

## Regional Entertainment

# Battle of two pops

KOREA AND JAPAN BATTLE FOR THE HEARTS AND MINDS OF ASIAN CONSUMERS IN A WAR OF POP CULTURES

By ELIZABETH KERR in HONG KONG

Gross national cool. That was how *Time* magazine described Japan's pop culture state back in 2003. The feature story entitled "What's Right With Japan" investigated how Japan's culture industries were reinventing the country's flagging economy and how the country was "transforming itself into Asia's cultural dynamo". At the same time, South Korea was beginning to come out of its self-imposed shell, and the Korean Wave or Hallyu (appreciation of all things South Korean), said to be coined by Beijing culture writers in the late 1990s, got under way.

In the decade since those twin phenomena erupted, Japan's influence has largely been mired in critical acclaim. Japan led the way in Asia in terms of content and artistry and has been there for decades. Japanese artists are most often described as innovative: filmmakers like Miike Takashi, Kurosawa Kiyoshi, and Kore-Eda Hirokazu; musicians Shiina Ringo, UA, and Bump of Chicken; and manga writers like the feminist leaning Yoshinaga Fumi and visceral maestro Otomo Katsuhiro. Japanese

television — or J-dorama — had its moment in the sun too, and made pan-Asian superstars out of Kimura Takuya, Takenouchi Yutaka and Shibasaki Kou. *Time's* story cited trade statistics for Japan's exported culture industries as worth US\$12.5 billion in 2003. That's a lot of Hello Kitty — and that number excludes the gaming boom led by Wii and PlayStation.

Then there's Hallyu that unofficially kicked off when a fresh wave of filmmakers, Western-influenced singers and a television industry got creative. *Jewel in the Palace* and *Winter Sonata* were two series that, like their Japanese counterparts, created stars (Ji Jin-hee, Choi Ji-

woo) and sold incredibly well in overseas markets — chiefly the Chinese mainland, Singapore, Hong Kong and Japan. The South Korean film industry is the de facto inventor of modern revenge cinema: the acclaimed *Oldboy* and the recent, ultra-violent thriller *I Saw the Devil* (which allegedly inspired sprints to the restroom at last year's Toronto International Film Festival) are just two of a new sub-genre that's starting to filter out into other cinemas the way "Hong Kong action" of the 1980s once did. And no one does boy-and-girl-bands the way South Korea does. Current chart-toppers like Girls' Generation and 2NE1 are as likely to be heard in Los Angeles and Kuala Lumpur as they are in Seoul.

There is a basic factor at play in the appeal of the two similar but

distinct pops. "If I have to pick the common fundamental appeal of both South Korean and Japanese pop cultures, I would point out that they are well-balanced, East-West hybridized cultural forms," theorizes Sun Jung, an author and research fellow at Victoria University's School of Communication and the Arts.

"South Korean TV dramas show Asia's sentiments and traditional ideologies such as familism and Confucianism. At the same time, K-pop and J-pop are very Westernized and modernized, adopting various Western popular music genres and visual images, and advanced cultural aesthetic forms. Within the very capitalistic entertainment industry system of South Korea and Japan, these mixed elements often create something uniquely 'cool'. In short, they are familiar yet superior," she says.

Though conflicting reports have South Korea's star on the wane, it is that country that has taken the zeitgeist lead. The South Korean Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism reported exports of cultural products which include TV shows, movies and music plunged in 2007 but Jung's research found they were up to US\$18 billion in 2008. Perhaps as a reaction to that, Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry is readying a new department for 2011 to "give financial aid to related firms and help them secure sales

distributors overseas," as *Kyodo News* reported in October 2010.

"I would say, although the Korean Wave is seemingly fading in the Asian region, it actually is becoming wider, richer and diversified," argues Jung. Admitting that television appeal may be dropping, interest in Hallyu is simply shifting. It's now "more significant as it is expanding to different genres of pop culture. K-pop and J-pop are two of the most popular music genres among youths in Singapore. Also, it is now expanding beyond Asia into various regions in Europe, North and South America, and Arab countries," she explains.

Also key to the longevity of Hallyu is the widening of its market base. "Its consumer group has also been expanded to include the teens and those in their 20s," Jung says.

The future is up for grabs. South Korea has been more aggressive in its marketing, but Japan isn't out of the game. They influence each other as much as others; American singer Gwen Stefani with her hit single *Harajuku Girls* being a notable example and Chinese singer Huang Xiaoming being accused of pilfering from K-pop star Rain's third CD. In the end, Jung sees it as a case of globalization of art that speaks to the Facebook generation. "I see many aspects of cultural hybridizations and interactions around the contemporary Asian pop scene, and I believe that this hybridization dynamic will become faster and more diverse, possibly due to the development of new media technologies." Maybe the battle is just beginning.



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Jung Ji-hoon "Rain" (left), a Korean pop star, actor and pan-Asian heartthrob, has become the personification of Hallyu (appreciation of all things Korean); Hong Kong goes Korean in the remake of John Woo's classic actioner "A Better Tomorrow", an example of Korea's current cultural dominance.



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