

FOCUS: ENTERTAINMENT



THE SINGING AND DANCING group YHBOYS has seven members, age 10 to 13. They now have more than 27,000 followers on Sina Weibo. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

A BOY BAND IS BORN

Youngsters dream of fame. Entertainment executives dream of making a fortune. Here is where they meet.

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First, there is the name, with some suggesting it has an uncanny resemblance to TFBoys, a Chinese teen boy band put together by the Beijing company Time Fengjun Entertainment, and which gained rapid popularity, essentially through the internet, after issuing its debut promotional video *Ten Years*, in August 2013.

However, for every person who raises questions about Yue Hua Entertainment's commercial intent with the latest gaggle of youngsters, there seem to be 100 others who cannot get enough of them and eagerly await more videos — and the merchandise that is doubtless on its way.

To bring the group together, seven boys from Jiangxi and Hebei provinces, the Inner Mongolia autonomous region and Taiwan were chosen from more than 3,000 candidates who applied in an internet talent search, says Du Hua, founder and chief executive of Yue Hua Entertainment, which has been creating Chinese pop idol groups since 2009.

Five of those boys appeared in the video released last month; the two others will appear in two videos to be released on the internet this month. Eventually, more boys will be added to the group.

The recruitment process and getting the boys ready to appear in public took more than two years. Having invested so much time and effort in bringing the YHBOYS together, Du has laid big plans for them. In fact those plans appear to go well beyond China. A Twitter account, @YHBoysGlobal, was set up for them,

although for the moment it has just a few hundred followers.

Plans are also afoot for a YHGIRLS group whose members will be between 16 and 18 years old.

"There is huge potential for developing Chinese pop groups. More than 200 pop groups are set up every year. China has a huge population, but only a dozen or so new groups appear each year, and most of them fizzle out, Du says.

"These seven boys are not just good looking but also talented, some playing instruments, such as the guitar and piano, and some dancing hip-hop and speaking English. We want them to be role models for Chinese youngsters."

The members of YHBOYS and their parents contacted for this article declined to be interviewed, but it is apparent that at least one of the boys, who is 11, is already well into his show business apprenticeship.

Zhang Minghao, born in Harbin, Heilongjiang province, made his TV debut when he was 9, performing on *Go! Baby!*, a variety show produced and aired on Anhui Satellite TV in which youngsters take part in quizzes and show off various talents. Zhang has since appeared in other variety shows aired by Hunan Satellite TV and Beijing TV. Last April he starred in a movie, *After School*, directed by Liu Yijun, whose theme is school bullying.

The other members of the group are Guo Dianjia, Li Linma, Liu Guanyi, Sun Jiakai, Zhang Enshuo and Zhang Junyi.

Another priority for the company is ensuring that YHBOYS fans get every possible opportunity to observe their training, rehearsals and the minutiae of their daily lives, which in turn becomes fodder for live-streaming on social media.

"It's all about communication," Du says. "The boys grow up and their fans are able to see the ways they are changing and how they are progressing. This kind of bond between the pop group and fans is important."

All-girl version

Even as Yue Hua Entertainment prepares to put a girl band together, Nook (Beijing) Culture Media Co, which publishes the fashion magazine *Xin Wei* — whose target readership is college students and young female office workers — continues to seek the next Chinese female pop stars through a competition called China Girl.

The annual competition, which began in 2010 as a beauty contest, sends its top 10 winners to Japan, first for training as models and later given a chance to be presented as a pop idol.

Xin Wei is the Chinese-language version of the Japanese magazine *Vivi*, one of Asia's top-selling fashion

magazines. Editions localized for Taiwan, Hong Kong and Thailand are also published.

Zhu Guangrui, publisher of *Xin Wei*, says that when China Girl was first held, the winners' main job was modeling for the magazine and attending fashion events in China and Japan. Over the years the competition has expanded so that successful entrants take part in TV shows, movies and video games.

Jia Qi, 28, from Inner Mongolia, was selected as one of the top winners from China Girl in 2010. She learned traditional Chinese folk dance starting when she was 7 and later graduated from Minzu University of China in Beijing.

She is now a TV presenter and trains others who have been successful in the China Girl competition for careers in the entertainment industry.

"Unlike in South Korea, where pop groups' managing companies keep a very tight rein, in China we have a lot of freedom," Jia says.

"The lines between various industries, such as TV, movies, online broadcasting and modeling, are blurred. Competition is fierce, and these days, young people are much more hungry for fame than they were when China Girl began. From a very early age they want to become a star."

Zhu says she is keen to create stars with something special, rather than just South Korean-Japanese pop



star clones. This month her company plans to open a school in four floors of an office building in Tianjin that will recruit young people who hope to become pop idols.

One of the hardest tasks in creating a pop group is coming up with something that is highly distinctive and adaptable to the individual styles of members, thus setting the group apart from other pop acts.

"Content is crucial," Zhu says. "We will design courses tailor-made for each student. Some will be good singers and others good dancers. If you want to attract fans you have to make maximum use of your own specialty."

Any young person keen on an acting or music career once required a talent agency — or had to impress somebody enough to want to record them or stage professional performances, she says; but now, by virtue of the internet and social media, a person can attain overnight fame simply by posting a video online.

Besides looking for newcomers to the scene, Zhu is also interested in young performers who already have an online fan base.

"With a fan base, and us giving them training, they are highly likely to strike success in the market," Zhu says. "For attractive young men and women, the idea of being in a pop group seems glamorous, but it involves extremely hard work, and you really need to enjoy what you are doing. Yes, you may look fabulous on stage, but behind the scenes you have to go through a heck of a lot physically and mentally."

For producers, it pays to emulate others' success

By CHEN NAN

In the late 1980s and early 90s one of the most popular boy groups in China was Xiao Hu Dui, or Little Tigers — a trio from Taiwan. The group, which was founded in 1988, was made up of Alec Su, Nicky Wu and Julian Chen. They disbanded in 1995 after releasing 12 studio albums, starring in movies and winning acclaim with their squeaky-clean dance moves and catchy pop songs.

However, over the ensuing 18 years, success was elusive for made-in-China boy bands, most fading into pop-world oblivion after a hit or two. Instead, it was groups such as the Backstreet Boys, Big Bang and SMAP — from Western countries, Japan and South Korea — that dominated the Chinese market.

But in 2013, along came the TFBoys. What seemed to give the group, consisting of Wang Junkai and Wang Yuan (both from Chongqing) and Yiyang Qianxi (from Huaihua, Hunan province) instant appeal was their fresh, handsome schoolboy image.

The group went on to become one of the most successful Chinese pop groups in the country, evidenced by the contemporary Chinese barometer of success Sina Weibo, the social media service, on which the group has 20 million followers.

In January it was the opening act in the most-watched TV program in China, celebrating Chinese New Year — the CCTV Spring Festival Gala — which is said to have had more than 1 billion viewers.

The three TFBoys have also launched solo careers, including Wang Junkai starring in the film epic *The Great Wall* alongside Matt Damon and Andy Lau. Wang Yuan was a delegate for China at the sixth United Nations Economic and Social Council youth forum and gave a speech in English calling for equal access to quality education worldwide.

It is with that kind of success in mind that Chinese entertainment companies have been toiling away looking for the right act that can emulate the TFBoys and thus deliver huge commercial success.

One company is Yue Hua Entertainment, whose choice of name for its latest musical creation, YHBOYS, may be a subtle salute to the TFBoys, or perhaps reflects the hope of riding on the group's coattails.

In creating boy bands and girl bands in China, emulation seems to be the name of the game, with Chinese companies closely following the lead of top record label and talent agencies in Japan.

Following the success of the Japanese girl group AKB48 — whose letters are an abbreviation for Akihabara, the members' home district in Tokyo, and 48 is the number of



TFBOYS



SMAP

members the group originally had — a Chinese girl group sprang up in 2013 in Shanghai bearing the name SNH48. The Chinese group is modeled closely on the Tokyo group. Its 48 members are all about 20 years old.

China Music Business News, an online news platform for China's music industry, says that about 20 boy groups will be introduced to audiences in China this year.

In December Huang Rui, the former manager of TFBoys, launched a project called Original Plan, in which Chinese pop idols 10 to 18 years old are recruited through both open auditions and a network of scouts.

Before they are exposed to the world, millions of potential fans will be drip-fed images of the performers in the form of cartoons — one way of keeping them hooked and connected to the project, according to Huang.

"We need to come up with original ideas. You can't just simply go and try to produce duplicates of others' success stories," Huang says.



BACKSTREET BOYS PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY