K-Pop as a Means to an End among Thai Youth: Korean Wave as Costume, Food, and Image
Keith Howard and Great Lekakul, SOAS, University of London

To cite this article: Keith Howard and Great Lekakul, “K-Pop as a Means to an End among Thai youth: Korean Wave as Costume, Food, and Image.” Culture and Empathy 1(1-4): 18-33, DOI: 10.32860/26356619/2018/1.1234.0003.

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.32860/26356619/2018/1.1234.0003

Published online: 8 Oct 2018.

Submit your article to this journal

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://culturenempathy.org/terms-and-conditions
K-Pop as a Means to an End among Thai youth: 
Korean Wave as Costume, Food, and Image

Keith HOWARD, SOAS, University of London
Great LEKAKUL, SOAS, University of London

Abstract
Assessments of the impact of K-pop beyond Korea, and of other aspects within the broader Korean Wave, often focus on groups of fans. The research reported here began from an intention to move beyond fandom, encouraged by a challenge to demonstrate that members of the British Thai community, aware of their heritage in Southeast Asia but growing up in the eclectic cultural mix of contemporary Britain, were interested in K-pop. We respond to academic literature on popular culture, on specialized music and dance training, and on the musical tastes of diasporic groups, by working with teenagers and students who study and perform Thai classical music and dance in two organizations, the Thai Music Circle in the UK and the Thai Dance Academy. We present the results of a survey, and contextualize our findings by exploring recent Thai literature and television programs about Korean Wave and K-pop.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 10 August 2018
Revised 24 September 2018
Accepted 30 September 2018

KEYWORDS
Korean Wave, K-Pop, Thai Youth, Globalization, Glocalization, Polymusicality, Multiculturalism

Introduction
Assessments of the impact of K-pop beyond Korea, and of other aspects within the broader Korean Wave, usually focus on groups of fans. These can be identified through festivals and events, or can be self-selecting respondents to questionnaires. The research reported here began from a desire to move beyond fandom. We were challenged to demonstrate that members of the British Thai community, aware of their heritage in Southeast Asia but growing up in the eclectic cultural mix of contemporary Britain, had any interest in K-Pop. Our response was to narrow the lens of our study further, to explore knowledge of K-Pop among teenagers and students learning and performing Thai classical music and dance in two London-based organizations, the Thai Music Circle in the UK and the Thai Dance Academy. To what extent would students of Thai classical music and dance associate with K-pop? This paper reports our findings.
Setting the Scene

A body of discourse sits behind our choice to work with British Thai specialists in Thai music and dance. First, most research on the global impact of K-pop has explored fandom, the fans who Ien Ang (1985) states comprise enthusiastic audiences and consumers of cultural products. Fans can be defined through participation, hence, are those who display fandom in overt and public ways. Literature once tended to characterize fans as obsessive, or as loners who become frenzied within crowds of like-minded enthusiasts, perhaps suffering from contagion (e.g., Jenson 1992). More recent accounts soften this characterization and see fans as individuals engaged through social participation (Duffett 2013; Williams 2016), and this is seen in studies on K-pop in Thailand (Siriyuvasak and Shin 2007; Käng 2012, 2014a and 2014b). However, concentrating on fans can skew analyses on consumption: fans self-select, and we may miss “passive fans” (or “passive consumers”, Rhein 2000) – consumers who do not overtly demonstrate behavior associated with fandom.

Second, studies of Western conservatoires often report an expectancy of monoculturalism (Kingsbury 1988; Nettl 1995), with teachers arguing that the commitment required to master a Western art music instrument and its repertoire precludes any diversion towards genres such as pop or jazz or, indeed, Thai classical music. Again, ethnomusicologists often make distinctions between Western art music and traditional musics elsewhere, with the structures and grammar of each considered sufficiently distinct to limit a musician from a given cultural group gaining high competence in Western music. Discussions of difference, representation and appropriation couple to the observation that Western art music can struggle to gain acceptance when local art traditions are strong (Born and Hesmondhalgh 2000; White 2012), and this would appear pertinent to Thailand (Miller and Williams 1998). At the same time, however, the ethnomusicological concept of bimusicality has broadened as crosscultural and intercultural expert musicians have emerged (Hood 1995; Trimillos 2004). Globalization has brought an awareness of variety which, coupled to the changing economics of production, has increased musicians’ polymusicality (Cottrell 2004, 2010). Likewise, a Thai studying traditional Thai music or dance (or a Korean studying traditional Korean music or dance; see Howard 2010, 209–11) masters old and new repertoires, but also listens to multiple pop musics as well as Beethoven’s symphonies.

Polymusicality has an implication for studies of diasporas. So far, studies typically focus on music and dance traditions of homelands and adopted lands (Reyes 1999; Um 2005; Grau 2002, 2008; O’Shea 2007; Meduri 2008; Zheng 2010), but the broader spectrum of musics coexisting within culturally diverse environments needs consideration. At the very least, musical tastes and practices have today become multicultural, intercultural or transcultural (Schippers 2010, 30–31). Hence, British Thai teenagers studying Thai classical music and dance have interests beyond the duality of Britain and Thailand.

Third, contemporary K-pop challenges standard models of what the music industry is (Howard 2014). Such models have long considered that music is made by creative artists; scouts find artists to sign, managers take artists under their wing; engineers mix and
producers package recordings; promoters and distributors, consolidators and retailers bring music to its audiences. The industry may be argued to have “colonized leisure” (Chapple and Garofalo 1977); it has its hooks, standards and formulae, “imposing conglomerate control” through major labels, and forcing conformity to “bland apolitical” easy-listening formats that “order potential chaos” (Hirsch 1972; George 1988; Manuel 1991). It seeks to protect revenue streams generated from sales of products, arguing that since it underpins the livelihoods of a diverse array of creative minds governments should counter “piracy” and peer-to-peer file sharing. While the international music industry is routinely considered to be declining, Korea remains vibrant, because its industry works with new models. That this is so is shown by the success of K-pop as a core component of the Korean Wave. The domestic market was never dominated by international majors, and, as it began to expand in the 1990s, it had to face both the 1997 Asian economic crisis and the digital revolution. One of its key reactions was the development of the now-familiar entertainment companies, in respect of which, The Economist reported on October 26, 2013, SM Entertainment’s market capitalization stood at 780 billion won, YG Entertainment at 515 billion won, and JYP Entertainment at 120 billion won; SM Entertainment’s profits were 9,300,000,000 won in 2009, 25,600,000,000 won in 2010 and 20,300,000,000 won in 2011 (Seoul Sinmun, April 4, 2012). Business-to-business (B2B) models have emerged (Oh and Park 2012) that generate revenue less from recorded music sales than through the promotion of additional/other products. Although Thai teenagers consume K-pop, they rarely buy music recordings, rather, investing in Korean fashion, make-up, food, and technology. Thus, and as we signal in the title to this paper, K-pop is a means to an end.

The Thai Music Circle in the UK and the Thai Dance Academy

The Thai Music Circle in the UK was formed in June 1991 under the patronage of Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. Its first performance was held on July 6, 1991 at Taplow Court in Berkshire to accompany an exhibition of photographs taken by His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej (who, until his recent death, was the longest serving monarch in the world). Its first members were recruited through advertising at the Royal Thai Embassy in London, at the South Bank Centre, and by word of mouth. It is the only fully-fledged Thai music ensemble in Europe, and has performed in Denmark, France, Ireland, The Netherlands and Poland, as well as throughout Britain; it has released two double CD compilations, in 2004 and 2010. It was established primarily to teach and perform Thai classical music, and to this end Princess Sirindhorn donated instruments and supported a series of musicians to work with the Circle while studying for postgraduate degrees in London and York. Of its membership of more than 40 at the time of our survey of the Circle (February 2014), almost half were teenagers and students. Our respondents consisted of 13 teenagers who were learning Thai music, and six university students who performed with the Circle at the time.

The Thai Dance Academy essentially began in 1997, when Poranee Johnston was asked to teach a small group of Thai children to perform for cultural events. Its formal establishment came four years later, in 2001, when Johnston and a group of teachers and dancers choreographed and mounted a dance drama, “Manora”, at London’s Bloomsbury
Theatre. It went on to perform in venues including the Royal National Theatre and the Victoria and Albert Museum, as well as across Britain and Europe. In 2014, it was one of the largest and most respected dance groups outside Thailand, with more than 40 performers, the majority being teenagers and university students. Our survey with the Academy was conducted in September 2014, and our respondents consisted of 15 members active at that time.

**Thai Discourse on the Korean Wave and K-pop**

Thai youth was first drawn to the Korean Wave through TV drama. While the first broadcasts of Korean dramas are claimed to have been in 1997, it was the Korean KBS drama “Full House”, broadcast in 2004 on Channel 7, followed, in 2005, by “Dae Jang Geum” (“Jewel in the Palace”) on Channel 3, that saw a mushrooming of interest. Before this, though, the game Ragnarok, created by Korea’s Gravity Corporation in 2001, was introduced to Thailand in 2002, attracting several million players, many of whom became addicted (Chat 2003, Sasiwimon 2005). “Full House” introduced Thai audiences to Rain (Jung Ji-Hoon). In Korea, Rain won Best Actor Award from KBS, but his album, “It’s Raining”, released locally by the label GMM Grammy in 2004 sold at least 150,000 copies in Thailand out of its million-plus total sales across Asia (Shin Hyunjoon 2009, 520). In 2003, the K-pop band Se7en had been introduced by a second local company, RS Promotion. GMM and RS operated their own radio stations and were major players in local pop; in 1999 GMM claimed 47% of the domestic market, and RS 19% (Chanabun 2000; for company profiles, see Siriyuvasak and Shin 2007, 136). Arguably, it was Rain who had the greatest impact: he visited Bangkok in February 2006, selling out a capacity 20,000 seats for his Rainy Day tour, and returned the following year with Rain’s Coming. Quite apart from generating a mass of female fans, it is said that his body image led to a rapid increase in male Thais frequenting fitness centers. By 2006, Korean cosmetics were established in Thailand and were beginning to sell well, with brands such as Missha, Laneige and Etude House being advertised by Korean stars (Tada-amnuaychai 2006). Within a couple of years, then, the Korean Wave complex had become firmly embedded locally, as a complex of Korean dramas, K-pop, cosmetics and fashion.

Beginning in 2006, reflecting concerns about local cultural production being uncompetitive in what was becoming a transmetropolitan Asia, Thai reports began to explore why Korean dramas were proving so successful. Supawan Wattanasupakul (2007) characterized Korean dramas as being about identity and youthful love, given space by slowly developing plot lines and frequent close-ups. Watchara Nuamteab (2008) found appeal in strong plots and coherent dramatic situations charged with emotion, noting that romance rather than action characterized the favored dramas, and that the eventual resolutions, whether happy or sad, were well signposted. Sirada Techasa (2008) considered plots to be key, but argued that costumes, lifestyles, and tie-ins with other dramas and K-pop took important supporting roles. Thanawan Kaewkong (2008) concluded that the images of performers—handsome men and beautiful women—were more important to Thai audiences than the dramas themselves. Salisa Pongphim (2007) noted how fan groups had emerged who dressed as the star actors. Woranuch Tantiwitidpong (2008) and Thippaya Sukpornwittawat
(2008) identified the same cosplay among K-pop fans; fans bought Korean cosmetics and Korean fashion to allow them to imitate the stars they emulated. Thai girls were keen to whiten their complexions so that they could become more like their favorite Korean stars (Chatchana Serikoon, 2009). More recently, Dredge Käng has added nuance to the scene: “Thai sissies who cover Korean girl groups are among the most prolific ‘prosumers’” (Käng, 2014b).

The emphasis on participation indicated in the term “prosumer” (Jenkins, 2006; Duncum, 2011)—a combination of “producer” and “consumer”—neatly indicates how fans acted out roles and produced their own cover dances of Korean Wave products. However, Arisa Witthawaskul (2006) argued, in one of the earliest theses we have examined, that Korean dramas were part of a public relations operation by the Korean government rather than commercial products designed to generate income. Veluree Metaveenvinij (2007) refined this view, noting how the government was supported by the Korean Tourism Organization. Korea began to feature as a tourist destination for Thais, where in 2002 a mere 50,000 had travelled to Korea (compared to 700,000 Koreans who visited Thailand). If participation began to involve travel, unlike the well-documented Japanese women bussed around the scenes and sets where “Winter Sonata” was filmed, Thais tended to go on shopping expeditions and on trips to access plastic surgery; indeed, Chutima Chunhakan (2007) discusses “plastic surgery tours”, while Patcharaporn Dewong (2013) notes that Thais sought out eyelid, rhinoplasty, and jawline surgeries.

Much Thai literature considers dramas and movies to form the major part of the Korean Wave. Indeed, Ekarat Visesrith, having sampled 400 respondents, found that 79.5% had begun their engagement with things Korean with drama, and only 11.3% with music; lagging a long way behind, food was named by 2.8% and tourism by 1.5% (Ekerat, 2009: 79). Accounts give K-pop a more prominent role when considering nation branding—one, exploring how Korean Wave could be used as a model for a Thai Wave and written from Sweden, being by Tobias Eltebrandt (2010). The Bangkok-based journalist Richard S. Ehrlich explored the implications of K-pop for Thailand in a CNN article published in 2010. Ehrlich found Thai youth attracted to metrosexual, urban, yuppy, slim Korean boy bands wearing slick costumes and sporting longish hair (some of these elements are common to earlier accounts of Koichi Iwabuchi and others, and have been explored by Sun Jung (2011)), and to Korean girls in sporty outfits who mixed cheerleader gear with sexy dollification. The girls, he states, typically had heightened noses, rebuilt oval faces without square jaws, and liposuctioned thighs redolent of time spent under the knives of plastic surgeons. Such images were primarily supplied by K-pop, because dramatic plot lines and emotional tear-jerking allowed for less immediate cosplay among fans. However, Ehrlich denies any uniqueness to Korean styles, pointing out that the Korean Wave is manufactured in a modern, wealthy country heavily influenced by the United States. Noting that Thais had for several decades been influenced by American and European youth culture, he finds the reason for Korean success in restrictions imposed by the Thai government: “Bangkok’s panoptic Ministry of
Culture desperately tries to homogenize and package [cultural production] in an endless repetition of traditions”, limiting freedoms and attempting to maintain indigenous creativity.

Thai commentators took contrasting positions. First, in the program “Cheepajornlok” broadcast on Modern 9 TV on February 20, 2006, history was the starting point. Moderated by Sutthichai Hyuin, a journalist and writer as well as chairman of a multimedia company, and assisted by Venarat Laohapakakul, the program opened by briefly mentioning Korea’s historical relationships to Japan, China and Thailand. It then looked at the international impact of Korean Wave after the economic crisis of 1997—a crisis shared by Thailand, as the Tom Yom Koong crisis. Sutthichai saw Korea’s rapid economic recovery as having come from soft culture, and from the promotion of specific actors and stars. A shift in government policy allowed cultural production to complement exports of manufactured goods, and the Korean Wave improved Korea’s image, which in turn allowed Korean products to make greater inroads into foreign markets. He pushed the need for cooperation between public and private sectors, if Thailand was to follow the Korean example. He gave some thought to the impacts of Korean culture in Thailand: awareness of brand names, increasing demands for Korean products, the popularity of Korean make-up, and so on.

Second, a 2008 report by Walailuck Noypayak carried in the eTAT Journal explored Korea as a tourist destination, but asked how Thailand could compete, not just in its traditional role as a destination but for local cultural production. She described how the Korean government had begun to support its cultural industries in 1998, through what it called “Vision 21”, reflecting on the then emerging digital world and how it could capitalize on its cutting-edge technological expertise, and seeing in cultural content one of seven components of industrial production. She identified factors that generated the success of Korean dramas—familiar storylines based on family, loyalty, morality and love, skillful acting, sets and costumes speaking to modernity—and backdated the appeal of K-pop to the early 1990s, when it was just one choice among many for Koreans and other Asians on satellite broadcast channels. She argued that the success of K-pop relied on good looking and cute singers who exhibited great dancing skills and had great voices. To an extent, she sidelined the sexualization of more recent K-pop, but she still warned how some countries had begun to counter what they saw as a threat from too much Korean influence.

Third, Chonlanat Koaykul presented a program broadcast on TPBS on May 8, 2010, “Peardhupeardta”. Under the tag “society and quality of life”, he discussed Korean Wave contagion, asking whether Thai teenagers were being mesmerized by its polished images. He identified crazy behavior among fans, but asked what might be learnt, arguing the popularity of Korean Wave was based on the appearance of singers and actors, their costumes and make-up, and the good stories of dramas. In the program, Kanjana Kaewthep a communications professor at Chulalongkorn University, pointed out that Korean government policy influenced both products and their promotion, but then introduced her own data: among 800 teenager fans in Thailand, the first stage of their devotion was based on the appearance of celebrity singers, but, as they discovered more, they became fascinated by the perfection achieved in performance because of the long and dedicated training pop singers
were willing to endure. There was, she said, no comparison with Thai pop stars, who tended to become famous more for personal scandal, but, in a conservative Thailand, this was to her a major reason why teenagers had largely lost interest in Thai pop. While she failed to note the many scandals that persist within K-pop, the program’s basic conclusion was that, before criticizing Thai teenagers for their K-pop fandom, commentators should explore and learn from the back-stories of perseverance, training, and devotion within the Korean industry.

Lurking in the background in all three reports was an awareness that those who imitated K-pop stars had begun to challenge normative behavior in Thai society. Cover dances had become important fan activities, facilitated by academies such as the Cover Dance Thai Academy (www.coverdancethai.com), but these were less troubling than the cosplay, and the adoption of dress and hairstyles, which posed a threat to normative gendered behavior in Thailand. Web articles confirm this attitude (e.g. Thanatida Yookong 2012). One item on Thairathonline News published on December 8, 2013 pushed at another negative aspect: the overt masculinity of dancing male K-pop stars, which, based on strength and strong movement, would tempt girls. One of the more obvious challenges to normative gender behavior came with the Korean television drama “The First Shop of Coffee Prince” (often shortened to “Coffee Prince”), broadcast in Thailand in 2007 and foregrounding homoeroticism through the tomboyish female lead, played by Yoon Eun-hye. Dredge Käng has discussed the homoerotic in considerable depth (see, e.g., Käng, 2012, 2014a) but, in respect to our survey, such a topic fell outside what we felt comfortable asking Thai teenagers and students. However, one of our interviewees told us how:

Urn San [Go Eun-chan, Yoon’s character] makes me relax about myself, to know who I am. Before she appeared on TV, I didn’t want to express what I wanted to be. But, because of her, I’m sufficiently brave to step out and go to the shopping mall with a man’s hairstyle, wearing a shirt and trousers. I just behave like Urn San did, and its not only me but also my tomboy friends. I’m happy with this.

Thai Teenager and Student Perceptions of K-Pop

For this paper, we interviewed Thais in Britain. Generally, we found awareness and interest in K-pop higher among university students, who tended to look back to their high school days. This older group named many of the same groups: TVXQ (Dong Bang Shin Ki, or DBSK), Super Junior, Girls’ Generation, 2PM. One recalled, somewhat controversially, how, in his former school, boy bands were favored by schoolgirls and girl bands by boys, although evidence suggests that the opposite is just as common. Several respondents kept up with K-pop news, and added more recent (in 2014) groups such as EXO, who were reported to be “highly popular now in Thailand”, the “cute and beautiful” Miss A (collectively), and Sistar’s Hyolyn (Kim Hyojung) and Soyou (Kang Ji-hyun). Teenagers from the Thai Music Circle offered a varied list of bands and singers, and it was notable that they almost always spelled names accurately: Rain, Girls’ Generation and Psy were named by nine (70%) each, Big Bang by eight (62%), Beast by seven (54%), Super Junior and KARA by six (46%), G.Na, Brown Eyed Girls, Sistar, TVXQ, EXO and 2PM, by four each (31%), MBLAQ, Wonder
Girls, Miss A, Shinee, 2NE1, Teen Top, JYJ and Ailee by three each (23%), and then one or more mentions for Tiger JK, Sunmi, Block B, B.A.P, T-ARA, 2AM, SS501, Infinite, F.T.Island, U-Kiss, 4Minute, DMNT, BIA4, Boyfriend, Trouble Maker, Block B, GOT7, Shinhwa, CNBLue, A Pink, Lee Hyori (from the 1990s band Fin.K.L.), Lee Hi, After School, Crayon Pop, Epik High, and Leessang. The Thai Dance Academy respondents offered a narrower list: Psy was named by 10 (67%), Girls’ Generation by five (33%), Rain by four (27%), Big Bang by three (20%), Brown Eyed Girls and KARA by two (13%) each, and there were only single mentions of Sistar, Beast, Wonder Girls, Super Junior, Akdong Musician (AKMU) and Lee Ji-eun (IU). Interestingly, the last two sit outside bubble-gum fayre, and the student who mentioned Akdong Musician said they were a favorite because of their “unique style.”


Among the general comments on K-pop were observations that it was teenage oriented, stylish, becoming ever more popular (despite our observation to the contrary above; we would contend that the responses reflected what our interviewees thought we wanted to hear), and always linked to dance. Some respondents felt that it lacked depth, and preferred British pop, commenting that this was all around them, accessible, fun, and easy to listen to. However, while the K-pop groups and singers listed went well beyond the major and much-viewed-on-YouTube stars, tastes in British and North American pop tended to reflect the mainstream, from Justin Timberlake and Katy Perry through to One Direction, Ed Sheeran and Michael Bublé. Despite this, British charts were said to be full of variety, in a way that
One Thai Dance Academy respondent considered was comparable to K-pop but much more varied than the “monotony” of Thai pop songs about love and heartbreak.

One Thai Music Circle university student commented that she preferred to listen to Thai pop rather than K-pop because she understood the lyrics and found them meaningful. This begins to suggest a potential hierarchy of elements in the appreciation of K-pop, in which melody is most important, followed by dance, and, but in a rather poor third position, lyrics. This hierarchy appeared to apply particularly when respondents compared K-pop with Thai pop: “I find the lyrics of Thai pop most meaningful. Even though I can understand songs sung in English, some of the lyrics do not touch my heart”. Or, put in a more complex way:

While I enjoy the music and the melodies, there is a limit to how enjoyable K-pop is when I don’t understand all the lyrics. But what I do enjoy is the culture surrounding it, and the idol culture associated with the groups. Personally, I think K-pop became such a phenomenon in Thailand partly because of the looks of the singers, not just because of their style of music. Or, again, I don’t mean that [K-pop stars] cannot sing. They can. There are some songs that I really like, but in my opinion I do not think Thai teenagers will be so attracted to K-pop just because of the music, because it seems difficult to engage with something that is in a different language.

Many respondents circumvented the issue of words and language by suggesting that the music, dance and staging could convey meaning and feeling without audiences needing to understand the lyrics. Hence: “K-pop is very high quality. Although I do not understand the Korean language, I still perceive the meaning of the songs through the music. I feel it”. It has recently, though, been reported on a number of academic electronic discussions pages that the popularity of K-pop has led to students taking up Korean language classes, and one Thai Dance Academy respondent told us that K-pop was her favorite music precisely because it was sung in Korean, a language she was studying.

However, when asked specifically what they appreciated in K-pop, most respondents reported that the appearance and attractiveness of singers was most important, followed by vocal quality and professional dance skills. In this, we return to the common perception, that, to quote one respondent, “it is quite a stereotype, but it is the trend, that most Thai boys and men nowadays prefer girls and women with what we think of as a Chinese appearance—white skin, single eyelids, slim bodies”. Appearance was framed by overlapping perceptions of the actors in Korean dramas and the singers of K-pop, even though idol culture favored the latter. Many singers perform on the soundtracks to dramas, and our respondents referred to Taeyeon from Girls’ Generation singing for the drama “Beethoven Virus”, the group Shinee singing for “Full House”, EXO in “To the Beautiful You” and Yoona from Girls’ Generation acting in “The Prime Minister and I”. Possibly intended with a degree of skepticism, one respondent suggested that the reason K-pop singers provided soundtracks for dramas was because doing so enabled media companies to get K-pop fan clubs to promote specific dramas.
Appearance also had to do with costume, make-up and image. Korean cosmetics have become popular among Thai youth, and we were frequently told how K-pop stars “advertise Korean products such as Skin food, Nature Republic, etc., on Thai TV”, encouraging Thais to yearn for the same skin color and complexion, as well as the beauty. One male university student told us: “When I was in high school, I bought trousers similar to what was then the Korean style, and in a stunning color, wanting to be like a K-pop star.” Another commented:

When I was in high school, Korean hairstyles were held in high esteem among us Thai boys, because the schoolgirls were so impressed by Korean boy bands. We thought that if we had haircuts like the Korean stars we would attract attention from the girls. Even I had my hair cut the Korean way.

One respondent built on this, stating that “K-pop encourages us Thais to take care of our image”. Several younger respondents noted that Korean costumes seen in K-pop were “in style”, “cute”, “matching my style”, “unique with great design”, while one, with travel in mind, told us how much she liked shopping in Seoul. Korean make-up, marketed along with K-pop, had shades and tones “suitable for Asian women”. It was, respondents claimed, “designed for Asians, to flatter them”, and was advertised creatively, packaged attractively, and sold cheaply. Put together, one Thai Dance Academy respondent noted how:

Korean culture is very trendy, and it leads the Asian market. Koreans have a heavy influence over trends, because they are constantly innovating their culture through images and technological advances.

Branding extended to Korean car companies and electronic conglomerates, which were given placements in Korean dramas and were often encountered as the sponsors of K-pop events. Food, too, emerged as a key marker of Korean culture, and while only 20% and 27% of the Thai Dance Academy respondents mentioned, respectively, that they liked Korean fashion and make-up, all but one told us they liked Korean food: “I enjoy eating Korean BBQ”; “Korean food is very new to Thailand. It is healthy and has great taste”; “I enjoy kimchi”; “Korean food is tasty and I enjoy the interaction when making a Korean BBQ”. Given the widespread availability and popularity of Thai cuisine in Britain (where there are reckoned to be more than 1200 Thai restaurants) and elsewhere, and its considerable distinctiveness and considerable variety, the comments on Korean food surprised us, particularly given the recurrent themes of its great taste and healthy quality; we note, however, that Korean cuisine is indeed popular in Bangkok today.

Turning to quality and professionalism in performance, long and rigorous training was regularly mentioned as being critical. Training resulted in high quality performances, much as Kanjana Kaewthep related in the “Peardhupeardta” program. Here is what one Thai Music Circle respondent wrote:

Some members of K-pop bands start off really young. There are different agencies. YG, for instance, trains their groups for many years before they can debut. Recently,
as part of the training process, they have used two teams to compete against each other, with whichever wins being allowed to debut on the public stage.

Dance was crucial, and singers were expected to be professional dancers who had trained for many years. They were expected by Thai Music Circle respondents, reflecting the popularity of cover dancing, to both sing and dance, when in groups to perform in unison, to dance in energetic and powerful ways, and to always exhibit an accuracy in their positions on stage and in their postures and movements. Respondents indicated that dance rendered the foreign lyrics of little concern, making the dimensions of love and romance—that otherwise have always characterized more than 90% of all pop songs according to the British music sociologist Simon Frith (1988)—fairly meaningless. It was noted how K-pop dance had begun to be imitated by Thai stars, by, for instance, Bie The Star (Bie Sukrit Wisetkaew; “Bie” is a nickname), in an effort to allow Thai youth to find something of Korea in their own pop. Equally, though, dance was said to encourage participation. Here, there was a common perception that many dance moves could be imitated because they were not too difficult; participation was considered fun and interesting. This, however, was contrasted by the notion of complexity: the professional was to be watched while the less professional was to be copied. Some respondents found dancing “Gangnam Style” too simple, but commented that EXO routines and Sistar’s “Alone” were notoriously difficult. One respondent summed up her dancing experience:

Easy: I can follow steps without much difficulty because so much of the rhythm is straight and continuous. The melodies help me follow and remember. Difficult: Many times, I find that Korean dance postures shift very rapidly, making them difficult to imitate. Some songs have lots of moves that make it hard to commit everything to memory.

Dance gave many of the Thai Dance Academy respondents’ scope for reflection, although only 20% admitted to having participated in K-pop cover dances. It was common for respondents to compare the elegant, slow and constrained nature of Thai classical dance with the commercial, urbanized, edgy, energetic club culture of K-pop. Thai dance required training, but “K-pop is really easy to dance to”; it is “a contemporary dance whereas Thai dance is more culturally specific and traditional”; it is “very Western and the movements are fast and modern”. To our respondents, while K-pop dance is “not difficult, because we have the basics of dancing in our bodies”, it is something to approach somewhat warily. Because of their personal focus on Thai classical dance forms, the dance group was arguably, and for good reason, removed from those who make up K-pop’s cover dancing fandom.

“Gangnam Style” was frequently critiqued, suggesting the balance between complexity/low imitation potential and simplicity/high imitation potential weighed in favor of the former: “It’s in trend, but I don’t like it”; “The tune is catchy, but in the end it is not good to listen to, something more to enjoy when watching the music videos”; “Very catchy, but too commercial”; “Too mainstream”; “It was great until it went viral. Then it got annoying because it was everywhere”; “The composition is catchy, but when I looked up the
meaning of the lyrics I didn’t like it much”; “It was fun to dance and listen to at first, but then it got really annoying when it was repeated too many times in the clubs and everywhere”; “It is over the top, annoying but catchy”; “Infective but annoying”. Nonetheless, “Gangnam Style” was respected, as unique, funny, catchy, and as a successful way to market K-pop with dance routines and scenes that were highly memorable as well as lending themselves to parodies: “It is good, and brings a new style to the world through which most people know what K-pop is”; “It’s dance routines and fashions set trends among youngsters, although the song doesn’t have any lasting cultural implications beyond making K-pop known.”

Conclusion

With the bias towards the high quality and professional end of things in mind, the following, a response that saw K-pop as part of national branding, sums up much that we were told:

K-pop advances, becoming more popular and more powerful in the music world. It relates to the image of Korea, in particular in terms of international affairs and economic might. K-pop has become a type of propaganda or soft power that can occupy people’s hearts and make them think in more positive ways about Korea. I think music is one of the most powerful tools to use to create a national image, and this makes it an important way to negotiate many issues between many states.

Does this answer the ambition of this paper? Yes, to the extent that K-pop is a core part of the image of Korea for Thai youth, and is a core part of the branding of Korea. It is important as an icon—beautiful stars performing complex, professional dance routines, framed within an image of modernity that leaves consumers desiring the high-tech and high quality products made by Korean companies. But it is also something that is participatory, through the ability to imitate—whether by learning cover dances, or dressing in Korean fashions, using Korean make-up and eating Korean cuisine. Participation, though, as for the YouTube generation elsewhere, does not mean that “prosumers” buy CDs or pay to download K-pop (or DVDs or downloads of Korean dramas); indeed, only four of our Thai Music Circle and four of our Thai Dance Academy respondents—barely 25% of our total sample—told us they would consider paying to download a K-pop song. Rather, Thai teenagers and students are no different to others of their age: they consume social media in a way that “employs user-generated material to draw ears and eyeballs to advertising” (Duncum, 2011: 25, citing Burgess and Green (2009) and Snickars and Vonderau (2009)). To Henry Jenkins, characterizing the discourse about today’s social media, “the old-style consumer is dead, RIP” (Jenkins, 2007, 358). K-pop thus becomes a means to an end. There is little reason for Thai teenagers and students to pay to consume it, but K-pop encourages them to buy and consume Korean clothes, make-up, and food.
Keith Howard is Professor Emeritus at SOAS, University of London. He is the author or editor of 19 books and more than 100 articles. He found and directed OpenAir Radio and the SOASIS CD and DVD label, and from 2002 to 2008 was director of the AHRC Research Center for Cross-Cultural Music and Dance Performance.

Great Lekakul is a Thai traditional music specialist who has recently completed his doctorate at SOAS.

Notes

1. Information from the following site: http://www.siam.edu/siamedu_thai_mainpage/images/stories/article/2550_bus12.doc. All URLs cited were available in 2014, when we researched this paper.


3. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XcGx6iz2N3U; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iBL_qZlyzMQ; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2X0xCktFo8; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OAmr5I_at00.


5. We note that K-pop was one of many ingredients in V Channel satellite broadcasts across Asia from the mid-1990s, and that, in Thailand, ‘K-pop’ was initially placed with J-pop and Taiwanese pop in the bins of record shops.


8. Note that this contrasts the Korean fashion for “Western” double eyelids, and has an implication for Thai plastic surgery tours to Korea.

References


Nettl, Bruno. 1985. Montira Tada


