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Introduction

Many people consider K-pop – the term being an abbreviation of *Korean pop* – to be one of the most successful Asian pop musics today. Its popularity and the popularity of its performers have spread not only within the region, but to many Western countries. If the first ‘Korean wave’ was centered in the popularity of Korean soap operas, such as *Winter Sonata* and *Daejangkeum*, the second ‘Korean wave’ is about K-pop and K-pop idols, such as Super Junior and Girls’ Generation. In both waves, Taiwan has played an important role in the dissemination of Korean popular culture within the region. Therefore, the K-pop boom in contemporary Taiwan is worthy of examination (after Moskowitz 2011: 4). This paper, based on ethnographic research in Taiwan, discusses the role of the Taiwanese music industry and Taiwanese music fans in the dissemination of K-pop, both in Taiwan and in other Chinese-speaking areas. The sources used are mainly interviews with fans, TV producers, music industry leaders, and officials of the Tourism Bureau in the Ministry of Transportation and Communications of the Republic of China, and have been conducted since March 2000.

Taiwan: The Contact Zone of East Asian Pop Music

Academic research on the popular culture of East Asia has typically focused on explaining the success of Japanese and Korean genres and styles (Huang 2011; Iwabuchi 2006; Kim 2005; Shim 2006; Sung 2008; Ubonrat & Shin 2007), leaving Taiwan unexplored. But, Taiwan can be defined as a contact zone within the East Asian pop music landscape, as its popular culture has become fashionable in Mainland China (Gold 1993) and South Asia. The idea of contact zones was developed by Mary Louise Pratt, who defines them as ‘social spaces where cultures melt, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermath as they are lived out in many parts of the world today’ (1991: 34). Taiwan can be defined as a contact zone for several reasons: first, it is a point of connection between the local population and cultures from outside, both Chinese and Japanese, but also from Europe and the United States; second, its colonial history involved the intrusion of external cultures, especially and more recently that of Japan; third, the Taiwanese have an open attitude toward foreign culture, in part to distinguish themselves from Mainland Chinese (Sung 2010; Moskowitz 2011). Taiwan itself is a place of multiple ethnicities,

a highly developed contact zone, with a complicated colonial past and a long history of multiethnic immigration. The choices the people of a contact zone like Taiwan make – what they absorb and use – should be carefully analyzed (Riemenschmitter 2009).

According to Miss An Ting Ting at the International Affairs Division of the Tourism Bureau in the Ministry of Transportation and Communications of the Republic of China,

Taiwan is a very important region in Asia for many reasons. Not only geographically is it located in the heart of Asia, but it also plays central role in the region. The Taiwanese usually accept things easily when they are good without having any prejudice. Also, people are reacting very fast to trends. For example, popular culture from Japan and Korea can reach the Taiwanese audience within a week. We act very fast, and are always sensitive to Asian cultural trends especially from Japan and Korea, and the trends go to Mainland China and South Asia from Taiwan (interview with author, 25 March 2011).

In many interviews, Taiwanese TV producers and music industry leaders also claimed that Taiwan is the meeting point of Asian pop music. According to Phillip (to use his nickname) from the Alpha Music company,

Taiwan is a small country with a small market, but because of the language and culture as well as the liberal free market, many Asian record companies will choose Taiwan as a first step into the Chinese market because China is still a very closed market with lots of regulations. I personally think the Taiwan music market is too small and not that important, but if you think about the number of Chinese speaking people around the world, Taiwan is very important as a first step for the Chinese market (Email interview with the author, 9 April 2012).

How thoroughly Japanese and Korean popular music has penetrated Taiwanese contemporary society can easily be seen in CD shops and on cable channels such as Channel V. Since 2000, Korean pop culture has gradually penetrated Taiwanese society and become the most loved of foreign pop culture. Taiwan was the first country to import Korean television dramas, and now Korean soap operas can routinely be seen at almost any time of day on local channels. Again, K-pop now occupies the biggest part of CD shops and Channel V. However, Taiwan's music industry has not always been so open. Ever since the Kuomintang (Nationalists) took over, in 1949, political and economic forces have controlled the availability of certain kinds of music and musical activities. Although Taiwan was a Japanese colony for 50 years and Japanese culture retains influence over many older Taiwanese, the mainland émigré regime's close ties with the United States and their hostility toward Japan, especially after Tokyo established diplomatic relations with Beijing in 1972, led to strict control over the import of Japanese culture (Gold 1993: 908). Only in 1993 did the Taiwanese government lift its ban on the broadcasting of Japanese-language programs, and only then did Japanese popular culture rise in popularity (Iwabuchi 2002: 121). Until then, American popular culture, especially from the 1970s onwards (Yang 1994), had claimed a major share of the market.

Developments in Taiwanese popular culture, especially in pop music, have been influential in the Chinese market. Taiwanese pop stars have influenced Chinese fashions and trends in many ways. Since the policy of reform and the opening of

Mainland China, Taiwanese clothing and cosmetics have become fashionable there (Moskowitz 2011:6). As a contact zone, Taiwan receives East Asian pop music from Japan and Korea, considered the main power stations of the Asian pop music industry, and in turn influences Mainland China and South Asia.

K-Pop in Taiwan

The Taiwanese music industry follows trends closely so that it can cater to the taste of its fans; however, K-pop did not catch its attention at the beginning of the Korean Wave. According to an anonymous person at Alpha Music Company whom I shall call Mr. C,

The Taiwanese are very used to having more than 100 channels. So, if a music video doesn't attract Taiwanese visually within few seconds, people will not hesitate to change the channel. So it is very important to catch people's eyes within a second. Without knowing the Korean language, the only way to attract Taiwanese interest is the visuals and the high skilled performance. From this perspective, K-pop was successful in catching the attention of Taiwanese audiences, but it was not so easy to promote K-pop stars when Korean Wave started because of the language barrier (Interview with author, March 2009).

Pop music was not part of the Korean wave in the beginning, when the Taiwanese music industry featured original soundtracks of Korean soap operas. Because the number of Korean soap opera fans has been increasing since 1999, producing original soundtracks has been the easiest way for many music companies to expand the Korean pop market. However, most of them did not want to risk producing single albums of Korean pop. According to the sales manager at Alpha Music Company, who I interviewed in March 2009,

We started to produce most Korean soap operas because we did not think that K-pop could attract enough Taiwanese fans. I assume K-pop doesn't have so much of a bright future in Taiwan. But, because Korean soap operas are all dubbed in Mandarin Chinese, Taiwanese don't feel so close to Korean lyrics. If they cannot enjoy the lyrics, I don't think there will be that much future. K-pop is very hard to follow because we have no chance to hear Korean in different cultural productions such as soap operas or films. That is why I think K-pop is limited.

Nevertheless, after building the fan base with original soundtracks, the Taiwanese music industry has made a constant effort to extend the K-pop market. Except for original soundtracks, Korean pop gained widespread media attention in 2000, when the male duo CLON made a successful debut. Although CLON became the first Korean group recognized in Taiwan, Korean pop already existed in other forms, notably local covers of Korean songs that had been recorded since the early 1990s. According to radio DJ Jau Yuan,

The CLON members were the most important artists to introduce Korean pop music into the Taiwanese market. After they saw the group's performance, fans gained a very deep impression of Korean pop. Before CLON appeared on the Taiwanese stage, Korean singers were not as impressive or attractive to audiences (Interview with author, 23 May 2002).

The situation changed when Rock Music Company issued CLON's first album in Taiwan. According to Rock's sales manager, Jack, who was in charge of Korean imports when I interviewed him, CLON were successful because of their trendy image, style, and dancing skills. Releasing a K-pop album was risky, but the group's image and skill encouraged ROCK, since CLON's specialties were hard to find in other Asian artists. CLON proved successful in helping to secure the place of K-pop in Taiwan. Their first album sold more than 400,000 copies – a high and fast rate of sales within the local market. The fast tempos of CLON's songs, paired with a visually focused performance style, meant that the audience could listen without needing to understand the Korean lyrics.

Fans demanded more, and in 2000 Korean pop began to boom, not just in Taiwan, but elsewhere in Asia. Korean groups such as H.O.T, NRG, Baby Vox, SES and Shinhwa began to penetrate the Taiwanese and Chinese music markets. The positive reactions they received encouraged Korean musicians and their managers to look for entry into additional markets, such as Singapore, Malaysia and Mongolia. However, the popularity of a few K-pop idols did not affect the majority of the Taiwanese audience as J-pop had, and was limited to a small number of K-pop fans until in 2009, when the Korean boy band Super Junior's *Sorry Sorry* and Wonder Girls's *Tell Me* had a huge success, sparking the K-pop boom. According to Alpha Music Company, the release of Super Junior's album *Sorry Sorry* marked the beginning of the second wave of K-pop. Simple rhythms and melodies with easy-to-learn dance steps secured a big hit and attracted people to imitate both lyrics and movements. It almost created an 'imitation boom' (according to my email Interview with Phillip, 9 April 2012). Since then, more and more girl and boy groups, such as Beast, Girl's Generation, Shinee, 2PM and 2AM, have been entering the Taiwanese market and attracting Taiwanese fans.

The most successful K-pop idol is still Super Junior. Super Junior made its debut in Korea in 2005 and slowly started to gain fame in other Asian countries, starting with Thailand and China in 2006, and followed by Taiwan in 2007 and Japan in 2008. Super Junior adopted the idea of splitting into subgroups for different markets: Super Junior-M ('M' stands for Mandarin), for example, was devised especially for the Mandarin-speaking market. In Taiwan, Super Junior released two albums during the period from 2007 to 2008, one of them in Mandarin, and both well-received. However, the group's biggest success came from their third complete album, *Sorry Sorry*, their best-selling album to date in South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, China and the Philippines.

K-pop achieved stable sales in Taiwan after Super Junior's success, and music companies now compete to import K-Pop. Also, from the Korean side, entertainment companies promote their stars by holding many small concerts to publicise albums and meet fans. Although the popularity of K-pop is still rising, Taiwanese music companies claim that the Korean market is still not that big because of the language barrier, and is limited to young, good-looking K-pop idols. Young fans started to be interested in the Korean entertainment business package that marketed and promoted the band members' good looks, and then they started to be interested in the music. However, my observation of the K-pop scene and interaction with fans suggest that the K-pop boom in Taiwan is strong and active. During fifteen days of

my stay in Taiwan in March and April 2012, three K-pop groups gave concerts in Taiwan. These were Beast, 2PM and Big Bang. Contradicting the skeptical comments from music companies, K-pop has gained the Taiwanese people's favor. The sales rate of Korean albums is higher than that of English albums, and K-pop sells more than J-pop. It seems that the K-pop boom will continue for a while, but as the Taiwanese music industry insiders say, how long the second Korean Wave will continue in Taiwan depends on the Korean entertainment business. Will Korean entertainment companies be able to continue to fulfill Taiwanese fans' needs? This is the key to survival. As long as Korea makes products that Taiwan likes, Taiwanese fans will continue to consume them.

Supportive Fans

There are many reasons why K-pop has become so popular in Taiwan, but an interesting point raised by music company professionals is the way that Taiwanese fans support their idols. Throughout my fieldwork, the support of Taiwanese fans in the dissemination of K-pop was often mentioned. Therefore, I observed and interviewed K-pop fans to understand how they participate in the K-pop phenomenon.

While doing research, I came across a taxi driver who helps fans chase K-pop stars. Around 20 taxis in Taiwan work for K-pop fans, and Mr. Lien was one of the first taxi drivers who did so, back in 2008. Interviewing him and his coworkers elicited much information about the characteristics and roles of Taiwanese fans. Mr. Lien believes that K-pop is the most popular music in Taiwan at this moment because he can charge the highest prices for chasing K-pop stars – three times as much as for chasing Taiwanese stars. Moreover, the fans who chase K-pop idols are not just teenagers; many older people do so. Mr. Lien has worked for fans up to 50 years old, though he estimated that typical fans are working women about 30 years old. According to him, 'K-pop concerts are very expensive. So in order to follow them and go to their concerts, you need money. So most of them are working people' (interview with author, March 2012). Chasing stars is prohibited in Korea and Japan, but not in Taiwan, so many Japanese fans travel to Taiwan to see K-pop stars. Taiwan is where fans can meet and share information. Taiwanese fans sometimes can speak both Chinese and Japanese, and their language ability helps them share information with Chinese and Japanese fans.

With the information provided by Mr. Lien, I went to K-pop idol Beast's arrival in the Taipei airport on 31 March 2012. It was surprising how many fans had gathered there, considering that Beast is not one of the most famous idol groups. Some of the fans explained that they had come to the airport the day before, because, for the most popular K-pop stars, such as Super Junior, fans will not have a place to stand if they arrive only a few hours beforehand. Compared to Super Junior, Beast was not that popular, but it was still amazing to see how many fans lined up for their arrival. After they came out of the airport, fans scrambled to get into taxis they had booked earlier and to chase them to their hotel.

After chasing the car of Beast to the Formosa Hotel, I had a chance to interview fans waiting for the next appearance of the group. The taxis were also waiting. The

interviews revealed many interesting things. Several fans were chasing Beast because they just wanted to see them up close, but most were formal members of Beast fan clubs. According to a 24-year-old university student who refused to give her name, they were members of a Mainland Chinese fan club, of which they were Taiwan-based representatives (interview with author, 31 March 2012). They try to follow K-pop stars and provide information, pictures and videos to fans on the Mainland. The student said Mainland Chinese have information about the stars, but that the Taiwanese have more chance to attend concerts, see them live, chase them, and get close. Several fans said the reason that chasing stars is unrestricted is that Taiwanese fans are respectful: they never try to touch the stars, but merely chase them. Taiwanese fans emphasized the difference between Taiwanese and Chinese fans. When I asked them if they would stay at the Formosa Hotel so they could be closer to Beast, they said they would never do anything to bother Beast. According to one fan, 'Chinese fans sometimes book the hotel next to the idols and try to break in to their room and all that, but we don't like to do such things. All we want is to show them [K-pop idols] that we welcome them here and support them by posting nice shots on the fan club website so the other fans can also see the things we saw' (interview with a fan, 31 March 2012). I saw a few Japanese fans visiting Taiwan just for this purpose, and Taiwanese fans helped them get more information about Beast's schedule.

When the Korean Wave started, around ten years ago, Taiwanese fans played an important role in its dissemination because the internet and cable or media were not so widespread as they are today. It was hard for many at that time to get information rapidly, and Taiwanese fans helped spread the news about K-pop (email interview with Phillip, 9 April 2012). But now the internet conveys information without a time gap, through unlimited wireless connections. Fans worldwide can easily watch Super Junior or SNSD's first on-air music video at the time that it is being screened at home. Even soap operas with records for high audiences can be shown almost simultaneously – with Chinese subtitles – all over the world. Therefore, the influence of Taiwanese fans over the K-pop boom has lessened; however, they still take close-up photos by waiting for stars and chasing them, then sharing their images on Mandarin-speaking fan club sites.

Conclusion

Since the beginning of the Korean Wave in early 2000, Taiwan has played a central role in its success. According to Lili at Gala TV,

Koreans think Taiwan is not that important spot because it is too small. Korean entertainment company focuses on promoting their stars in China or Japan. They think it is not worth investing in Taiwan. But they are totally wrong. Taiwan is very important in East Asian pop culture because of geographical location and because of its language. Taiwan is the central spot for Korean Wave (interview with author, 2002).

Because of the language and culture, as well as a liberal free market and the supportive fans, many record companies have chosen Taiwan as an entry point into the Chinese market. In effect, Taiwan has been a trial market for the Chinese market; when stars or styles are successful in Taiwan, Chinese record companies take an

interest in promoting them. Despite initial skepticism, K-pop has successfully penetrated the Taiwanese music market and become the most robust foreign genre in the contemporary music scene.

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