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ABSTRACT

Thailand's hip hop culture has developed at a very different pace to other prominent early adopters in the Asia-Pacific. Given its late adoption of hip hop in the 1990s through popular music labels (Kita Music, GMM Grammy, Bakery Music, RS Promotion), local DJs, MCs, aerosol artists and breakers negotiated hip hop in a relatively short period – pressurized under local market conditions and influenced by multidirectional flows of hip hop that extended across the region and beyond. Hip hop in Thailand now draws on local traditional cultural influences while also being inspired by an immense flow of expat workers, tourists and transient visitors annually. It is not surprising that immanently polycultural music cultures like hip hop manifest in a number of ways in the Thai context, stratified by degrees of appreciation of international aesthetics and reverence for local Thai cultural history and customs. While hip hop exists across the country, with prominent communities in Chiang Mai, Chon Buri and Udon Thani, it is most notably diverse and concentrated in Bangkok – the place it began and where many pioneers have created their legacy.

To understand hip hop in Thailand it is useful to consider the country's history of modernization over the last century. Despite the reformation of Siam as a multicultural demesne into a monocultural citizenship following a push of nationalism in the 1930s, the cultural history of Thailand has always been intertwined with cultures elsewhere (Baker et al. 2009). While Thailand has resisted colonization, the nation has also typically had issues with resisting imperial power relations in the region – briefly allying with Japan for a period of the Second World War. Since then the nation has been

KEYWORDS

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DJS/TURNTABLISTS

- Babyscash
- DJ Missile
- DJ Toru
- Fredrik Funk
- Jedie
- Maia Ma
- Riot Hunt
- Spydamonkee
- TNT
- Watdatfrog
- Zlexx

MUSICAL ARTISTS
AND BEAT-MAKERS

- Fiendsh
- Master Bogus
- Mighty
- Miwyu
- Ramin
- Réjizz
- Rhymekhamhaeng
- Scrimloops
- Subnet
- Sweet Mellow Bello
- Tekky

MUSIC
COLLECTIVES

- AroyD
- Bang Sue Electrix
- BKK Beat Cipher
- Flow Dojo
- The Foolest

1. Raptor was the localized effort to reproduce Kriss Kross in the Thai market.

a site of complex local–global development, giving way to inter-regional pathways and cultural flows into the country – prompted by significant foreign investment and physical flows of expats to the country from the 1960s (Baker et al. 2009). While the country celebrates its culturally chimerical music traditions given the various cultural influences on Thainess from across the region (Chinese, Indian, Cambodian, Loas, Burmese; see Baker et al. 2009; Marwah 2020; Miller 2010), Thai culture also sees influence from an immense flow of tourists and transient visitors annually (World Bank 2022). Indeed, the capital Bangkok is the most visited city in the world. It is not surprising that immanently polycultural cultures like hip hop manifest in a number of ways in the Thai context, stratified by degrees of appreciation of international aesthetics and reverence for local Thai cultural history and customs.

Thailand has developed hip hop at a very different pace from the early identifying hip hop cultures in the Asia-Pacific. Unlike places that first encountered hip hop through *Wild Style* (Ahearn 1982) and *Beat Street* (Latham 1984), Thailand was never privy to a local release of these influential texts, nor a market to sell them to. Japan was the only nation in Asia in the 1980s which saw an official cinematic release of these globally renowned texts (IMBD n.d.a, n.d.b), whereas English-speaking countries like Singapore received these exports directly from the United States or from exchanges with returned travellers. Instead, Thailand’s hip hop development appeared much later forming in the early 1990s. Unlike the waves of pop-culture that swept across the Americas and Europe in the 1980s, hip hop’s local development made its way into the mainstream through popular music labels Kita Music, GMM Grammy, Bakery Music and RS Promotion. Bangkok, saw an intensified pace of cultural production as expat workforces grew and the middle class in Thailand expanded, making pathways for other flows of hip hop cultural products viable for exporters. American record stores like Tower Records and television programming provided by MTV were instrumental in diffusing both global (e.g. American and Japanese) and local Thai hip hop. These early providers of hip hop cultural flows were critical for shaping local Thai hip hop identities and practice in a process that always negotiated the local by looking outwards to globally diffuse aesthetics.

Early forms of hip hop music emerged most notably through *Original Thai Rap* (1993) by Technical Knock Out (TKO, ทีเคโอ) and Joey Boy’s 1995 self-titled album. TKO’s work brought with it an appreciation for existing hip hop aesthetics from the United States. Their approach was inherently international, with the four founding members hailing from Thailand, the United Kingdom, Japan and Canada. In contrast to their short tenure in the industry, Joey Boy’s production, subject matter and vocal flows, continued to diversify the musical elements, tropes and instrumentation present in hip hop’s emerging localization during the 1990s. These early works are also part of a larger history of redefining western music forms through a local Thai cultural lens by way of *phleng Thai sakon* (เพลงไทยสากล [‘Thai-international music’]) – a practice that emerged in the 1930s which developed a local industry of western pop with Thai lyrics (Mitchell 2011). The above two examples are now considered among the most influential records on Thai hip hop, that developed alongside a history of pop-idol appropriations that also rose to national popularity, such as J Jetrin’s (เจ เจตริน) *Yoong Na* (1993) and Raptor’s *ซูเปอร์ฮีโร่* (*Superhero* 1994). Over the next decade these paths for localization

continued as audiences grew. Dajim emerged as an underground hip hop icon for his album *Hip Hop above the Law* (2001), while Thaitanium became known for their American sound, bilingual flows (vis-a-vis Tenglish or Thai-English) and local industry connections to Joey Boy on their debut album *AA Crew* (2000).² These early examples also symbolize the dynamic process of negotiating local hip hop forms in a relatively short period – pressurized under local cultural specificities, market conditions and constantly evolving from the increasingly multidirectional flows of hip hop accessible in the region and across the globe.

Thai hip hop music has evolved significantly in more contemporary times, with an increasing attention from media corporations – for example, *The Rapper Thailand* (2018–present), which showcases rap on mainstream television with a high-profile judging panel comprised of industry mainstays, Joey Boy, Khan (Thaitanium), Golf Fucking Hero, Twopee Southside, UrBoyTJ and Poojan Long Mic. As hip hop music has recently gained a notable increase in popularity through a localization of globally embraced forms, such as trap, it has propelled new talents like YUNGOHM to iconic status. This particular participation, however, tends to eclipse the increasingly diverse forms of hip hop music that exist outside of the mainstream sphere. Other expressions come from an underground network of producers, MCs and DJs, who distinguish themselves in other ways. For instance, the bilingual rapper Rhymekamhaeng uses his name to convey a reference to the area where he grew up, *Ramkamhaeng* (2019) – the title of his first EP. While using Tenglish to communicate his hybrid-consciousness, Rhymekamhaeng claims his local distinction from the popular mainstream, and seemingly from dominantly Thai-speaking cohorts, sharing an experience of the local–global relations in Thailand with the lines:

Rappers flow the same.
Feeling numb from the novocaine
Making no sense these mumble raps got slower brains
Country's never conquered. Monster tats and mantras
Food, craft and art, Muay Thai known to foreigners
Home to the expats, rice for breakfast
It's expected พนมมือ (waai³) or get disrespected.

(Rhymekamhaeng 2020)

The above excerpt from 'Jum G'⁴ conveys a handful of gems that appear on the album, *Siamese Beast* (Rhymekhamhaeng 2020), alongside other cultural references to local food (e.g. 'Krapao Music'⁵) or to place (e.g. '3AM in Bangkok'⁶). Unlike the dominant Thai–English dynamics, other artists have found alternative pathways to nuance their distinction in the Asia-Pacific. One such example is Juu and G. Jee's (2020) collaborative album *New Luk Thung* which brings Thailand's musical styles and instrumentation together with both Thai and Japanese lyrics, forming a regional transnationalism with Japan by way of record label EM Music.⁷

While music is perhaps the most popular hip hop element in Thailand, the nation also has its own breaking traditions that similarly reprise the importance of local customs while engaging with a globally continuous practice. While limited, research on breaking culture in Thailand points to the importance of Thai cultural norms and sociocultural hierarchies,

2. Thaitanium's P-Cess was born and raised in New York, giving him distinction from local Thai-born artists. Thaitanium's popularity also extended into Japan where they were featured on Japanese artists M-Flo's *COSMICOLLOUR* (2007) album.
3. To *waai* is to bring your hands together in a prayer gesture. In Thailand this is a common greeting and used more generally used to show respect or thanks.
4. Jum G is Thai nursery rhyme that counts fingers that proceeds by eliminating participants one by one, similar to 'Eeny, meeny, miny, mo'. On Jum G Rhymekhamhaeng uses the introduction of the children's song and proceeds to say 'จำฉันนะเพื่อเปาะ เต๋ยวูกจะเคาะหน้าแก่ง ถ้ามีงมไม้คูกกล้าน่ง' which translates roughly to 'imma smack you in the face, if you have the mic I'd steal it'.
5. Krapao is a basil-based stir-fry dish popular across Thailand.
6. บางกะปิ ('Bangkapi') is a central-east district or 'Khet' of Bangkok city.
7. Luk thung was a popular Thai-international music from the 1960s which they appropriate and reference.

8. A great example is Bboy TekkyPlz (99Flava) representing Thailand at Radikal Forze Anniversary 2014 in the Seven to Smoke battle in Singapore (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8fCqpVK1Kzg>, accessed 10 April 2022).
9. RamaFlow learned rocking from Bronx native QueRock from ReadyToRock.
10. The Beat Lounge DJ Training Facilities moved from beat lounge to a new location following the venues formal closure.

where younger dancers continue to *waai* to older dancers to show respect (Leartvimolkasame 2017). Indeed this reciprocity of respect extends to hip hop culture as various dancers (e.g. GeeOne, Oman, Gonza) host events to showcase the scene's unity while promoting the broader global hip hop cultural ethos around community connections and building. Another notable Thai breaking stylistic element is breaking barefoot both on the street and in competition – a rawness known too many across the region⁸ and visible across the city's repurposed urban environments for practice and cultural exchange.

Some historically notable breaking spots in the city include the sky bridge of National Stadium's Bangkok Mass Transit System (BTS) station (the community later moved into the Nimibutr Arena Building across the street), the Manorom Tower courtyard on Rama 4 Road, and street cyphers along popular tourist destination, Khao San Road. Here, local practitioners from 99Flava, 6Kamenz, Anarchy Rockers, Ground Scatter, Bangkapi Rockers, among various other crews from around the world congregate. Other than these outdoor practice spots, breaking is also seen in commercial spaces – notably, in shopping malls such as Donki Mall Thong Lo where other all-style groups also connect, or at Seacon Square where the Thai Battle of the Year (BOTY) qualifiers were held in 2019. But local hip hop dance traditions are perhaps most alive in their party contexts. For instance, the *Have a Break* (2022) event, sported all elements of hip hop cultural practice (bar aerosol art) and included a rare rocking showcase by RamaFlow.⁹

It is no surprise that the various threads of hip hop culture seek out spaces to express themselves. Importantly, bars and clubs have become critical sites of intersection between elements and different threads of the Thai hip hop cultural community. One critical place for turntablism and general DJ culture was the Beat Lounge, owned by 1997 DMC Thailand Champion Spydamonkee. Given his local influence on the music scene as a resident producer for Gancore Club GMM Grammy (2003–10) (owned by pioneering Thai hip hop artist Joey Boy), Spydamonkee has developed a reputation across the Asia-Pacific. His work with the Beat Lounge, honoured hip hop's communitarian traditions by providing space for all to host events, to perform, or test one's skills via scratch cyphers. Not least, the Beat Lounge was home to a turntablism school the *Beatlounge DJ Training Facilities* (BDTF)¹⁰ certified by industry staples Rane, Serato and Genelec. Here Spydamonkee was joined by the accomplished local turntablists Jodie, Maïam Ma, Whatdatfrog and TNT. Spydamonkee's desire to grow the community of turntablism practitioners is admittedly part of two key mission statements: first, to make a new generation with their own unique voices to 'improve Thai DJs standard', and second, to share the disk-jockey practice as part of a larger hip hop lifestyle, 'not just working in the club' (BDTF 2021). After the formal closure of the Beat Lounge during the COVID-19 pandemic other hip hop collectives have emerged with a similar emphasis on building community connections and offering practitioners space to perform, develop skills and network.

One important thread of hip hop culture in Thailand is provided by the Japanese expatriate community in Bangkok. Japan's influence on Thai hip hop culture has long been part of local pop-cultural consumption by way of MTV Asia, Tower Records, and publications such as *Ollie Magazine*, supplied by prominent Japanese exporter Kinokuniya (see Meyer-Ohle 2014). Now

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various venues across the city like 12×12 and Studio Lam host a number of Bangkok-based and international Japanese acts such as Masaya Fantasia (Jazzy Sport, Japan) and Target-C (Goja Records, Thailand). These venues are a critical part of hip hop infrastructure for beat-making culture in Bangkok. GOJA in particular has emerged as the hub for Asia-Pacific hip hop transnationalism. GOJA is run by local cultural entrepreneur, beat-maker and DJ, Toru, who offers his space to music communities every night. Picking up the Beat Lounge's community spirit the art gallery and bar-restaurant provides space for the local hip hop scene, for both community events and skill exchanges via GOJA's DJ School. On any day of the week you might see breakers, beat-makers, MCs and DJs from across the world congregating in its small Prakanong home. Some key nights include *Phase* which brings Japanese performers such as Famy the Diesel (Dlip Records, Japan) and Question SEQ a.k.a. Pizz? (Vlutent Records, Japan), to the same stage as local Thai talents such as popular twitch.tv host DJ Missile, and *Bangkok Beat Cipher* that sees local and international beat-makers come together, featuring Miwyu (TH), Fiendsh (TH-USA) and Subnet (TH-AU), alongside scene-veteran Ramin – a local music journalist and critic turned DJ and producer.¹¹

The story of hip hop in Thailand is as much a story of local Thai cultural history as it is its entanglement in various intersecting paths of globalization. While hip hop exists elsewhere across the country, with prominent communities in other cities such as Chiang Mai, Chon Buri and Udon Thani, it is most notably concentrated and diversified in Bangkok. Although Thai hip hop has developed at a much different pace to other hubs in the Asia-Pacific region, its relatively slower introduction has rendered hip hop in Thailand particularly open to global influence, nuancing local cultural practices in unique ways – especially in the capital. Today, all of hip hop's elements are represented in full effect, from the sidewalk to the clubs and still locked in the ever-evolving process of global recontextualization and local realization. This short account is only one of many threads to pick up and follow across Thailand and in its global metropolis, Bangkok. To quote Rhymekhamhaeng and Réjizz's 'Home Town Flow', 'every corner has a story' (Rhymekhamhaeng 2020).

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11. Ramin's ongoing scene participation in Thailand since the late 1990s, solo work, and collaborations with vocalist FEZT on *Because of You* (2016) and *Stellar Pledge* (2018) (a rare Thai take on trip hop) has made him a type of underground legend in Bangkok.

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