Young Chinese Drawn to Hip - Hop

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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SHANGHAI, China (AP) -- Yang Jie's parents found inspiration in the revolutionary slogans of Mao Tse-tung. The 20-year-old Shanghai youth discovered his in the gyrating hips of Janet Jackson.

Yang was just another college-bound high school student until he saw a Jackson concert video three years ago. The energy and freedom that he felt from her performance convinced him to become a professional dancer instead.

Now he teaches more than 100 Shanghai teen-agers and university students the lock-step moves of hip-hop dancing. Like him, many of his pupils wear oversized parkas and jeans that sag in the crotch. A fervid few boast sun lamp-darkened skin and dreadlocks.

``Hip-hop lets young people express their emotions in ways that traditional Chinese dancing can't,'' said Yang, who has won several televised competitions in hip-hop -- called ``jiewu,'' Chinese for street dancing.

Hip-hop's growing following underscores the popularity of American culture in China, despite the two nations' often rocky political ties and the misgivings many Chinese feel toward U.S. military power.

Relations between Washington and Beijing are recovering from last year's standoff over a U.S. Navy spy plane, and President Bush hopes to give them a boost during a visit to Beijing this month.

But American music and fashion need no such high-level emissaries to win the hearts and minds of China's people -- particularly the children of its
American chain restaurants and coffee shops have opened even in remote provincial cities. Hollywood movies are so popular that the government limits their number to protect domestic filmmakers. American brand-name outdoor wear and university sweatshirts are almost as common in Shanghai as New York.

One of the most successful cultural imports has been professional basketball, whose games are shown regularly on Shanghai TV. Michael Jordan is as well-known here as Chinese-speaking celebrities like Jackie Chan. Shaquille O'Neal's face appears on the prepaid cards used in Chinese public phones.

Experts say U.S.-inspired materialism is rushing into the moral vacuum left in China by decades of political upheaval and rapid economic change. Marxism and Confucianism alike have been discarded, without any clear alternatives rising in their place.

But American values are not accepted wholesale. Chinese pick and choose what they want. There's little talk of democracy and human rights, at least in public.

And experts warn that the same young Chinese who buy American brands and music are no less likely march on the U.S. Embassy if they feel their national dignity is at stake -- as they did during amid the tensions over the U.S. spy plane's downing.

``There isn't a cultural rudder left in China. Young people are easily attracted to the fashions of the West, and just as easily attracted to the nationalistic outrage that followed an incident like the spy plane standoff," said Wu Zhinan, who researches pop culture at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, a government think tank.

Wu says American fashion and music offer young Chinese ready-made ways to assert individualism in a society that still emphasizes public displays of conformity. They also bring a sense of free-spirited release from the grueling pressures of China's career-determining university entrance exams.

As a result, says Wu, American countercultural movements like hip-hop take on a whole different meaning in China. Songs about love and self-expression are more popular than odes to alienation and ``gangsta" violence.

Yang Jie said hip-hop lets him feel more modern and liberated than his parents, who were listening to communist propaganda operas when they were his age.

Yang says he feels drawn to America as a land of creativity and free expression. He says he's particularly fascinated with black America because of its enormous influence on world music.

``When I dance hip-hop, I imagine a black American dancing in front of me. I try to imitate his movements, his emotions. They are much more intense than those of Chinese,'' Yang said.

One of Yang's pupils is 14-year-old Zhao Li, one of a dozen junior high school students he teaches in a music room of their school on Shanghai's outskirts.

Zhao recognizes hip-hop's American roots. But she also sees it as part of an emerging Asian youth culture. Her favorite rap bands are from richer Asian countries like Japan and South Korea, brought to the mainland via a popular Hong Kong-based music video channel.

``Hip-hop is not just American anymore. It belongs to Asia, too,'' Zhao said.