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Waves on China's Shore

Ryan Bardusch

Introduction

Within recent years, there has been an explosive cultural phenomenon known in much of the world simply as “Hallyu.” Hallyu, or in English, the “Korean Wave” is most eloquently defined by Sooyeon Lee as “the unprecedented popularity of Korean pop culture, especially television serials and films, in the Asian region starting in the 1990s.”¹ The phenomenon is typically traced to approximately the mid-90s, when Korean television dramas such as “What’s Love Got To Do With It?” became more popular with Chinese viewership than their Japanese counterparts.² Since these were also much cheaper to import due to the lesser royalty fees, they were welcomed by broadcasters as well.³

Starting in 2009 and continuing to today, Hallyu has seen what Sooyeon Lee refers to as the “second wave” phenomenon.⁴ After the popularity of later dramas from the first wave, much of the interest surrounding the Korean Wave had died off, until in

¹ Lee, Sooyeon. 2012. *The Structure of the Appeal of Korean Wave Texts*. Korea Observer 43 (3): 447-469.

² Chua, Beng Huat. *The Growth of Korean Cultural Industries and the Korean Wave*. In East Asian Pop Culture Analysing the Korean Wave. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press; 2008.

³ Sung, Sang-Yeon. "Constructing a New Image. Hallyu in Taiwan." *European Journal of East Asian Studies*: 25-45.

⁴ Lee, *Structure of the Appeal of Korean Wave Texts*. 447-469.

following years, the spread of Korean culture saw a renewal, specifically its idol singers becoming more popular at home and abroad. Even with a main focus on the South Korean market, artists associated with Hallyu have had multiple #1 spots on Japan's Oricon charts, performed sold-out concerts on American soil, and have touched nearly every corner of the globe through various forms of social media.

Part of this success can also be attributed to the success of Korea's star-making model. To quote Shin Hyunjoon, "The organization of Korean entertainment companies is called the "in-house" system... This system integrates 'production' and 'management' and all other necessary functions for developing and training talents."⁵ By organizing themselves in this vertically integrated pattern, the agency can create their talent and package it themselves as a product, rather than scouting out a band from outside their agency, and forcing it to fit their mold. In doing so, Hallyu is an incredibly efficient method of both marketing and spreading cultural awareness.

EXO, a boy band divided into two smaller groups for promotions and developed using this production model, have seen unprecedented attention from their fandoms in Korea and China, going on to become the first artist in 11 years to sell over 1,000,000 copies of an album in South Korea⁶. With four natively Chinese members (now two) and many of their other members focusing attention on learning the Chinese language, the groups expend all effort in promoting in both China and South Korea. By providing a viable sample in both the Korean entertainment market and the Chinese market, EXO

⁵ Shin, Hyunjoon. "Have You Ever Seen The Rain? And Who'll Stop The Rain?: The Globalizing Project Of Korean Pop (K-pop)." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*: 507-23.

⁶ "EXO Breaks 12-Year Drought, "XOXO" Becomes Million Seller." Soompi. December 26, 2013. Accessed January 11, 2015.

makes the perfect case study to analyze the effectiveness of the international marketing of Hallyu idols.

Studying the EXO phenomenon

When evaluating the success of EXO in China, two major theories for their success spring to mind. The first is a so-called “renting out” of Korean culture. EXO-M is predominantly a Mandarin group, with four of its original six members hailing from mainland China. However, despite the nationalities of this members, it still remains, in name, a Korean group, under a Korean label, and EXO, when treated as a whole, is predominantly comprised of Korean members. Because of this Korean model of “idol stars,” and because of the distinctly Korean qualities of the group, fans are attracted to EXO.

The second theory is that, despite being a Korean group, it is the Chinese features of the group, rather than the Korean aspects, that allow its success. Even from the early days of Hallyu, there has been an increased focus on both Taiwan and Mainland China. After CLON’s breakthrough performance at the *Nanxing* 101 concert in 1999, their album sold over 400,000 copies in Taiwan, and the door was opened for other Korean artists to promote in Taiwan.⁷ After this initial opening, many popular Korean groups came through on promotion cycles, but until recently, no group has successfully focused exclusively on promotion in China until EXO-M, while its counterpart, EXO-K, promotes in Korea.

⁷ Sung, Sang-Yeon. "Constructing a New Image. Hallyu in Taiwan." *European Journal of East Asian Studies*: 25-45.

In order to determine which of these theories is the more valid, and in an attempt to understand the fandom on the whole, a series of interviews were conducted with Chinese EXO fans (without discrimination as to EXO-M or EXO-K.) For the sake of their privacy, when referred to in this article, they will be addressed by online handles, rather than by their own names. As expected of the fans of a Korean male idol group, this random sample was composed of mainly younger girls, most of which happened to be in the range of 20-22 years old. Each was asked a series of fifteen questions, regarding their fandom, as well as their views of both the Korean and Chinese entertainment sectors.

Consensus of fans

In order to determine the success of EXO's marketing, one of the most important points to understand is how these fans came in contact with EXO itself, and how they grew to become fans. Many of those interviewed stated that TV performances aired in China were the first time they were exposed to EXO, and it was this exposure that lead them to seek out more of the group. However, many of those who were exposed to EXO through TV performances were already familiar with K-Pop before experiencing EXO for the first time, whether through more popular groups such as Girls' Generation and Big Bang, or less popular ones such as CNBlue. In addition to this, a small section of the interviewees claimed their friends had been the ones to expose them to EXO first.

As with all Korean idol groups, the predominant goal is, of course, to sell albums. However, as Sooyeon Lee notes, "the appeal of K-pop is as much visual as it is vocal." She further goes on to suggest that the appearance of the performer is one of, if not the

most, important aspect to the draw of Kpop itself.⁸ It would seem that the statistics would agree with Lee's sentiment, as the participants, when asked about which aspect of EXO was most important, almost unanimously put both individual member's personality and appearance above both music and dancing. Keeping this structure of appeal in mind, it is not uncommon to see fans claim a member as their "bias," the one member they hold above all others in the group, and the one they intend to support to the fiercest degree.

When asked who their bias was, almost every member's name appeared, with Chinese names showing up in only slightly higher frequency. Those who claimed a bias toward Kris or Lu Han, two members who left the group in 2014 and are currently suing their parent company, often by default gave a second bias from the group's current formation,⁹ stating they support both EXO and their original bias' solo activities. In fact, one fan, who was initially a fan of only EXO-M member Kris, and claimed EXO to be the exception to her rule of not liking Korean music, still supports other EXO members.¹⁰ In addition, those who stated a Chinese member of the group as their bias were asked how they would feel toward their bias if they were not natively Chinese, and these answers were typically along the lines of DIY自己的咖啡's response:

“Yes! I feel that if they're Chinese or Korean, it really makes no difference!

After Luhan, my next few favorites are all Korean.”¹¹

⁸ Lee, *Structure of the Appeal of Korean Wave Texts*. 447-469.

⁹ Interview with All My, February 2015

¹⁰ Interview with All My, February 2015

¹¹ Interview with DIY自己的咖啡, March 2015

Despite many fans' love for the Chinese members, many also claimed allegiance to the Korean members of the group, members that typically would not come to China on promotional cycles (with the exception of large, self-hosted concerts.)

In terms of their views of EXO on the whole, views were incredibly varying. When confronted with the question of preference toward either subgroup, almost all the interviewees stated that although EXO is in fact subdivided into two separate groups, they believe that EXO should always be treated as a 12-member group, even after the departure of two of its members last year (Wu Yifan, or "Kris" in May, and Lu Han in October.) Those claiming preference for one of EXO's two subgroups always claimed preference toward the one containing their "bias," and in addition, all interviewees claiming preference stated they still paid attention to the activities of both subgroups. When confronted with the question of whether or not they could feel the same level of passion toward a Chinese group, beyond one fan who was previously a fan of Chinese singer Jay Chou, the standard answer seemed to be "I can't say for sure, since I have not experienced it yet."¹² However, unlike these fans' hopeful feeling of being able to this sentiment was typically expressed with some doubt,¹³ and in some cases, completely denying the possibility that they could follow a Chinese group.¹⁴

This feeling of doubt toward being able to like another Chinese group may be tied to another notable finding from the opinion of these fans. When asked about their perceived differences between the Chinese and Korean entertainment markets, a handful of the interviewees stated that they feel China is attempting to create what is

¹² Interview with Chunchun不蠢, March 2015

¹³ Interview with Qing, February 2015

¹⁴ Interview with Face, February 2015

described in the second proposed theory; essentially, a Chinese-based network of idol singers. As pointed out by 石田妮可, one of EXO-M's biggest competitors is a Chinese-native boy band called TFBoys, with fans of EXO and TFBoys getting into fights on Weibo.¹⁵ However, as China's entrance to the modern world has been the result of an economic boom, many of its industries are still struggling to mature, and almost all of the interviewees pointed out the flaws of the still-struggling Chinese music industry, specifically the disorganized nature of the industry as a whole, in addition to the lack of training of its artists. As one of the interviewees put it best:

"There really weren't many idol groups in China before, or at least, there weren't many in the mainland. In recent years, they've started to imitate the Korean groups, but compared to South Korea, these groups are immature and need to be developed further; after all, Hallyu is a pillar of Korean industry, but in China, entertainment can't even be considered mainstream."¹⁶

Conclusion

From the results of this survey, multiple conclusions can be drawn regarding the success of EXO in China. Firstly, while EXO-M provides an effective localization tool for SM Entertainment's promotions in China, it is not absolutely necessary to the success of the group to have an entirely different subgroup focused on these promotions. Despite SM Entertainment's intense overwhelming presence in China, their presence in Korea,

¹⁵ Interview with 石田妮可, March 2015

¹⁶ Interview with Chunchun不蠢, March 2015

as well as the presence of other Hallyu idols in Korea, is strong enough that the Korean Wave can now touch down on China's shore with relatively little effort on the part of the label, as evidenced by the familiarity of so many fans with other Korean artists that have not attempted international promotion.

Secondly, for the time being, it seems that despite China's attempts to grow its own idol industry, South Korean idols still have a strong security net for their artists' overseas promotions. Despite competition from other Chinese groups, the Chinese entertainment market still has a lot of growth to come if it wishes to compete with Hallyu idols. By taking advantage of this perceived disorganized nature of Chinese idol group training, a vacancy is left for well-trained Korean idol groups to fill the void, and this place will likely be held for the future.

Finally, and most importantly, despite EXO-M's Chinese features, and its attempt to focus on the Chinese entertainment market, EXO as a full, twelve member, Korean entity, is considered more important than its subgroups. With so many Chinese EXO fans that are loyal to the full group, it is worth noting that the idea of these EXO subgroups may even be done away with in the future, with minimal backlash from fans of either subgroup. Furthermore, by understanding the presence of a "half-foreign" entity in the Chinese entertainment market, future attempts at marketing in the Chinese sphere of influence may take note of these results, and plan accordingly.

Appendix A: Interview Questions (in original Chinese, and translated)

1. 你今年多大了？(How old are you?)
2. 你是一个正式EXO-L吗？(Are you a registered member of EXO's fanclub, EXO-L?)
3. 你怎么认识EXO？(How did you come to know EXO?)
4. 你是EXO的粉丝，EXO-M的粉丝，还是EXO-K的粉丝？(Do you consider yourself a fan of EXO as a whole, EXO-M, or EXO-K?)
5. 你为什么喜欢EXO？(Why do you like EXO?)
6. 你最喜欢的成员是谁？(Who do you consider to be your favorite member?)
7. 你为什么喜欢他？(Why do you like him?)
8. 如果他不是中国人，你觉得你还会喜欢她吗？(If your bias was not Chinese, do you think you would still like him?)
9. 你觉得什么方面是最重要的：EXO的音乐，EXO的成员的体貌，成员的个性，还是他们的跳舞能力？(Which aspect do you think is most important: EXO's music, the member's appearance, their personality, or their dance skill?)
10. 你喜欢什么别的韩国音乐队？(Do you like any other Korean groups?)
11. 你认识EXO的以前还是以后找了个别的音乐队？(Did you find these groups before, or after discovering EXO?)
12. 你觉得韩国的歌手，音乐队跟中国的有什么相同的地方？(Between Chinese singers/groups and Korean singers/groups, what similarities do you perceive?)
13. 你觉得韩国的歌手，音乐队跟中国的有什么不同的地方？(Between Chinese singers/groups and Korean singers/groups, what differences do you perceive?)
14. 你觉得你对一个中国的音乐队会不会有一样的热情感觉？(Do you think you could have the same passionate feelings toward a Chinese group as you do toward EXO?)

Appendix B: Translated Quotes from Interviews

Footnote 9: (immediate response to question 6) “现在他们不是脱离了么？算12个人是鹿晗，我觉得他为人处世让人很舒服。10个人的话，是d.o.”

Footnote 10: (in response to question 4) 一开始是m。在此之前我很讨厌韩国乐队的。。因为韩国人一直申遗还有大放厥词的缘故。所以喜欢上他们我基本在打自己的脸。。。而且k在我看来长得都一样。不过因为他们互动合体，我渐渐都喜欢了～

Footnote 11: (in response to question 8) “会！我觉得是中国人还韩国人没有关系的！我最喜欢的几个里面除了鹿晗就都是韩国人了”

Footnote 12: “这个问题没办法回答你，不过暂时没有这样的组合出现过。”

Footnote 13: (in response to question 14) “不会吧，目前为止还没有过”

Footnote 14: (in response to question 14) “不会。”

Footnote 15: “实话说 很难会有吧 在中国有一个组合叫tf boys 很流行 在中国的 '推特'上 他们的粉丝经常有很多和exo的粉丝争论谁更受欢迎。”

Footnote 16: (in response to questions 12 and 13) “中国以前偶像组合不多吧，或者说中国内地偶像组合不多，近些年模仿韩国开始有偶像组合出现，但是相较韩国的还是不成熟，需要自己再开发完善吧，毕竟韩流是韩国的支柱产业,在中国，娱乐行业并不算特别主流的产业。”