exchange had grown slowly since then. This contrasts sharply with Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, which, as Cold War allies or sites of U.S. occupation, had had significant exposure to U.S. popular culture since the late 1940s.
19. In our interview, Zhang did not recall the English name of the film. However, he remembered the film was from the U.S. and featured a great deal of hip-hop dance and a young black male actor. *Breakin’* fits Zhang’s description and was showing in theaters in Hong Kong during the exact dates of the Dance Festival. See Cawthorne (1984).
20. By December 1984 advertisements also appeared for new book and television programs teaching social dances. See, for example, Wudao (1984).
21. According to Clark (2012, 86), *piliwu* was still extremely unfamiliar in Shanghai, China’s most westernized city, as late as 1986. The first discussions of breaking in Chinese print media appeared in the fall of 1984, although the term “*piliwu*” did not appear until 1985.
22. The term “*yezonghui*” was a revival of a word used in the 1930s to describe nightclubs in semi-colonial Shanghai (Field 2010).
23. Tao was a teacher at the People’s Liberation Army Military Arts Academy in Beijing, one of China’s top dance conservatories. Zhang taught at the Beijing Dance Academy.
24. Clark (2012, 106) notes that pirated tapes of songs from the *Thriller* album were circulating in China “not long after its release in 1983.”
25. Notable exceptions in the dance field include Fogarty (2007); Johnson (2011); McCarren (2013). Condry (2006) includes some analysis of dance, but it is not the focus.

26. Johnson (2015) defines the three main forms of hip-hop dance as follows: (1) California “funkstyles” represented by locking and popping, the latter of which includes “ticking, waving, tutting, strutting, roboting, and boogaloo”; (2) urban underground club dances developed in New York, Chicago, and California, which include lofting, waacking, and disco; (3) the New York City phenomenon of b-boying/b-girling or breaking (including uprocking), characterized by battles, stylized footwork, ground-work, spins, and freezes.
27. Cui Jian, China’s first local rock star, did not emerge on the national scene until 1986, and before that, the only major international pop or rock group to tour China was *Wham!* (George Michael before he went solo) in 1985 (Zhou 2007, 112–118). See also Jones (1992).
28. This explains also why the term “rock” (*yaogun*, as in the name of the film *Rock Youth*) was also used as a catch all for music and dance associated with pop, rock, disco, or hip-hop.
29. The article states that a blues song had been adopted as “an Ethiopian war cry against Italian invaders” during the 1930s (Jing 1984).
30. Another film that appeared in 1988, titled *Singing Star for a Night (yiye gexing)*, included a scene in which the main character used Michael Jackson music to dance *piliwu* in preparation for an audition (Hu 1988).
31. For videos of the studio in action, visit <https://tv.sohu.com/v/cGwvNTIzNDM1OC8xNDI2MTA5NC5zaHRtbA==.html>.

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## Special terms

<i>Yaogun qingnian</i>	摇滚青年	Bai Tao	白涛
Tao Jin	陶金	yezonghui	夜总会
piliwu	霹雳舞	yaogun	摇滚
disike	迪斯科	yiye gexing	一夜歌星
dakou	打口	Aishen feiwu	爱神飞舞
zouxue	走穴	jiewu	街舞
Zhang Ping	张平	Xiao Chuan	小船
Song Bo	宋波	Ji Chuan Tian Shang	吉川天尚
Yang Na	杨纳		

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