

From K-pop to C-pop: Feasibility Exploration of Building a Chinese Star-Making System Based on the Korean Local Idol Model

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Abstract. In today's increasingly globalized world, where the economy is rapidly advancing, a cultural phenomenon known as K-pop has been gradually gaining prominence. Originating from South Korea, K-pop has not only made a significant impact on neighboring countries within Asia but has also captivated audiences in the Western world. This cultural wave has effectively positioned South Korea as the epicenter of the emerging East Asian trend culture. However, China, with its rich cultural heritage, has faced obstacles in cultivating its own idol industry. While C-pop, the Chinese pop music genre, has struggled to establish a significant presence both in terms of scale and quality, it is important to recognize the immense market potential and promising future of the Chinese idol industry. This paper focuses on idol groups associated with the famous Korean entertainment company JYP. It aims to meticulously examine the key factors that have contributed to the development and prosperity of K-pop. By doing so, it seeks to analyze the characteristic path suitable for the development of China's idol industry.

Keywords: K-pop; C-pop; Idol industry; JYP.

1. Introduction

At present, the influence of K-pop is steadily on the rise, and this success is not coincidental. Cha and Kim believe that K-pop, characterized by its fusion of oriental symbols and Western pop music elements, combined with a systematic idol training model, has successfully captured a substantial global fanbase [1]. These fans have, in turn, accelerated the global communication process of K-pop in a counter-current fashion [2]. K-pop has become a symbol of local pop culture flowing in reverse to the global market [3].

In contrast, China's star-making system is not yet mature, and the prospect of C-pop achieving global recognition remains distant. The global position held by K-pop impacts the share of the world cultural market. Therefore, it is necessary and operable to examine the idol model in the context of K-pop, identify the factors contributing to its success, and contemplate how China can establish its own star-making system.

This paper uses a combination of methods, including case studies and descriptive analysis, to dissect the unique mode of the establishment and rise of the K-pop idol groups. Through this exploration, it aims to pinpoint the challenges facing C-pop and predict its future developmental trajectory.

2. The Rise of K-pop

The ability of Korean culture to sweep the world is inseparable from the encouragement of the South Korean government of private capital in developing cultural industries. The financial crisis in 1998 hit South Korea's economy severely, necessitating a swift shift in its industrial structure to recover from the crisis as soon as possible. Therefore, Kim Dae-Jung, the then President of South Korea, proposed the economic development route of "the foundation of South Korea in the 21st century is a high-tech and cultural industry" [4]. Since 1999, South Korea has upgraded the development of its



cultural industry to a national priority, progressively deregulating the entertainment industry, and guiding private capital and enterprises to develop the cultural industry more freely.

In recent years, K-pop, as a component of Korean culture, has undergone a localized evolution and become one of the mainstream cultural forces in the East Asian cultural sphere [5]. Its influence has rapidly expanded from Asia to Europe and the United States, setting off a global wave of K-pop. JYP Entertainment is one of the famous entertainment companies in South Korea. It has strategically expanded K-pop groups into international markets such as Japan, China, Australia, Europe, and the United States. This paper conducts a specific case analysis of the K-pop girl group TWICE and the boy group Stray Kids, both under JYP Entertainment Company. It describes part of the trend of the Korean entertainment market from the initial group formation model and later development modes of these two idol groups, and seeks to explore the alignment of these trends with theories of cultural localization and globalization.

The members of the TWICE group were selected through a talent show called Sixteen, including participants from Japanese, Taiwanese, and Koreans. This practice of including foreign artists enables JYP to develop multiple overseas markets while simultaneously developing the domestic market. Because language and cultural adaptation significantly impact K-pop's overseas expansion [2], Twice often releases Japanese versions of the same Korean album. This approach allows Twice to thrive in the Japanese market by bridging language and cultural gaps. In addition, as Wang has noted, every Korean idol develops their own brand and marketing characteristics, so that they can effectively target specific audience genders, historical phenomena, and cultural groups [5]. In Twice's case, their music style aligns with the lively and youthful preferences of the Japanese music market, further contributing to their success in the regionalization in Japan.

On September 21, 2017, JYP Entertainment announced the launch of a new talent show, "Stray Kids" with commenced on October 17 to select the next new boy group capable of carrying on the legacy of 2 PM, GOT7, and TWICE. The Stray Kids concept is that the members of the group pursue their dreams and look for the dawn together. This was the first time that it is not established by the company but by the combination concept conceived by the members of the group. Compared with ordinary companies forming groups by selecting members through the draft, JYP also formed "Stray Kids" for the first time through an experimental method. The method is to first select a trainee as the captain with the authority to select other trainees, forming his group. Stray Kids includes two Koreans with Australian nationality, and its members have strong music creation abilities. Their music style closely aligns with the music preferences of Europe and the United States in recent years, which also provides favorable conditions for globalizing the boy group concept and expanding into Australian and American markets.

In the context of JYP Entertainment Company, the development path for K-pop idol groups, represented by TWICE and Stray Kids, involves selecting group members through talent and variety shows. This facilitates the establishment of a solid fan base in the early stages of idol group development and better realizes cultural regionalization and globalization. However, such a development route may not be suitable for the Chinese entertainment industry, which is influenced by K-pop culture. Due to certain market challenges, the Chinese government has issued strict regulations prohibiting the participation in talent shows, and many talent shows in the mainland were suspended. Therefore, this article seeks to analyze the C-pop industry to identify a development path better suited to China's cultural industry.

3. Analysis of China's Idol Industry

In 2023, the National Bureau of Statistics of China released data on the cultural industry, revealing that since 2022, China's cultural and related industries have exceeded 16.5 trillion yuan in operating income, and the scale of the industry has continued to expand. With an operating income accounted for more than 30% in 2022, the performance of the cultural new business sector, and the structure of China's cultural industry is being constantly optimized [6].

However, with the general positive trend of the industry, there are few studies providing individual data on the idol industry. Additionally, the limited data available from unofficial sources have also lost their research relevance over time. In other words, China's idol industry has yet to be branded and systematized with relatively low influence within the broader context of China's cultural industry development.

3.1. Current Problems in China's Idol Industry

Nowadays, China's idol industry has formed a situation of internal and external market competition, which is manifested in the fierce rivalry among numerous domestic idol groups and individual idols as well as the encroachment of foreign idol groups and individuals into the Chinese idol market. Additionally, China has introduced a series of policies and regulations, such as the Notice on the Comprehensive Management of the Culture and Entertainment Sector issued by the Central Propaganda Department in 2021, aimed at overcoming the obstacles to the development of the idol industry and to form good industry norms [7]. However, China's idol market still has risks and the market model needs to be improved.

In recent years, the prevailing trend in the domestic entertainment market has been talent shows featuring idol groups, heavily relying on online broadcasting platforms for promotion. This trend needs a more mature and sustainable market operation model. In contrast to Japan and South Korea, where the idol industry is relatively mature and boasts a wealth of idol singing stages and variety shows that are well suited to the developmental qualities of idol groups, mainland China lags behind. China currently features many fledgling platforms with rigid models, and the popularity of idols is often limited to a few months after the program airs, with no sustainable star-making system in place. In addition, the domestic entertainment industry has habitually replicated the profit-oriented "consumer-oriented idol worship" approach of K-pop without instilling rational values for young people to follow. This tendency leads to negative social impact alongside the idol market's profitability [8].

Furthermore, competitors in domestic idol talent shows exhibit varying levels of abilities. Low-threshold talent shows provide participants who has good looks with the possibility of instant fame. However, as many of these individuals have not undergone long-term systematic idol training, they do not have enough ability of singing and dancing to sustain their idol careers beyond the talent show. This dynamic presents a challenge to China in developing a truly sustainable and culturally exportable C-pop industry.

3.2. Market Potential of China's Idol Industry

Despite the challenges faced by the Chinese idol market compared to its Japanese and Korean counterparts, and the difficulties of C-pop export, China's idol culture industry still has the potential for further growth and international success as the country's influence gradually increases and China's entertainment industry companies strategically plan. First, China's large population provides a large potential audience for the idol culture market. Zhuang attributes the growth of China's idol industry in recent years to several factors including rising per capital incomes, a booming cultural industry, and the rise of various social media platforms that have facilitated the rapid dissemination of idol content, which will continue to have a positive impact on the industry [9].

Secondly, according to the 2022 China Artist Agency Industry Analysis Report Assessment of Industry Development Status and Development Potential, as the state's regulation of the idol industry increases, the artist agency market is poised for a transformation toward more organized and sustainable development [10]. This shift will avoid the chaotic and disordered market due to internal competition, and facilitate the future development and export of the C-pop industry. Moreover, based on the existing policies and idol economic model, Zhuang proposes that the future idol industry should gradually develop into a pan-entertainment market integrating music, film, TV, variety, animation, web series and other content carriers, covering a rich variety of contents and forms [9],

thereby promoting further localization of China's idol market. Additionally, the widespread discussion and popularity of Chinese TV dramas in recent years on social platforms in Japan, Korea, and Southeast Asia provide evidence of the feasibility of effectively exporting Chinese cultural products overseas. This suggests that China's cultural products have the potential to find receptive audiences beyond its borders.

4. Suggestions

Based on the abovementioned analysis, the study suggests a strategic approach to developing the Chinese idol industry in overseas markets and spreading popular culture effectively in the future. This strategy encompasses three key perspectives: government support, domestic idol company initiatives, and the individual behavior of idols. The synergy between the three elements can promote the success of the C-pop industry in international market development and overseas cultural export.

From a government's perspective, the first necessary measure is to conduct comprehensive market research in the target markets to understand cultural differences and preferences between China and other countries. Understanding these nuances is vital for tailoring content to resonate with overseas audiences. Secondly, creating an excellent national image is crucial to overseas audiences. The government can depend on cultural exchange programs to achieve this goal and promote positive soft power assets on foreign social media. In addition, easing regulatory restrictions on the Chinese idol industry, such as providing more platforms for domestic idols participating in international music festivals, can also promote their contact with global audiences. With the assistance of China's economic strength and cultural resources, government policies should show a preference for developing the idol industry while recognizing its potential in the broader cultural field.

From the perspective of domestic entertainment companies, the companies should adapt to changing market trends and audience preferences. Adjusting the style of launching idol groups to align with current trends is essential. At the same time, cooperating with foreign entertainment companies can highly beneficial, which is inspired by the Korean model. For example, JYP cooperates with well-known Japanese record companies such as Sony Music, which is beneficial to developing overseas markets [11]. In addition, adding Chinese cultural elements, such as dance, opera, poetry, etc., to the artworks launched by idol groups and using Chinese aesthetics in makeup design and dance choreography can also provide a unique selling point for the idol groups in the C-pop industry to compete on the international stage.

For individual idols, it is also essential to improve their professionalism and strive for exposure opportunities, which requires idols to master professional skills, learn Chinese cultural knowledge and the language of the target country market to interact with overseas fans, and increase the possibility of attracting fans. However, due to the restriction of talent shows in China, idols can use domestic media platforms to interact with fans, showcase their strengths, and cultivate a group of dedicated fans before their official debut. This approach resembles the practices employed by K-pop idols in interacting with fans before their formal debuts.

5. Summary

In conclusion, this article supports that China's idol industry, although a latecomer to the global stage, has enormous development potential. There are many feasible plans with high operability to promote industrial expansion. Therefore, the construction and improvement of China's star-making system can utilize the successful factors in the K-pop industry model, such as relying on overseas entertainment giants to carry out localized communication in other countries and regions and starting preliminary work before idols' debut, such as accumulating fans, establish an interactive model with fans, etc. However, it must maintain Chinese attributes like K-pop to create a C-pop context. As a country with a rich historical and cultural heritage, China's star-making system can "transform" its cultural characteristics and tell "Chinese stories" in a language that audiences in other countries can understand.

The main contribution of this study is to fill a gap in the literature on the Chinese idol industry, which is beneficial to scholars in understanding the industry environment. To practitioners, this paper can offer some inspiration for the development direction of the Chinese Idol industry. However, it is essential to acknowledge that current research may benefit from improvement, such as more pertinent data and a broader array of research samples. Future studies should aim to explore this topic from multiple angles to further enrich our understanding of the Chinese idol industry.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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