

# The Revolution of K-pop

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Since ancient times, the Republic of Korea, often known as South Korea<sup>1</sup>, had always been under significant influences of Chinese, Japanese, and later Western cultures. After its government and economy became solid, Korea threw itself into the grand ambition of generating a transnational culture and today, successfully marked its existence on the globe with the fierce Korean Wave---a flow of South Korean pop culture. The wave initiated as regional development and grew into a global phenomenon, spread via the internet and social media and heavily impacted on contemporary cultures, the entertainment industry, and behavior of young people. In the eye of the Hallyu<sup>2</sup> cyclone, K-pop---abbreviation of South Korean pop music that is an audiovisual genre of catchy melodies with hypnotizing choreography and music videos---led the wave to foreign shores and produced worldwide subcultures such as K-pop fandom. Having long conquered East, South, and Southeast Asia; K-pop is now stationing itself in the Western world. As it had attained such global popularity in merely a few decades after its rise at the end of the twentieth century, it seems a spur of pop culture in present, rapidly changing society. However, K-pop's success was in truth built on prescient strategies, careful calculation, and systematic preparation; obtaining domestic marketability first and then progressively colonizing the world through several idiosyncratic stages.

### *The First Stage (The 1990s)*

The initial stage of the Korean Wave raised its curtain in the 1990s. Following the nation's establishment in 1948 and the armistice of the Korean War in 1953, South Korea experienced a number of political unrests and societal turmoils in the next three decades. Yet, its economy had started to flourish since an export-oriented industry policy with a focus on heavy chemistry fields promulgated during the Third Republic (the government of South Korea from 1963 to 1972). Till the Sixth Republic (1987 to present), prosperous financial state and

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<sup>1</sup> Mixed uses of South Korea, and Korea in following paragraphs all refer to the Republic of Korea.

<sup>2</sup> The Korean term for "the Korean Wave".

relatively stable politics spared the citizens to enrich life in aspects of art and culture. Seo Taiji and Boys, a musical group that was active from 1992 to 1996, was considered the father of modern K-pop music. The vocal Seo Taiji integrated Western music elements such as rap, rock, techno, and R&B into Korea's ballad music, and the result was sensational. Also incorporating English phrases, the group pioneered K-pop's hybridization, which was one of the crucial factors why K-pop was capable of attracting youths and penetrating foreign markets. Then, the first wave of Hallyu K-pop began with the first generation of young "idol" groups. In 1995, singer Lee Soo-man founded SM Entertainment Co., Ltd.---one of the earliest and largest Korean entertainment companies. At the time, Lee adopted Japanese pop culture (J-pop) and the *aidoru*<sup>3</sup> system and launched the first K-pop boy band H.O.T. in 1996.<sup>4</sup> It was since then that the term "idol" became known to mostly refer K-pop musical artists.

In J-pop, an idol was a teen aspiring star manufactured and marketed for an ideal image and personality. Surviving on the entertainment industry, idols were meant to offer escapism from routine life. In order to achieve that, entertainment companies and talent agents recruited teenage girls or boys who were visually appealing, either with little or no previous experience in the industry, and prepared them with in-house training in singing, dancing, acting, and modeling before debut. Usually, companies launched either all-boy or all-girl groups for targeting specifically male or female fans, and instead of a solo, a group with various looks and styles helped meet different tastes of individuals and generate a greater fan base. The career of an idol was excessively fan-driven, that the income of the idol depended mostly on his or her following and support from the fans. Dedicated fans would devote their time and money for their favored members, purchasing records, tickets of concerts, and Idol-related products from the gift shop of the company or a third-party. To profit further, the companies kept the intimacy

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<sup>3</sup> "Idol" in Japanese.

<sup>4</sup> Lee, Sangjoon, and Markus Nornes. *Hallyu 2.0: the Korean Wave in the Age of Social Media*. University of Michigan Press, 2015. pp. 76-77.

between idols and the fans by operating events such as meet-and-greet, handshake, and record signing.<sup>5</sup>

Thoroughly systemized the procedure of manufacturing young pop stars, Lee created H.O.T. from the result of a poll on ideal pop groups among high school students. The group soon gained enormous popularity among teenage girls in Korea and spread to China via radio and television. The sales of the group's first Chinese album even helped it survive the Asian financial crisis.<sup>6</sup> Subsequently, SM's first girl group S.E.S. was considered as the female counterpart of H.O.T. and made a breakthrough in Japan by including a Japanese Korean member. Gazing this burgeoning and lucrative idol business, YG Entertainment and JYP Entertainment, which grew to be major K-pop powerhouses as well, shortly erected and followed SM's production style. The former's all-boy band Sechskies was credited with developing the basis of K-pop fandom culture and became H.O.T.'s biggest rivalry.

With an effort to allure audiences, the first wave of K-pop was also characterized by its memorable music and trendy fashion. Songs and performances were composed of "catchy melodies, simple harmonic progressions, group dance movements," and short English phrases. Boy bands wore coordinated costumes reflecting the hip-pop fashion that was popular among young people during the '90s.<sup>7</sup> Well-chosen props and accessories such as hats, glasses, gloves, and bags elevated quotidian outfits to stage attires. Though the costumes of one male idol group were arranged under a certain theme with united color schemes, textiles, and styles, each member's clothes conveyed individuality. On the other hand, female idols uniformly dressed for an innocent, youthful impression.

### *The Second Stage (The 2000s)*

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<sup>5</sup> Iwabuchi Kōichi. *Recentering Globalization Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*. Duke Univ. Press, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> A period of financial crisis that gripped much of East and Southeast Asia from July 1997 to 1999.

<sup>7</sup> Lee, Sangjoon, and Markus Nornes. *Hallyu 2.0: the Korean Wave in the Age of Social Media*. University of Michigan Press, 2015. pp. 77.

At turn of the century, the second wave of Hallyu K-pop hit Asia more rigorously with solo singers. Known as the “Queen of K-pop”, BoA was discovered by SM talent agents at age eleven and carefully trained for two years with fluency in Japanese and English apart from basic idol skills before her debut in 2000<sup>8</sup>. As South Korea and Japan promoted cultural exchanges in the early 2000s, SM strategically collaborated with the Japanese entertainment conglomerate Avex Inc. and launched BoA’s music career in Japan a year later. Even though this action caused her to quit school, it significantly benefited her growth as a performing artist because lip-syncing was illegal in Japan. BoA’s debut Japanese album was such a success that it reached a million sales and rooted her standing in the Japanese music industry. Her continuing popularity led to a Hallyu boom over the East Sea, especially succeeding the 2002 FIFA World Cup co-hosted by Korea and Japan. At the same time, the R&B/hip-hop singer Rain surfaced with the export of Korean television series during the 2000s. He achieved instantaneous fame by casting a lead role in the romantic drama *Full House* (2004), which later received adoptions in Filipino, Vietnam, Thai, and China. In the same year, Rain’s third album “topped music charts in Korea as well as throughout Asia” and prompted him to embark on a concert tour that covered eight countries.<sup>9</sup>

Extending their influences to Southeast Asia, however, K-pop stars in the second wave failed to cross the Pacific Ocean. Due to elements of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and mainstream music in the American market; along with the “unpredictability of contemporary transnational flows”; BoA, Rain, and a few other solo singers’ American debuts all misfired and forced them to

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<sup>8</sup> Herald. “K-Pop Queen BoA Returns to Music.” *The Korea Herald*, 26 July 2012, [www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20120726001097](http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20120726001097).

<sup>9</sup> “Rain Season Breaks Records Across Asia.” *The Chosun Ilbo (English Edition): Daily News from Korea - Business/Sci-Tech > Business*, [english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2005/10/13/2005101361017.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2005/10/13/2005101361017.html).

return Korea.<sup>10</sup> Amidst the gloomy outcomes in the United States, Hallyu underwent a general slowdown with declined K-drama<sup>11</sup> consumption around the mid-2000s.

Revitalized with SM's boy band TVXQ!, the third wave of Hallyu K-pop was marked by a return of young male and female idol groups, and K-pop gradually dominated the Korean Wave. Inspired by BoA's overseas accomplishment, TVXQ! also debuted in Japan after earning domestic popularity in 2004, but not until the late 2000s did they emerge as international prominence. Afterward, the group was crowned as the "Kings of K-pop" and "K-pop royalty" for its tremendous success and contributions to the spread of Hallyu: it was the first K-pop group to perform at the Tokyo Dome<sup>12</sup> and sold ten million physical records over Asia during its first ten years of activities.<sup>13</sup> <sup>14</sup> Another SM's boy group launched with featuring one Chinese member in 2005, Super Junior, was particularly active in China and Southeast Asian countries including Thai, Vietnam, and Indonesia. SJ's third title track *Sorry, Sorry* attained the best-selling album of 2009 in Korea and other neighboring countries, bringing another important milestone for today's K-pop music. Similar to *Nobody*, a song performed by JYP Entertainment's Wonder Girls in 2008 and swept across Asia, *Sorry, Sorry* consisted of "short catchy refrains...minimalist lyrics, and synchronized dance movements...and fashion styles specific to each song", which became norms for later bands.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Lee, Sangjoon, and Markus Nornes. *Hallyu 2.0: the Korean Wave in the Age of Social Media*. University of Michigan Press, 2015. pp. 78.

<sup>11</sup> Korean dramas, Korean TV series.

<sup>12</sup> Tokyo Dome is a stadium in Bunkyo, Tokyo, Japan. With the nickname "Tokyo Big Egg", it is known for its large capacity, which can only be filled by extremely famous singers. Therefore, performing at Tokyo Dome is a proof of enormous popularity.

<sup>13</sup> Koreatimes. "King of K-Pop Is Back." *Koreatimes*, 3 Oct. 2012, [www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/culture/2012/12/386\\_121363.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/culture/2012/12/386_121363.html).

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin, Jeff. "TVXQ! Q&A: On America, Favorite Artists, Future Touring Plans." *Billboard*, Billboard, 16 Jan. 2014, [www.billboard.com/articles/news/1481405/txq-qa-on-america-favorite-artists-future-touring-plans](http://www.billboard.com/articles/news/1481405/txq-qa-on-america-favorite-artists-future-touring-plans).

<sup>15</sup> Lee, Sangjoon, and Markus Nornes. *Hallyu 2.0: the Korean Wave in the Age of Social Media*. University of Michigan Press, 2015. pp. 79.

Besides musical innovation, K-pop in the third wave began to form a new formula with gendered group format and visual emphasis. Co-ed idol groups were extinct, except for project groups<sup>16</sup>. With the popularization of the Internet, a rise of *Ulzzang* trend greatly affected K-pop and Asian standard of beauty. The Korean unisex term “Ulzzang” literally meant “good-looking”, and those who desired the status submitted their photos to online contests and gained popularity from voters and followers. K-pop idols adopted the Ulzzang styled face, which was usually about the size of one’s palm in “[s]mooth, pale snow-white skin” and contained large, Bambi eyes<sup>17</sup> with a fold on the upper eyelids, a nose with a high bridge, and a small, sharp chin that formed a V-shape with the defined jawbone.<sup>18</sup> Because of this ideal, male idols seemed effeminate to most people, for their routine application of make-up and boyish appearance, while K-pop fans viewed such traits as unique masculinity of them, and neither their gender nor sexual orientation was questioned. Additionally, since a perfect Ulzzang face was rarely obtained naturally, such a trend propelled demands for cosmetic contact lenses, skin-whitening products, and plastic surgeries.

### *The Third Stage (Late 2000s to Present)*

The third stage of the Korean Wave shone with the intensive use of technology, climaxing in PSY’s *Gangnam Style* unprecedentedly hitting one billion Youtube views.<sup>19</sup> Well-known groups since the late 2000s included YG Entertainment’s Big Bang, JYP’s 2PM, and SM’s Girls’ Generation and SHINee. Their formation was not notably distinct from the ones of the last wave.

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<sup>16</sup> Groups created for specific reasons, usually temporary and from a project like a survival show or a reality show.

<sup>17</sup> Innocent, big eyes that remind Disney’s character Bambi.

<sup>18</sup> Soh, Elizabeth. “Korean 'Ulzzang' Beauty Mania Comes to Singapore.” *Yahoo!*, Yahoo!, 29 Oct. 2012, [sg.style.yahoo.com/blogs/singapore-showbiz/korean-ulzzang-beauty-mania-comes-singapore-072253957.html](http://sg.style.yahoo.com/blogs/singapore-showbiz/korean-ulzzang-beauty-mania-comes-singapore-072253957.html).

<sup>19</sup> “PSY's 'Gangnam Style' Video Hits 1 Billion Views, Unprecedented Milestone.” *Billboard*, Billboard, 21 Dec. 2012, [www.billboard.com/biz/articles/news/1483733/psys-gangnam-style-video-hits-1-billion-views-unprecedented-milestone](http://www.billboard.com/biz/articles/news/1483733/psys-gangnam-style-video-hits-1-billion-views-unprecedented-milestone).

Yet, the ripple they created was monumental. As Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube erected in succession, the fourth wave of Hallyu K-pop, already secured its position in Asia, rode on social networking services and finally arrived the Western Hemisphere. Entertainment companies advertised entertainers through official social media accounts; netizens on the other side of the earth were subject to the fans' constant endorsements to K-pop idols as well. Further, the skillful utilization of Youtube critically contributed to K-pop's globalization. Instead of local MTV, idol groups uploaded their music videos to Youtube the free and virtually borderless platform, instantly exposing themselves to the world. The bewitching, colorful short films and the fierce expression of choreography visualized the music and targeted numerous international teenagers. Recognizing K-pop's potential, the iTunes Store first started selling it. In 2011, K-pop attained its own chart in *Billboard*, the *Billboard K-pop Hot 100*. Several months later, it became the first country-specific music genre to earn a homepage on Youtube, which shortly demonstrated "that the U.S. accounted for the heaviest concentration of views outside of Asia".<sup>20</sup> Most remarkably, the user-generated content site allowed faraway fans to connect with K-pop via dance covers or reaction videos.

One of the indelible existences on K-pop history, Big Bang was the trendsetter for the first half of the 2010s, in terms of music, dance, and fashion. Unlike many K-pop groups, Big Bang's songs were mostly written and produced by its leader G-Dragon, whose diverse adoption of music genres and infectious melodies assisted the quintet to win the Best Worldwide Act at the 2011 MTV Europe Music Awards and chart its fifth EP<sup>21</sup> on the *Billboard 200*. As captivating as its performance, the quintet's stage fashion introduced South Korea to cornrows and faux hawk and global brands such as Bape, Louis Vuitton, and Jeremy Scott. Another prominent figure Girls' Generation was acknowledged for regaining public attention to female idols after an influx of boy bands in the aforementioned periods. The group also attracted

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<sup>20</sup> "YouTube Is Taking K-Pop GlobalPatty Ahn / University of California San Diego." *Flow*, [www.flowjournal.org/2017/11/youtube-is-taking-k-pop-global/](http://www.flowjournal.org/2017/11/youtube-is-taking-k-pop-global/).

<sup>21</sup> An extended play record, often referred to as an EP, is a musical recording that contains more tracks than a single, but is usually unqualified as an album.



Western media in subsequent to its fourth title track achieving the Video of the Year at the 2013 Youtube Music Awards.

Receiving such overseas recognitions, Hallyu K-pop significantly impacted Korea in return. Carried by music the “universal language”, K-beauty<sup>22</sup> spanned its market to India.<sup>23</sup> K-dramas and Korean films as other successful cultural products of the Korean Wave became so invasive that Chinese and Japanese governments “made special efforts...[by] passing measures to...stem the flow...and protect their own cultural industries”. Korean language-learning students had drastically increased all over the world.<sup>24</sup> The University of Toronto witnessed a rising demand in Korean history courses.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, according to the Korea Tourism Organization, the number of monthly tourists had tripled over twenty years since 1996. SM even developed its travel agency to help international fans attend concerts in Korea with guidelines and travel packages.<sup>26</sup> Identifying K-pop as “South Korea’s greatest export”, the Korean government took advantage of it as soft power<sup>27</sup> in diplomacy. During the last summit, South Korea invited more

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<sup>22</sup> An umbrella term for Korean skincare products.

<sup>23</sup> “From K-Pop to K-Drama, Kimchi to K-Beauty, Indian Youngsters Just Can't Get Enough of Korea.” *The Economic Times*, Economic Times, 23 Sept. 2018, [economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/from-food-to-popculture-and-cosmetics-india-eager-to-embrace-korean-cool/articleshow/65915355.cms](http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/from-food-to-popculture-and-cosmetics-india-eager-to-embrace-korean-cool/articleshow/65915355.cms).

<sup>24</sup> “Transnational Television Programs.” *New Korean Wave: Transnational Cultural Power in the Age of Social Media*, by DAL YONG JIN, University of Illinois Press, 2016, pp. 43–67. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt18j8wkv.6](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt18j8wkv.6).

<sup>25</sup> Pickles, Matt. “K-Pop Drives Boom in Korean Language Lessons.” *BBC News*, BBC, 11 July 2018, [www.bbc.com/news/business-44770777](http://www.bbc.com/news/business-44770777).

<sup>26</sup> Cha, Frances. “Harnessing K-Pop for Tourism.” CNN, Cable News Network, [travel.cnn.com/seoul/visit/harnessing-k-pop-tourism-386868/](http://travel.cnn.com/seoul/visit/harnessing-k-pop-tourism-386868/).

<sup>27</sup> A persuasive approach to international relations, typically involving the use of economic or cultural influence.

than 190 K-pop performers to Pyongyang for a special concert to North Korean audiences and Kim Jong-un.<sup>28 29</sup>

The fifth wave of Hallyu K-pop was yet taking shape but already demonstrated phenomenal global influences. In recent years, K-pop had manifested frequent appearances on the *Billboard* and other Western music charts. It substantially affected Mando-pop (Mandarin pop) with former and current Chinese K-pop stars, and China had adopted a large number of Korean variety shows including *Running Man*, *Infinite Challenge*, and *The Return of Superman*. SM's annual family concert SM Town Live World Tour began to step out of Asia, holding the 2018's in Dubai and the 2019's in Chile, and strengthened local K-pop culture wherever it had landed.

In the meantime, K-pop fandom had grown to a powerful legion and developed particular, fascinating social norms. Collaborating with Korean television and radio network companies, K-pop managed to generate a large amount of dedicated fans by stimulating fan engagement and embracing social media's giant "potential for international circulation" to attract international consumers. Whenever idols released new albums, they promoted title tracks through live comeback stage performances on multiple Korean music shows that charted weekly. Today's six main music shows---" SBS's<sup>30</sup> *Inkigayo*, MBC's<sup>31</sup> *Show! Music Core*, KBS's<sup>32</sup> *Music Bank*, Mnet's<sup>33</sup> *M! Countdown*, MBC Music's *Show Champion* and SBS MTV's *The*

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<sup>28</sup> Krista Mahr. "South Korea's Greatest Export: How K-Pop's Rocking the World." *Time*, Time, 7 Mar. 2012, [world.time.com/2012/03/07/south-koreas-greatest-export-how-k-pops-rocking-the-world/](http://world.time.com/2012/03/07/south-koreas-greatest-export-how-k-pops-rocking-the-world/).

<sup>29</sup> Baynes, Chris. "South Korean Pop Stars Perform First Concert in North Korea for More than a Decade." *The Independent*, Independent Digital News and Media, 1 Apr. 2018, [www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/k-pop-diplomacy-south-korea-north-pyongyang-red-velvet-kim-jong-un-moon-jae-in-a8283901.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/k-pop-diplomacy-south-korea-north-pyongyang-red-velvet-kim-jong-un-moon-jae-in-a8283901.html).

<sup>30</sup> Seoul Broadcasting System.

<sup>31</sup> Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation.

<sup>32</sup> Korean Broadcasting System.

<sup>33</sup> A South Korean pay television music channel.

*Show*—each designated for one day of the week, from Tuesday to Sunday”.<sup>34</sup> Though charting methodologies varied in shows, most incorporated digital sales, Youtube views of music videos, and voting committees; winners were awarded a physical “trophy in front of their peers” and offered to “perform an encore of their winning song”. Since every championship was considered a milestone to not only the winning stars but also fans, behavior such as looping music videos for more views and bulk-buying numbers of albums became necessary strategies for fans to “secure a win” of their idols. Thus, a lucrative cycle formed: the more “coordinated fan efforts”, the further could K-pop drive consumerism. Some sheer record-breaking movements prevailed as well, when fandoms of different groups competed to first achieve ten million views. Emulating Korean fans, worldwide tech-savvy K-pop followers worked jointly as a united front. In addition to routine music shows, SBS, MBC, and KBS also hosted end-of-year *Gayo Daejun*<sup>35</sup> that invited all present K-pop singers and groups to perform exclusive stages, sometimes as a reward to the fans; while Mnet held MAMA (Mnet Asian Music Awards) acknowledging accomplishments of idols and fans.

Nonetheless, the future of K-pop lay uncertain in the changeable nature of the entertainment industry as this field also reaching maturity. Overabundant appealing idols intensified competition. While “an established group like SHINee might promote” its annual album for two weeks, SM’s younger group NCT 127 released singles or mini-albums every season and performed them on music shows for an entire month, in order to create the constant exposure and “ubiquity necessary for fans to be completely immersed in the music”.<sup>36</sup> In 2016, SM’s CEO Lee Soo-man refined the Japanese *aidoru* production and coined his Culture Technology project over the course of trials and errors. The neologism referred to a holistic

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<sup>34</sup> Kelley, Caitlin. “How Korean Music Shows Diverged From MTV and Became the Epicenter of K-Pop Fan Culture.” *Billboard*, Billboard, 10 Oct. 2017, [www.billboard.com/articles/columns/k-town/7990486/korean-music-shows-mtv-trl-bts-history](http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/k-town/7990486/korean-music-shows-mtv-trl-bts-history).

<sup>35</sup> An annual televised music festival.

<sup>36</sup> Kelley, Caitlin. “How Korean Music Shows Diverged From MTV and Became the Epicenter of K-Pop Fan Culture.” *Billboard*, Billboard, 10 Oct. 2017, [www.billboard.com/articles/columns/k-town/7990486/korean-music-shows-mtv-trl-bts-history](http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/k-town/7990486/korean-music-shows-mtv-trl-bts-history).

system for manufacturing K-pop idols, and it involved four core phases: casting, training, producing, and marketing/managing.

Every once a few years, SM hosted global auditions in search of worldwide talented youths. SM's latest one in 2018 were held in ten countries including Vietnam, USA, and Argentina. Having launched a number of exceptionally visually attractive stars, the company did not solely depend on auditions but also street casting or scouting aspiring singers or dancers at performing-arts-specialized schools. Although the majority of idols were Korean, the process often netted international members, who benefited the group in developing international fans with advantageous foreign language skills.

Enrolled as trainees, idols trained extensively on vocal, dance, and presentation for as short as a few months or as long as several years. They were strictly controlled on diet for losing weight, lived in dormitories, and underwent arduous exercises to build up physical strength in preparation of demanding choreography. In addition to fundamental skills of performing artists, SM paid special attention to teaching its trainees a sense of decorum. As a result, idols from SM were universally praised for their modest and grateful attitude, no matter how influential they became. For constructing fanbase in advance, SM featured its pre-debut idols in the videos of established bands or arranged them in the training team SM Rookies, which held performances and released videos.

After the decision of debut, producing was an integral phase that packaged individuals and groups ready for the market. Especially since its legendary boy band EXO debuted in 2012, SM was obsessed with "concepts". Every idol group was assigned with a concept, an intriguing setting that would boost consumerism, and the group was responsible to always act its character. For example, EXO was a group of mysterious boys with superpower from the Exoplanet outside the solar system; to retain its enigmatic identities, the group had to shun its presence from entertaining variety shows in the first five years of its career. Concentrating on overseas expansion, SM prepared its idols that targeted specific countries with matching

strategies and equipment. Featuring Chinese members and releasing studio albums in both Chinese and Korean, EXO ranked the most streamed K-pop group.<sup>37</sup>

As idols accumulated fans and popularity, managing and continuous marketing focused on sustainability and further development. It was essential to maintain a close relationship with fans, who were just as precious to the idols as the idols were to them. Beyond hosting fan events such as fan-meets<sup>38</sup> or celebrated their own birthday parties with a crowd of luckily selected fans, idols adored their fans by offering “reversed support”<sup>39</sup> surprises, such as providing free food and drinks for fans who queued for concerts. Over time, K-pop idols surpassed being merely admired musical artists but became existences who spread happiness and whom fans worshiped or fell in love with, though such an attachment usually led to broken heart or intolerance toward idols’ love lives. Then, this phase also helped idols develop omnidirectionally by casting in TV dramas, films, and variety shows, which became alternatives for older idols.

In only a few decades, Hallyu K-pop evolved from domestic entertainment to an international consumer product. Its history, though short, yielded numerous inspiring stories and entrepreneurial lessons and proved its outstanding strategy-making ability, step-by-step endeavor, and achievements that earned never by chance but by cleverly exploiting handy resources. With a path still long before reaching the horizon and potential still large as an iceberg lay deep from the surface, the future of the Korean Wave and K-pop were unpredictable and exciting.

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<sup>37</sup> “EXO Are the Most Streamed K-Pop Idols in China.” *SBS News*, SBS News, 31 July 2018, [www.sbs.com.au/popasia/blog/2018/07/31/exo-are-most-streamed-k-pop-idols-china](http://www.sbs.com.au/popasia/blog/2018/07/31/exo-are-most-streamed-k-pop-idols-china).

<sup>38</sup> A mini-concert with less seats and performances but more interactions with fans by playing games or answering questions.

<sup>39</sup> Idols support and give gifts to fans, as opposed to fans usually supporting and sending gifts to idols.