Hip Hop Dance

"Freestyle hip hop dance" evolved in New York City dance clubs in late 1984. According to Elite Force Crew's Buddha Stretch, freestyle hip hop developed following the stricter styles of b-boying and popping (Crew 2020). In the early years as hip hop dance was adopted in Vietnam, dancers used to refer to the style as rap dance (*nhảy rap*), whereas today they use the English term "hip hop" dance (*nhảy hip hop*), dissociating it from the term "freestyle." Freestyle, by contrast, is used to refer to the battle category in which most hip hop dancers participate. Many of the battles and competitions I witnessed in Vietnam focused on breaking, as it is the most popular style in Vietnam. However, breaking was always accompanied by a freestyle battle category in which dancers of all other styles – such as popping, locking, waacking – could participate.

"We didn't know that what we were doing was hip hop"

One of the main hip hop dance crews in Hanoi is New York Style (NYS) Crew, founded by Phuong Silver Monkey in 2010. The crew's name indicates a return to hip hop's New York City roots. One crew member explains that they chose the name to stand out from other dance crews in Hanoi, for whom the LA style was predominant. The crew's founder, Phuong Silver Monkey, is a contemporary with b-boy LionT, and has been involved in hip hop dancing since 1992. In fact, LionT invited him to join the Big Toe Crew. Phuong Silver Monkey decided to join as Big Toe was a large crew, and he wanted to expand his horizons. Training at the Soviet Vietnamese Friendship Palace, he eventually founded his own crew, the Fantastic Crew. Fantastic Crew consisted of six girls with Phuong Silver Monkey as their teacher. In effect, Hanoi's first hip hop crew was an all-female crew with a male leader. Like LionT, he promoted hip hop dance among young women. His students recall how they exercised

different dance moves, but at that time neither Silver Monkey nor the girls were aware that they were practicing hip hop dance. That was around 2008. At that time, b-boying, b-girling, and popping were already known in Vietnam, unlike hip hop dance. Silver Monkey researched dance moves on YouTube, and taught them to his female crew. While he was able to "copy" the motions quite precisely, he did not understand English. That is why they ended up renaming the movements on their own, not knowing that English terms already existed for the movement repertoire. A year later, when a new member entered the crew who was fluent in English, they researched the movements again, familiarizing themselves with English terms like smurfing, grooving, bouncing, and so on, which they had been practicing all along. They realized that what they were doing was part of hip hop dance's foundations.

This narrative shows quite well how information and knowledge in the community of practice is not only shared and transferred from old timers to the newcomers, but newcomers can bring in new knowledge and expand the scope of collective knowledge. Recognizing the standardized corporeal vocabulary, they were able to link and scale up to global hip hop discourse. As a result, newcomers not only assume a marginal position in social learning, but they can come to occupy a central role, for example, by contributing skills that others lack, such as knowledge of the English language. Another turning point in their growing awareness of hip hop was when the crew finally joined a competition for teenagers. Through exchange with others, and by making their practices public beyond their own crew, they realized that what they were doing was hip hop. The narrative of how they got to know hip hop illustrates learning processes within the community of practice. Embodied knowledge is distributed throughout the world in online tutorials – even reaching places that appear to be marginal to hip hop – and shared *in situ* through face-to-face interaction, as dancers form groups in particular times and spaces. Although dance instruction is often mediated by a discursive communicative repertoire, verbal language is not the only mode of conveying dance, as beats and rhythms, clapping hands, flicking fingers and tongues are also key kinesthetic modalities of communication. As Liberman (2013) shows, non-verbal forms of communication are crucial to guiding people's actions and creating order where there appears to be disorder.

While participating in Mai's hip hop class, for example, I quickly realized that although I was able to follow most of her verbal instructions in Vietnamese, the key to learning the motions was to carefully watch her, mimic her movements, feel the beats and music, and to let go. Accordingly, it is not

even necessary to know the (discursive) language of instruction while learning hip hop dance. Mimesis or the mimicking of bodily practices is sufficient to begin learning. However, in order to participate in global hip hop discourses, both bodily and linguistically, it is necessary to know specific vocabulary, and to use it correctly. The need to master rap and dance vocabulary is ultimately linked to processes of standardization, for instance, the naming of body motions helps to create cooperation among actors from different social worlds (Star and Griesemer 1989). Evidence for such standardization processes is the use of English language crew names, such as Big Toe, New York Style, Wonder Brothers/Sisters, and so forth.

Another form of standardization in hip hop is the battle mode. To Phuong Silver Monkey, the battle is constitutive of hip hop dance. However, he emphasizes that it is not just about fighting each other, but that the most important outcome of the battle is that competitors become friends again. In this view, Silver Monkey shares an intimate understanding of the battle with Alien Ness, member of the New York City Breakers and Rocksteady Crew. Ness considers the battle as elementary to hip hop together with b-boying and b-girling:

> "Through battle, b-boys and b-girls learn to use humble discipline as a foundation for arrogant creativity. They transform precision and finesse into symbols of raw aggression. They attack without mercy yet still see their opponents as distinct and valuable human beings. Ultimately, battling teaches its disciples how to use style to reconcile opposing forces, a skill that may well be at the heart of hip hop itself." (Schloss 2006: 21)

For Silver Monkey, hip hop's imperative is not to triumph over the other, but to be unique and unrivalled. More than that, hip hop is about helping each other and it should be joyous (Hanyi 2014). Consequently, hip hop is not just about mimicking movement, but making progress in developing the self and community.

Finally, Silver Monkey is one of the few hip hop pioneers in Hanoi who still keeps dancing, while mostly making his living from teaching classes. Many dancers of his generation, by contrast, quit dancing altogether or changed their focus. LionT, for instance, opened an academy and focuses on teaching and arranging choreographies, while only occasionally participating in battles. Silver Monkey explains that it was quite normal for older dancers in other countries to keep dancing, while opening studios and participating in workshops to teach the younger generations. He is quite positive that Vietnamese dancers will also embark on this road in the future.

Generally, Silver Monkey believes that hip hop has a bright future in Vietnam. In a 2014 interview with Dep Online, he was asked to assess the development of hip hop in Vietnam over the last 20 years. He recalls how, in the beginning, they tried to "imitate the American dancers, who went outside to dance in the streets." At that time, however, like their American counterparts in the mid-1980s, Vietnamese dancers were expelled from parks by the police for dancing in public. In the U.S., authorities believed that dance circles disturbed the public order and considered them to be gathering sites for criminals (Johnson 2014). Today, Silver Monkey says that it is much more easy-going (*thoải mái*) to gather and dance in public spaces, for example, in the park. Already by 2008, when I interviewed dancers from the MiNi Shock and Fit Crews, they explained that it was no problem to dance with loud music and late into the evening in front of the Ly Thai To statue. Although the site is monitored by guards in charge of maintaining public order, public dancing did not appear to disturb the well-monitored urban order (*trật tự đô thị*). On the contrary, the guards regularly came to watch the young men and women who assembled to dance. Moreover, hip hop dance in public seems to be accepted by society at large, since elderly people also like to participate and many parents send their children to hip hop class. Silver Monkey concludes the interview suggesting: "Society has developed, people's thinking has become much more open-hearted" (Hanyi 2014). Consequently, he is rather optimistic about hip hop's future in Vietnam, stressing that hip hop will no longer be considered "marginal" (*ngoài lề*) but will rather become recognized.

Infrastructuring work: crews and events

In order to create a wider public and larger community for hip hop, infrastructuring work is essential. Infrastructuring can be achieved through establishing crews, organizing dance events, and most importantly by attaining public visibility, for example, by training in public space or representing a crew at dance battles. Fantastic Crew first practiced indoors in a rented room, but only expanded and recruited new members when they moved outdoors to the Lenin Monument, where male dancers also joined in. As the group became larger, Phuong Silver Monkey founded the New York Style Crew in 2010. Consequently, the public visibility and tangibility of dance practice were essential to expanding the community and raising awareness of hip hop among the urban public. While some of the female members of Fantastic Crew continued

with New York Style, others quit in order to focus on careers beyond dancing. This is why the recruitment of new members is essential for the crew to survive. Originally coming from other hip hop dance styles, Nguyet and her husband Bi Max joined the New York Style Crew more recently. They are aware that to some onlookers, the New York Style Crew appears old, as Phuong Silver Monkey was born in 1981, while some other crew members were born between 1988 and 1990. Currently, the crew has more than ten members, only two of them female. Apart from Nguyet, Thanh Phuong is the other female member, whom Nguyet refers to as "elder sister." Against this background, they consider themselves the "new generation," with Bi Max acting as the crew's vice leader. Together with Silver Monkey, they put a lot of effort into developing and rejuvenating the crew, including the recruitment of new and younger dancers. Toward this end, Silver Monkey invites kids around ten or eleven years old to practice with the crew. The old timers are in charge of showing the kids how to develop their skills. Rather than an individual mentor-mentee relationship, however, legitimate peripheral participation appears to be a collective effort, requiring the involvement of all the crew members. The teacher-student relationship is also marked linguistically, as the children call Nguyet and Bi Max "teacher" (*cô*, *thầy*), while they refer to the children as "child" (*con*).

To recruit new members and raise awareness about the New York Style Crew among hip hop dancers, Nguyet and Bi Max consider it necessary to represent New York style Crew at battles. However, to date, there are not many hip hop battles as suggested in the introduction to this chapter, but rather events that feature a freestyle category in which hip hop dancers can participate. But the difficulty with freestyle battles, Nguyet suggests, is the music that the DJ plays during the battle. Most DJs not only play hip hop music, but also other genres that are difficult for many younger crew members to dance to. That is the reason why only Nguyet and Bi Max currently participate in freestyle battles, as the husband and wife team came from waacking and breaking styles, and are used to moving to different beats. By participating in freestyle battles, they thus represent New York Style Crew.

Representation is another important value of hip hop worldwide. Individual dancers, rappers, or graffiti writers represent their crew, which in turn may represent an entire neighbourhood, community, urban quarter, city, or – at international battles – an entire country. While New York Style Crew typically represents Hanoi, it represents Vietnam in international dance competitions, such as the Singapore Arena Dance Competition or the Juste Debout preselection in Bangkok, Thailand. The Singapore Arena is part of a series

of worldwide events. According to the Arena website: "The mission of Arena is to create a platform that, through the medium of dance, will connect cultures across the world, promote creative expression, and improve the lives of artists." The platform was founded by the The Kinjaz dance crew from Los Angeles together with the dance studio Sinostage from Chendu, China. In 2017, the New York Style Crew, together with Mai Tinh Vi, submitted a video to the Singapore Arena competition, and were invited to represent Vietnam at the international event. For this event, the crew developed its own choreography, demonstrating Vietnamese cultural elements. They danced to Vietnamese music, wearing costumes resembling the dress of Buddhist monks, embodying a poem by Vietnamese writer, Xuan Dieu. Known for his love poems, short stories, and literary criticism, Xuan Dieu is an important representative of modern Vietnamese literature. In 1943, he joined the League for the Independence of Vietnam (*Việt Nam Độc Lập Đồng Minh Hội*), or the Viet Minh, and promoted resistance against the French colonial regime in his writings. Accordingly, their choice to incorporate Vietnamese literature and music into their dance choreography indicates a politics of belonging and representation on an international stage. Accordingly, for New York Style Crew "to represent" in Singapore not only meant to represent their crew or the city of Hanoi, but to show to the world that hip hop in Vietnam is alive.

At both the local and national levels, another form of infrastructuring work is in the organization of hip hop events in Hanoi, with the aim of increasing public visibility and pulling hip hop out of its marginal position in Vietnam. A major hip hop dance event organized by New York Style Crew in Hanoi is called *Nhiệt*, which they organized for the first time between 2011 and 2012. As Mbaye (2014) has pointed out with her reference to peer production, hip hop artists engage in vertical integration, for example, by organizing events that serve as local hubs and markets for hip hop. With Nhiệt, the members of New York Style Crew sought to share their passion for hip hop dance with others, to build social relationships, and to expand their social horizons. Nhiệt literally translates as heat, and thereby references one of five elements of fire, earth, air, water, and ether from the *I Ching*. B-Boy Alien Ness combines b-boy with fire philosophies to reference the dancers' intensity, their heat, and how they come into the dance (Schloss 2006: 22). Put differently, for Ness the dancer's attitude towards their opponent is the key to winning a battle, even more than their actual movements. The attitude of the dancer becomes even more pronounced as Thanh Phuong, one of the main organizers of Nhiệt, explains the meaning of the event's name, translating it as "hit from fire." Ian

New York Style Crew

Source: Facebook Whassup Sisters (2019)

Condry (2001), in his ethnographic account of hip hop in Japan, likewise puts the flame metaphor to work. He draws on the lyrics of Japanese rapper ECD, who employs a metaphor of the spark in describing the arrival of hip hop in Japan. Overall, Condry (2001: 225) suggests that hip hop never travels between locales, but suggests that "it is the spark and the local fuel together that make the fire burn with its own particular range of colors." Condry elaborates that although popular music tends to travel on the winds of global capitalism, the local fuel will ultimately determine whether it burns or dies out. The Nhiệt

event was in fact an attempt to ignite passion for hip hop among the public in Hanoi, and to create a larger national hip hop community.

The Nhiệt event in Hanoi was organized three years in a row, bringing together hip hop dancers and b-boys and b-girls, as the latter still formed the majority in Vietnam. The event had two battle categories: b-boy 1 vs. 1 and hip hop 1 vs. 1. The first event took place in a park, and the second time the event was held in a mall. On the third occasion, the NYS Crew invited Henry Link, founding member of the internationally known Elite Force Crew from Brooklyn. Henry Link is an old timer of hip hop who got engaged in locking, popping, and breaking soon after the styles appeared in the U.S. He became popular with his dance style in Michael Jackson and Mariah Carey music videos. One reason for inviting Henry Link was that it is hard for Vietnamese dancers to participate in battles abroad, mostly owed to a lack of financial resources but also due to visa restrictions. Accordingly, NYS crew aims to create a larger public and community for hip hop in Vietnam by inviting international icons like Henry Link to Hanoi. In fact, a lot of former dancers, who had already quit dancing altogether, joined the event with Henry Link (Hanyi 2014). However, after Henry Link's appearance in Hanoi, Nhiệt needed to be put on hold due to a lack of organizational capacity. In 2018, when I was visiting Hanoi, Thanh Phuong explained that she was too busy with work to organize the event this year. While her job kept her from organizing the event this time, the skills she acquired from her job helped her organize the initial event.

Apart from organizational skills, financial resources were another issue. The whole event was pulled off by the New York Style Crew alone, and their major aim was to create a dance floor as a commons of sorts, in which anybody could participate independently of financial resources. While it has become rather common in Vietnam, like elsewhere around the world, to seek sponsors for larger sports events, there was little support for a hip hop event. Phuong Silver Monkey reflects that people might be willing to spend millions for a football match, since football is really popular in Vietnam. But what, he asks, do people get out of a football game? Hip Hop culture attracts young people, provides them with inspiration and joy from dancing. "Like rock, people who love hip hop have passion, and they depend on the passion of those who are able to maintain and make every effort of a difficult life" (Hanyi 2014). Another reason they refused to look for financial sponsors, was that sponsored battles were not "real." A real battle, for them, meant concern for the participants, the dance floor, the sound, and lighting. On the contrary, if a brand sponsored a battle, the sponsor would only be concerned about the number of participants

and spectators, and how many celebrities participate, in order to advertise their products. Along similar lines, Mai Tinh Vi explains that sometimes there are larger events like the TV show *Vũ Điệu Xanh*, sponsored by businesses and brands. She attended one such event sponsored by an ice cream company, but emphasized that "it didn't feel like [a real battle], you know." When asked why it did not feel right to her, she explains that no one even started to cypher at the event. In the end, a lot of dancers agreed to keep Nhiệt small, rather than organizing a large event supported by commercial industries.

Mai Tinh Vi's and Silver Monkey's rationale indicate an important shared value in the global hip hop community of practice, which is "keeping it real," in other words maintaining authenticity. Rather than having a commercially sponsored event and getting a lot of attention, members of community prefer smaller events so that all those interested can participate in hip hop. Thus, the inclusiveness of Nhiệt was a major priority, while another goal was to promote hip hop culture to society at large. While Silver Monkey is optimistic about the future development of hip hop in Vietnam, he is mostly concerned that hip hop becomes publicly visible and accepted: "Most important is that people see us when we convey our message, and that they accept and understand it." This overarching goal motivates their use of a communicative repertoire that is also legible outside their community of practice. For instance, Phuong Silver Monkey suggests that flash mobs fitting well with Vietnamese culture, and that they make use of language to convey their gentle message, such as in idioms of peace and love (*tình yêu hòa bình*). While peace and love may be reminiscent of a hippie-esque discourse, the metaphor of peace (*hòa bình*) is a central value to the revolution and in Vietnamese nation-building overall. For instance, Hanoi is referred to as the capital of peace (*thủ đô hòa bình*), a term frequently employed on propaganda posters and flags, such as those welcoming visitors from the International Noi Bai Airport, as they cross the bridge over the Red River. This point once again hints at the embodiment of revolutionary values by postwar Vietnamese youth, expressing them in their own ways and in popular culture.

Almost five years after the last Nhiệt event, the crew organized the fourth round of Nhiệt in October 2019. In the meantime, more and more hip hop dance events have emerged in Vietnam's major cities, such as Floorkillers, Hanoi Unity, Together Time in Ho Chi Minh City, and the Hue Streets Festival. Since 2018, the Red Bull Battle has been held in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. Even during the COVID-19 crisis, dancers remain active, seeking to create alternative formats to the conventional face-to-face battle. Under the govern-

ment-mandated lockdown that began on 1 April 2020 for 15 days, Mai Tinh Vi organized the Monsta Corona Freestyle Online Battle, which references her own label, Monstarock. On April 6, the registration list for the preliminaries was posted on Instagram. Participants were divided into three categories, each comprised of 26 to 27 dancers. Each category was further divided into groups of three, and each group was assigned a different track number. The track numbers were posted beneath the list, including a link to Google Drive where they could access the music.

The procedure for participating is as follows: Each dancer uses the music track assigned to them to record their dance round. The video is then sent to the organization's email by 5 p.m. on Monday, 6 April. The judges watch each video for one minute and then choose the best five dancers from the group to join the top 16. The last slot would be decided jointly by all three judges. Following the prelims, the top 16 dancers is announced by 10 p.m. on 6 April. The prelims are followed by a live stream at 1 p.m. on 7 April. From the top 16 dancers, eight battles are selected randomly. The post uses the hashtags: #monstarock #onlinebattle #monstacorona #freestyle #dance #proGacademy # hiphop #housedance #locking #breaking #popping #benphan #jokerrock #mcbuck #xClown #maitinhvi. The hashtags make several references, including to the COVID-19 crisis, diverse street dance styles, institutions and individuals prominent in the Vietnamese hip hop scene.

The eldest sister – Chi Bao

Thanh Phuong, aka Bao, is a member of New York Style Crew. Born in 1988, Thanh Phuong holds a degree from the University of Law on Nguyen Chi Thanh Street in Hanoi. She emphasizes that she will never be a lawyer, as she has never worked as such despite her educational background. Instead, she currently works for a major Vietnamese real estate company in marketing, where she has recently been promoted and now leads her own team. On the job, she has to travel quite a bit, both within Vietnam and abroad to other Asian countries. That is why I was quite lucky to meet with her during a lunch break. Stepping outside the office building into the newly developed My Dinh quarter, she wears a tight black dress, no tights, Wellington boots made from genuine leather, as well as a black coat. She is single with no children and lives together with her parents in Hanoi. Originally from Ha Long, her parents moved in with her after she got her first job in the capital. Before her

parents moved in, she had already lived on her own while studying at the university. She explains that she does not live with her parents because they expect her to do so, but rather because she herself does not like to live alone. Thanh Phuong is actually the only dancer I met with a fulltime job unrelated to dancing, and which requires her physical presence in headquarter building and in meetings with clients all around Vietnam and Asia. She explains: "You see, I am working for a real estate group, kind of a big group and I love my job and I love dancing too. But I have to arrange the time to bring dancing and working together." That is why she only participates in crew practice once a week, while other crew members regularly practice three times a week.

Thanh Phuong started dancing around 2007 or 2008, in her second year of university. Like her younger crew member Nguyet, she started off with waacking but she soon found hip hop more appealing. She began in the all-female Fantastic Crew, participated in Silver Monkey's open class at the Lenin Monument, and subsequently became a member of New York Style Crew. Thanh Phuong is very fond of the Fantastic and NYS Crews, as the first hip hop dance crews in Hanoi. To her, hip hop is about mixing styles and a way of finding herself: "You can make some uprock or downrock from b-boy, or some foil from locking, or some salsa move from house dance, and the music, too. So many elements from the other kind of music together. And that is why I love hip hop. It's like a kind of mixing, you can find some part of yourself in that."

Being 30 years old at the time of the interview, Thanh Phuong is slightly older than the other female dancers I met. Aware of her seniority in the hip hop community, she also takes responsibility for the community. She appreciates and encourages the skills and styles of her younger peers, and has been dancing with Nguyet and Bi Max for two years. Although both of them only recently started in hip hop, she recognizes their quality and quick development. She admires Mai for her personal style and values how she got into hip hop so early, while still in school. She collaborated with Mai Tinh Vi, participating in a 2 vs. 2 hip hop battle, and in New York Style Crew's choreography at the Singapore Arena hip hop event, representing Vietnam.

The younger peers, in turn, refer to Thanh Phuong as eldest sister, *chị cả Bao*. They appreciate her early involvement in hip hop, and her commitment to the hip hop community. During the King of Basic (K.O.B) event organized at Last Fire Studio in summer 2020, the organizers invited Bao to serve as a judge. The New York Style Crew proudly announced her on their Instagram and Facebook pages as: "Our eldest sister, founder of 'Nhiệt', of 'King

Of Basic K.O.B': Although focusing on her work for some time now, Bao never stopped to support and help the young hip hop generation. Thank you for joining K.O.B this year. RESPECT ♥♥" (Facebook King of Basic, 7 July 2020). The hip hop community acknowledges her support, as she uses cultural and social capital she acquired from her job to organize hip hop events in Hanoi, as she explains: "They like what I am doing because everything is just for our community, no advertising or anything like that, we like it smaller". For example, she writes funding proposals, while carefully monitoring the number of sponsors supporting the event. She only looks for sponsors to balance the co-organizers' personal financial resources, and to keep the event affordable to members of the hip hop community. Apart from Nhiệt, she organizes the Hanoi Unity event. Hanoi Unity is one of the first events in Hanoi to bring together all of hip hop's four elements, DJing, MCing, graffiti, and dancing. Unity, then, signifies the idea of unifying otherwise distributed communities of practice in Hanoi under the banner of hip hop culture. Thanh Phuong organized Hanoi Unity in 2015, which took place in a wedding plaza on Lang Ha Street. She engages in infrastructuring work by archiving the events through video recordings, and distributing them via social media platforms, such as Facebook or YouTube. In this way, the events become searchable and visible online. Recently, she has been thinking about creating an online platform to connect Vietnamese dancers with international dancers. In her wording, she differentiates between "us," as the Vietnamese hip hop community, and "the world." She thereby references the divide between centres of hip hop, like the U.S., and peripheries such as Vietnam, recollecting how much money and effort it took them to invite a renowned dancer like Henry Link to Hanoi. To create a platform for dancers from all over the world to connect and share experiences, she is considering developing a phone app. While showing me videos on her phone inside a noisy lunch counter, she says: "That's a beautiful moment. (…) That's the reason why I wanna organize this kind of event, because of that moment." The video artefact triggers her affective relationship with hip hop culture. Accordingly, information artefacts contribute to infrastructuring work, as they archive events, ephemeral practices, and even evoke affective reactions by those who both watch and share such videos, which convey their passion for dance.

Her attempts at infrastructuring work and commitment to the community also have implications for her career. In her future-making, Thanh Phuong is quite practical, aiming to create synergies between her job and her passion for dancing. She is aware that she cannot have both at the same

time, holding a leading position in a large company while practicing hip hop several times a week. That is why she hopes to use her skills, knowledge, and social networks to open her own studio. To do so, however, she needs to acquire financial resources. Consequently, she developed a two-step-plan: First, she started saving part of the money, which she earns from her job. Second, she plans on writing a business plan to find investors. However, while talking about the capital she needs to pull this off, she emphasizes that she does this for the community, whereas for her, "money is just a tool."

Ban Rua – Wonder Sisters

Born in 1989, Hoang Phuong started practicing hip hop dance around 2008. That year she participated in her first hip hop class with Phuong Silver Monkey, although she had already gotten in touch with hip hop several years earlier, around 2004 while she was in high school. Growing up in Hanoi's Dong Da District, she went to Tran Phu school in Hoan Kiem District. In high school, each class was required to perform a show. Together with her friend, she chose to cover the Viet rap track, *Kỉ niệm trường xưa*, by the two male rappers, Lil Knight and Young UNO. The original track name is *Ký ức học trò*[14], and is about school and exams –recurrent themes in Asian rap, for instance, in South Korean rap. Since parents invest a lot of financial resources in their children's education, and education is highly valued, children find themselves under strong social pressure to perform well in school. Accordingly, Hoang Phuong and her friend took up this theme in their own context as high school students. Hoang Phuong rapped Lil Knight's part, while her friend performed Young UNO's part. During their performance, other students started to perform moves from popping and breaking. In that moment, their performance to the rap track functioned as a boundary object, connecting students who had not interacted before, recognizing each other via the word play of rap, and the bodily performance of popping and breaking.

In order to prepare for their performance, she practiced the dance routine with her classmate, who at that time frequently danced at the Soviet Vietnamese Friendship Palace. One day she took Hoang Phuong with her, which was where she met Thanh C.O., the leader of C.O. Crew, who became her first teacher. Thanh went to the same school, but she only got to know him

14 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xIy4iqDAUtM

at the palace. C.O. Crew practiced in the house of culture behind the Soviet Vietnamese Friendship Palace. After practice, Hoang Phuong would join the other dancers to hang out in the palace lobby out front. In the lobby, she saw Phuong Silver Monkey dancing alone. In that moment, she knew that he should become her teacher. When recounting that moment, the pitch of her voice rises. Finally, she and her friend asked him to train them. Phuong Silver Monkey started to teach six girls. That was when Thanh Phuong and Hoang Phuong met, as they were among the first members of the Fantastic Crew, which later became the New York Style Crew.

Hoang Phuong started dancing at high school, when she was still living with her parents. Her parents did not completely approve, but they did not address the issue, as they recognized that dancing made her happy. The awareness of and care for their child's happiness, even if hip hop dancing challenges social conventions, was also shared by Thanh Phuong's parents. Hoang Phuong emphasizes how engaging in hip hop as a teenager completely changed her life. She recalls how she used to be shy, but with hip hop in her life, she gained a lot of freedom. Meeting her today, one would hardly guess that she used to be shy, especially considering her entrepreneurial spirit. Having studied banking and finance at Thang Long University, Hoang Phuong found her own way to earn an income while dancing at the same time. At age 29, she has already tried out various jobs, but most of them were "not good" for her. Finally, some years ago, she quit her previous job and started to work as a fitness instructor for an international fitness studio chain in Hanoi's old quarter. Her new job allows her to make "good money," while being able to practice hip hop dance. Last year, she co-founded her own dance studio together with a well-known popping dancer. When asked if her background in finance and banking helped her establish her own studio, she responds that the studio is not for earning money. While she earns her money by teaching classes in different studios, her own studio serves as a creative space for those who share passion for hip hop. Apart from hip hop classes, under which she subsumes the styles of hip hop, popping, and waacking, her studio offers dance classes that also cater to wider audiences, ranging from urban choreography as well as a girl style or "sexy dance" class. She refers to the latter as being "a little sexy and just fun."

Dance classes that target women by advertising a specific body image – namely, that of an attractive, sexually desirable woman – is a phenomenon that can be observed widely throughout Hanoi. Ann Marie Leshkowich (2008) makes similar observations about Ho Chi Minh City's growing fitness culture,

arguing that body images become more important in processes of commodification. Fitness culture is particularly embraced by the growing urban middle class, for whom membership in fitness clubs indicates status and a cosmopolitan life style. Moreover, fitness club membership is a particular form of conspicuous consumption, as it signals that women are free from existential responsibilities like labour or house work, and have enough time and money at their disposal to spend time in fitness clubs. According to Leshkowich (2008: 49), this tendency toward bodily self-disciplining through the consumption of fitness goes hand in hand with the state's promotion of ideals about urban-middle class femininity. Whereas in the post-war era, such conspicuous consumption would have been considered decadent and bourgeois, today images of slim and sexually attractive women are circulated through media such as magazines, books, newspapers and the like. With economic liberalization, women's beauty is consistently marketed as being their own responsibility, for which they need to exert effort in shaping their bodies through physical activity or going on diet.

Such popular images of women in late socialist Vietnam can be read in multiple ways. First of all, the circulation of images is amended by beauty manuals, with one of them evoking the Confucian virtue of *dung*, calling on women to maintain an attractive outer appearance, which is considered appropriate to their economic and social status (Leshkowich 2008: 58). Second, such idealized femininity recalls the three-fold obedience of women, namely, in the relationship between husband and wife. In heterosexual relationships, women need to remain sexually attractive to their husbands. For this purpose, magazines purport to draw on scientific knowledge in providing advice for conjugal relations. Third, such imagined femininity is not unique to Vietnam. Suzanne Brenner (1999: 17) describes virtual and verbal images of women circulating through print media under the New Order in Indonesia. These images evoked the many incarnations of modern Indonesian women: "as happy consumer-housewife, devoted follower of Islam, successful career woman, model citizen of the nation-state, and alluring sex symbol." Apart from the specific time and place of New Order Indonesia, or post-reform Vietnam, such images of women circulate widely across the globe. That said, the adherence to such body images could be seen – for better or worse – as connecting with global imagery of female bodies.

Against this background, we can understand why dance studios offer both girl style or "sexy dance" classes as well as "hard" classes that cater to the demand for normalized bodies. This also provides an explanation for Hoang

Phuong's decision to offer a girl's class, as a strategy for balancing smaller revenues from the hip hop class. Hoang Phuong explains that most people in Vietnam are not acquainted with hip hop at all, thinking that hip hop is some kind of modern dance that will help them shape their bodies. But in her studio, they target participants who are really interested in and share a passion for hip hop's dance styles. The studio is called Wonder Dance Studio, and was founded by Hoang Phuong together with the famous popper CK Animation. Accordingly, the co-founders create synergies through their specialization in different styles, and by representing different sexes.

CK Animation leads his own popping crew, the Wonder Brothers. By contrast, Hoang Phuong created her own all-female hip hop crew, the Wonder Sisters. The choice of English crew names once again hints at standardization, and local efforts to connect with the global hip hop scene. In addition, the names signify a kind of corporate identity, as the crew names relate to their mother dance studio, the Wonder Dance Studio. The Wonder Sisters Crew consists of six girls who have been following Hoang Phuong for several years. There used to be seven, but one girl is currently abroad. The crew members were already her students before Hoang Phuong opened her studio. At that time, they were practicing outdoors in the park behind the Ly Thai To statue. In the pavilion, where I had encountered the first b-girls in 2008, Hoang Phuong offered two classes, one on hip hop foundations while the other was an open class. The aim of the open class was to create space for freestyling, as Hoang Phuong helped her students develop their own style. She emphasizes that what holds them together as a group is not only dance, but that they "share many things about life" in common. As a result, they spend a lot of time together, hanging out and practicing every night. Today, she sometimes still takes her team to the Lenin Monument to practice. However, she is very conscious about both the merits and limits of training in public space. Although Hoang Phuong started out dancing in public space, she acknowledges that it is impossible to train in the park forever, particularly if a dancer wants to advance. She cites the number of other park users, suggesting that parks are overcrowded these days and that it is hard to concentrate in public. In contrast to Nguyet, who emphasizes the sensory experience of dancing in public spaces, Hoang Phuong outlines the sensory methods of learning in the studio, saying that she needs to listen to and see her "posture" in the mirror. That is why she mostly exercises with her team in her studio. When practicing in studio, the crew only needs to pay a small amount of money for using the infrastructure, mainly for electricity. The intimate, and rather

informal, relationship between her and her students is also signified in their choice of pronouns, since her students address her as "older sister" (*chị*) rather than referring to her as "teacher" (*cô*). Hoang Phuong's offer for free hip hop classes in a public space aligns with the approaches of many other hip hop icons, who would offer free classes outdoors. Consequently, Hoang Phuong, like her teacher Phuong Silver Monkey, or the waackers WHOWL and C2Low whom I introduce in the next chapter, make their dance practices visible in the city and thus accountable to others. In this way, they introduce diverse dance styles into the public sphere, with the aim of recruiting newcomers into their community of practice.

Hoang Phuong is known in the hip hop community as Bạn Rùa. *Bạn* means friend indexing her participation in a community of peers. *Rùa* translates as tortoise. She received her alias from her first dance teacher, Thanh C.O. My first guess was that he gave her the name in reference to the power move called "turtle" from breaking, but she clarifies that he started calling her turtle due to the position of her neck while dancing. In Vietnamese culture, the tortoise is a sacred animal, indicating wisdom and longevity. For example, in Hanoi's Temple of Literature (*Văn Miếu*), the stone pillars, which display names of the men who passed their doctorate in the temple, stand on tortoises made from stone. Bạn Rùa has participated in multiple competitions and dance battles. While studying at university, she participated in her university's dance club, too. The members mainly practiced K-Pop, while Hoang Phuong and one other girl engaged in hip hop dancing. The club participated in the Vietnam University Games (VUG) under Hoang Phuong's leadership. In 2013, they first won the national round in Hanoi, and were invited to Ho Chi Minh City to battle with the winner of the Southern competition. They beat the team in Ho Chi Minh City to win the first Vietnam University Games ever. That the VUG tends toward hip hop is indicated by the fact that the first competition judges were Mai Tinh Vi and Phuong Silver Monkey. Apart from these national youth competitions, Hoang Phuong also participated in the national TV program, *Vũ Điệu Xanh*. She participated with a friend in a 2 vs. 2 battle, but they lost to a dancer from Ho Chi Minh City, the best dancer in Vietnam at that time. Hoang Phuong recalls that the format of the TV show was really tough.

While VUG and TV programs such as *Vũ Điệu Xanh* point to the commercialization and popularization of hip hop in Vietnam, I ask Hoang Phuong what hip hop means to her, recalling her earlier statement that most people in Vietnam do not know what hip hop really is. Explaining that she does her own internet research on the history and origin of hip hop, she says that she is

Hoang Phuong, Wonder Sisters Crew

Source: Hoang Phuong (2020)

aware that hip hop is a culture. She explains the origin of the term b-boy, as b-boys used to dance to breakbeat music created by DJs in the 1970s. She recalls how some years ago, she was even able to feel the culture in Hanoi during an event that combined graffiti and rap with dancing. She even started to rap

herself, but quickly realized that she was much better at dancing. That was some time ago, however, and both the culture and her feelings have changed. None of that matters to her, she explains, "because I love dance, I love dancing, I love hip hop dance. So, I just practice." That is why she decided to exclusively research hip hop dance. In her research, she found famous videos from the Elite Force Crew. The videos "Old school dictionary," "Middle school dictionary," and "New school dictionary" are retrievable on YouTube. In the videos Buddha Stretch and Henry Link, both members of Elite Force Crew and pioneers of hip hop dance show what they call the "step bible." The videos show the two male protagonists standing in public space, an alley or basketball court, and alternately demonstrating a particular dance move. The only verbal communication in the footage is when Henry Link and Buddha Stretch call out each movement's name. The names are all references to American popular culture, ranging from popular comic figures and actors to sports brands, such as Smurf, Reebok, Fila (old school), Steve Martin, Bart Simpson (middle school), Skeeter, Rabbit, and Harlem Shake (new school).

Hoang Phuong's narrative indicates a combination of different knowledges. On the one hand, she researches hip hop's history on the internet through information artefacts such as video recordings. On the other hand, she "feels" or at least used to feel the presence of hip hop culture in Hanoi. Accordingly, she combines knowledge retrieved through textual and audio-visual sources with her sensory knowledge. This process is also reflected in her assessment of the dance experience. For Hoang Phuong, dance is not only about movement or skills. On the contrary, she states that her dance experience is intimately linked to her life experience, as she draws on, combines, and uses all kinds of inspirations and daily experiences from her job, conversations, and various relationships in dancing. Ultimately, she considers dancing as a tool to express herself: "in a few years, maybe I will try other things to help me to express myself. I don't know. But this time it is only about dance. So, I don't think too much about that." Her sensory approach to dancing also informs her assessment of what it means to be a good dancer. Hoang Phuong often serves as a judge in local and national battles. She identifies two factors that are most important to her as a judge, first, emotions expressed with the body, and second, personal style. First, like so many other dancers I spoke to, she assesses the quality of a dancer not exclusively on their skills, but based on a feeling for the dancer with the music playing, as expressed with their bodies. She explains: "Sometimes I want the music to lift you." Second, dancing is not solely about skill and technique. There may be dancers who have

excellent technique, but if they lack their own style, she prefers dancers who may only perform basic moves but with a personal style and feeling.

Hip hop and gender

Thanh Phuong narrates how she longed to be like her teacher the first time she met him at the Soviet Vietnamese Friendship Palace: "I saw him, and I feel like I wanna be him. And I try to do things to make myself look like him. But on the way to being like him, I found so many ways to complete myself (…) I don't want to be him anymore. I want to be myself." Her willingness to imitate a man hints towards gender trouble, the queering of gender in hip hop. Her desire was not about becoming a man, or even behaving like a man. While she started to mimic her teacher, she soon found who she was herself. Thus, gender does not appear as a major factor determining status in the hip hop community of practice, at least when it comes to judging a dancer's quality. Age, for example, is always indicated by an adjective, as when younger dancers refer to their teachers as old, or when they subsume a group of dancers within a particular generation, like first or second generations. Some of the female dancers, like Mai, even seemed surprised about my inquiries into gender. Dancers gain recognition from their peers based on their attitude, style, or technique. Thanh Phuong explains: "It is one reason why they have a different style, because like I'd say dancing is some kind of language and a dancer can prove themselves by that language. And when they present themselves, they show their personality and the style, their activity." Gender, by contrast, is not explicitly discussed. When I asked Mai how she felt surrounded by men, and if she felt respected by them, Mai was astonished, answering that, of course, she received respect from her male peers. In fact, Thanh Phuong was the only dancer who raised the issue of gender herself. One of Thanh Phuong's initial statements when we first met was that female dancers have more power than men, since women have to be responsible for many more things in life than men. Consequently, female dancers are able to practice and blend many different motions and emotions, which, according to Thanh Phuong, is what hip hop is all about. Dancing is also about embodying different emotions, which is something women are better at, as she explains: "a man, he can't feel like a woman, but a woman can feel like a man. They're different. You can see Mai Tinh Vi. She is better than a man."

Although many female dancers did not cite gender as a major issue, gender nonetheless surfaces in a number of other ways. Thanh Phuong's quote shows that she draws on gendered idioms when she evaluates the quality of Mai's performance, raising her above the male dancers she knows. Similarly, gender is used in communicative repertoires on social media. Like Bao, Bạn Rùa was one of the four judges at the King of Basic in 2020. On their Facebook page, the K.O.B. organizers proudly presented her: "Today, we would like to present to you all the first judge of Hip Hop Newbie 1 versus 1, a girl whose name will definitely make male dancer's hearts distressed haha." (Hôm nay, chúng tôi xin được giới thiệu đến các bạn vị Judge đầu tiên của thê loại Hip Hop Newbie 1 vs 1, một cô nàng mà khi nhắc đến cái tên đã làm điêu đứng bao con tim của các chàng trai Dancer haha.)

Linguistically, the author of this post uses a double evocation of gender, by characterizing the female judge as *cô nàng*. Both syllables indicate the female sex, *cô* meaning young woman and *nàng* meaning she, her, or girl. What is more, the author refers to the crowd of dancers, which Rùa obviously stands out from, as *chàng trai Dancer*, denoting the male sex of the majority of dancers.