

Post-90s fashion: The Hallyu say!

South Korean fashion, music craze sweeps up Hong Kong culture, outdoing what local brands or celebrities could have possibly inspired. As Andrea Deng reports, local youths are digging in to avoid a 'negative spotlight'.

They listen to Rain, dance to the beat of the Big Bang and they're part of the New Evolution of the 21st Century (2NE1), which for many post-90s kids is a girls generation. Today's Hong Kong youths are tuning in to Seoul — K-Pop, Korean popular music and the fashion culture that it helped spawn.

"Hallyu the Korean Wave", now sweeping the world, is a global marketing juggernaut shaped through a masterful collaboration of South Korea's entertainment industry, the ROK government and leading manufacturers like Samsung and Hyundai. Time Magazine called it "South Korea's greatest export".

"If you go to Tsim Sha Tsui and into Rise Commercial Building, almost all the boutiques are selling South Korean fashion. You see magazine clippings of South Korean pop stars wearing the clothes the store is showcasing. In that cultural milieu, there's not much local pop stars can do. They're overshadowed," Shadow Chow Wing-yan, a 23-year-old shop assistant at Sheung Wan's Cheap Monday boutique, told China Daily. "I believe it would be difficult for any local fashion to reach the level of popularity you see with South Korean fashion," she concluded.

Celebrity influence

"I would say celebrity is the major influence on the post-90s generation. On Facebook, Yahoo, YouTube, TV, there's always stuff about South Korean pop stars. With friends, all you talk about is Korean pop stars. I've been through it. I'd say 'oh I was in a boutique the other day and such and such is the fad this season.' And then somebody would say, 'yeah because such and such pop star was wearing it,'" said Chow.

The secret of Hallyu is the meticulous packaging of South Korea's pop icons. From the age of 11 or 12, they are groomed as role models, given culture, poise, taught how to move, coiffed, choreographed, promoted by teams of marketers — turned out in the latest South Korean fashions by leading experts — and blasted into cyberspace via YouTube for all the world to see. K-pop is not just popular music. It's a culture, a lifestyle and the sales of fashion brands, sports drinks and manufactured goods go way higher than music sales.

If one checks out the fashions seen on the streets of Tsim Sha Tsui or Causeway Bay, the post-90s crowds turned out in supreme caps, crop tops, oversized tops matched with tight mini dresses or high-waisted shorts. Clothes are loose fitting, whimsical, colorful, frequently asymmetrical and often sport colored lace. The city's streets have become a showcase for fashions worn by South Korean pop icons featured in popular magazines, even in "Vogue". Pop-star Kim Soo Hyun, who spent three days in Hong Kong in April, did a shoot for Calvin Klein denims.

One of the latest fads, Chow said, marked the return of a popular fashion of yore: Air Jordan sneakers the classic collection, originally promoted by former National Basketball Association great Michael Jordan. But it was



Members of the post-90s generation, desperate to express and identify themselves, are no less crazy about fashion although their common attire is the school uniform.

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JONATHAN LI LIK-CHUNG
FASHION CONSULTANT, I.T.

G-Dragon — the 25-year-old South Korean songwriter, rap, hip-hop and pop star and, noted fashion icon wore a pair of the classic Air Jordan-4s in a music video. G-Dragon is a member of Big Bang, just about the biggest bang there is in the K-pop Universe.

Taste of crazy fashion

The price of Air Jordan shoes went super nova. Five years ago, the post-80s weren't that into the sneakers. A pair cost about HK\$800. Now they're HK\$1,800. You can find some real classics for up to HK\$6,000.

Many Chinese who moved abroad on working holidays are coming home bringing a taste for crazy fashion led by brands like Hollister and A&F. These are "ABC style", as Chow called them. America and Europe aren't completely shut out. They still play a role in local fashion.

"Basically, if you go for Western styles, you'd visit the major chain stores. If you want South Korean styles, you go to the smaller boutiques. And there's nothing else much you could choose from," said Chow.

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Tina Wong, 18, stepped out of her fears and showcased her fashion tips via Instagram and YouTube, attracting thousands of followers.

Baby steps to self-expression

Everybody wants to be a real individual — especially when you're in school and wrapped up in a school uniform meant to eradicate individuality. Blossoming into full self-expression presents challenges in a culture where life's most embarrassing moments could turn into ammunition, on somebody else's Facebook Timeline.

"I talked to a few post-90s girls and as I had guessed, it's very easy to have a negative spotlight shone on you," said Jonathan Li Lik-chung, a fashion consultant at I.T. and a wardrobe stylist.

"It's so easy to be ridiculed in Hong Kong and people can be really harsh. It's such a small city made smaller by the Internet. If

girls are not confident about the way they look and what they have to say, it's unlikely they would put it out in the open subject to ridicule and derision. In the United States, you might still be criticized but it's much less likely that you will become some sort of infamous, city-wide online sensation," said Li.

For the young Hong Kong netizens, an example of "city-wide known online infamous sensation" would be Ruby Tang, born in 1993 and active in around 2010, posting self-made videos on YouTube. Tang posted videos about her life, sometimes offered beauty tips. She was loved by a large fan following — at least she was for a while.

In April 2010, however, she made

a video in which she mocked her peers, in flawed English, for speaking in flawed English. Her social miscue touched off laughter and ridicule all aimed at her. The ebullient young woman deleted most of her videos and faded away. She posted one more video in 2013. Her YouTube channel still had 9,319 subscribers.

It took Tina Wong a while to be encouraged by her friends to put herself under the spotlight. The 18-year-old started to post her fashion and beauty tips videos on YouTube late last year, posting her "outfit-of-the-day" on Instagram and running a blog to showcase all her fashion sense.

"I was not that into school work.

But I find huge passion in fashion and love contriving what clothes to wear and how I can match different items."

"But I was so afraid," she recalled. She made some videos and didn't upload them online. When she did upload those videos, and received a few negative comments, she felt upset even with comments saying that she "moved too much" in the video.

"I think Hong Kong people can be very critical and they seem easy enough to be able to just pick 10 flaws that you have. I don't like such environment and it makes the city look all the more narrow-minded," said Wong.

After a few months of frustra-



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SHADOW CHOW WING-YAN
SHOP ASSISTANT



Local culture finds it hard to compete with South Korean and American pop culture in inspiring youth fashion.

tion, the 18-year-old, however, has become more and more confident and decided that she would want to be a stylist. "I would not quit what I want to do just because of what others think of me," she said. She has

now 17,000 followers on Instagram and more than 3,000 subscribers on her YouTube channel with each video viewed 6,000 to 8,000 times. The numbers grew from late last year and are still growing.