The Rise of J-Pop in Asia and Its Impact

By Ng Wai-ming

JAPANESE pop music is commonly referred to as "J-pop," a term coined by Komuro Tetsuya, the "father of J-pop," in the early 1990s. The meaning of J-pop has never been clear. It was first limited to Euro-beat, the kind of dance music that Komuro produced. However, it was later also applied to many other kinds of popular music in the Japanese music chart, Oricon, including idol-pop, rhythm and blues (R&B), folk, soft rock, easy listening and sometimes even hip hop. This article uses a broader definition of J-pop.

J-pop has been one of the fastest-growing and influential music forces in Asia since the 1990s, warmly embraced by young people in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Mainland China, South Korea, Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia. Top J-pop artists such as Hamasaki Ayumi, SMAP, Speed, Utada Hikaru, V6, Kinki Kids and w-inds. have become common idols among Asian youths. Their records and merchandise sell like hot cakes and they serve as models for Asian music companies to train and promote their own singers.

Reasons for the Rise of J-Pop in Asia

J-pop has become an integral part of Asian music. Why are Asian youths so crazy about J-pop, an alien music sung in an alien language? First, the musical form of J-pop itself is appealing to Asians. J-pop is a hybrid music which fuses different foreign music traditions with the Japanese touch. J-pop provides a viable alternative for Asians who are looking for something different and refreshing. J-pop is quite mainstream and easy listening. Asians have been familiar with Japanese tunes, thanks to the popularity of cover versions since the 1970s. Sometimes, Asians listen to the cover versions first and then turn to the original Japanese versions.

Second, J-pop singers sell not only music, but also their images. They are mostly handsome young boys and cute and pretty young girls who know how to sing, dance, talk, act and dress. Many J-pop fans in Asia enjoy music videos (MVs) as much as CDs. Due to physical and cultural proximities, Asian youths feel close to Japanese idols. Unlike Western idols who are too out of this world to Asians, J-pop idols adopt a down-to-earth approach and present themselves like the people next door. Asian youths think that they will never look like Western idols but can somehow copy Japanese idols. For example, the hairdos of Sakai Noriko and Kimura Takuya as well as the make-up of Amuro Namie and Hamasaki Ayumi were once very popular in Asia.

Third, the popularization of Japanese dramas and the Japanese language in Asia promote J-pop. Many J-pop singers (in particular artists managed by Johnny & Associates) participate in Japanese television dramas or sing the theme songs. Japanese dramas have jump-started the J-pop craze in Asia. Many Asians listen to J-pop for the first time through Japanese dramas. Soundtracks of Japanese dramas sell extremely well in the Asian market. In addition, Japanese is now a very popular language in Asia and thousands of people are taking Japanese lessons in major Asian cities. Learning Japanese through listening to J-pop is a very popular method adopted in Japanese classes in Asia.

Fourth, the Asian edition and pirated edition play an important role in making J-pop affordable and accessible to Asians. Japanese music CDs are made for the Japanese market and thus they contain only Japanese lyrics, and they are very expensive. Without Asian and pirated editions, J-pop would never have been so popular in Asia. Some Japanese music companies such as Sony Music Entertainment Inc. (SME) and Avex Trax use Hong Kong and Taiwan as bases to make Asian editions of J-pop albums for the Asian market. Compared to Japanese editions, Asian editions are more user-friendly and affordable. They usually come with the Chinese translation of the lyrics. These Asian editions are much cheaper (about 50% less) than the Japanese originals and are only permitted to circulate in Asia outside of Japan. They have a wide circulation in Asia. For example, in 2000, the Asian edition of Kiroro's album produced by Music Street sold more than two million copies in Asia. Pirated editions made in Taiwan, Mainland China and Malaysia are omnipresent and cheap but are inferior in sound quality and packaging. Since the concept and legislation of copyrights have not been firmly established in Asia, pirated editions continue to flourish. In addition, the recent trend of downloading music illegally to computers or MP3 players popularizes J-pop at the expense of the Japanese music industry.

The Making of a J-Pop Craze in Asia

Japanese pop music has a relatively long history in Asia that can be traced back to World War II. In 1963, *Sukiyaki* (*Ue o muite arukou* [I will walk with my head up]) by Sakamoto Kyu was a smash hit in Asia introduced indirectly from the United States. During the 1960s and 1970s, Japanese *enka* (nostalgic and sentimental ballads) had had a very strong impact on Taiwanese pop songs in which about half of Mandarin songs were cover versions of Japanese enka. From the 1980s onward, Japanese pop music has been introduced to different parts of Asia directly from Japan. There were two golden eras of Japanese pop music in Asia. The first boom was in the early 1980s when Japanese idol singers such as Kondo "Matchy" Masahiko, Nakamori Akina, Matsuda Seiko, Shonentai and Saijo

Photo: Johnny's Entertainment Inc.

A Kinki Kids' Concert in Hong Kong in 2001

Hideki became the hottest idols in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore. They came to Asia for concerts and their tapes (many were pirated) and LPs sold well. Many Asian TV stations broadcast the Japanese "Red and White Singing Contest" (Kohaku Utagassen). "Matchy cut" was once the trendiest hairstyle for men and the cute style of Matsuda Seiko also made an impact on Asian fashion. The cross-dressing and outrageous make-up of Sawada Kenji also influenced some Asian singers (such as Roman Tam). Young men and women groups modeled after Shonentai and Shojotai mushroomed in Taiwan and Hong Kong.

The second peak appeared in the late 1990s when Speed, SMAP, Amuro Namie, Sakai Noriko, Utada Hikaru and Kinki Kids became Asian superstars. In different Asian nations, J-pop albums entered the local music charts, and concerts by J-pop artists were often quickly sold out.

Taiwan and Hong Kong were the two consumption and distribution centers of J-pop in Asia outside Japan. In the late 1990s, the circulation of J-pop could match its local and Western counterparts and a J-pop album by top artists could usually sell more than a hundred thousand copies in Taiwan and Hong Kong. For example, Utada's *First Love* album (1999) sold more than 500,000 copies in Taiwan. J-pop artists have big concerts in Taiwan and Hong Kong every year. J-pop fans in Taiwan and Hong Kong have founded fan clubs, both official (like Johnny's fan club in Taiwan and the Sakai Noriko fan club in Hong Kong) and unofficial, for their J-pop singers. Johnny's Fan club in Taiwan has recruited 30,000 members. J-pop fans in Asia are very faithful to their idols. Some follow their idols to Japan and other parts of Asia just to listen to their concerts. When Inagaki Goro was sidelined by Johnny & Associates for trying to escape an illegal-parking ticket and hitting a policewoman in 2001, hundreds of letters sent by fans of SMAP from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and China flooded into Johnny & Associates to ask for lenient treatment. At 2003 Christmas, fans of w-inds. in Hong Kong sent 10,000 letters to their icons.

Singapore is the major market for J-pop in Southeast Asia. J-pop albums have entered the top 10 of the Singapore music chart since March 1999. In 1999 and 2000, 19 Japanese artists had albums the top 10 in the Singapore music chart and at least nine Japanese albums topped the chart. J-pop albums also sell well in Malaysia, Thailand and Mainland China, although piracy remains a serious problem. Even young people in South Korea are also under the spell of the J-pop craze in Asia. J-pop was an underground musical form in South Korea before the South Korean government partially lifted its ban on Japanese songs in 1998. Licensed Japanese CDs and MVs were circulated in the South Korean market. In June 2000, Japanese singers were allowed to sing in Japanese in their concerts in South Korea. The World Cup Soccer 2002 concert was a breakthrough because for the first time in South Korea since World War II, Japanese songs (sung by Chemistry and Sowelu) were telecast nationwide. Mainland China is the market that the Japanese want to penetrate. After 2000, increasing number of top singers (including Hamasaki Ayumi, V6, Glay and Rip Slyme) have held concerts or performed there.

The J-pop craze in Asia reached its peak in the late 1990s and began to cool down in the early 2000s. The decline of J-pop in Asia after 2000 has been affected by a number of factors such as the slump of the music industry in Japan and Asia, the rise of Korean pop music, the end of the Japanese drama boom in Asia and the problem of piracy. Regardless of its decline, J-pop has become an integral part of pop music in different Asian nations and it is going to stay and make a comeback in the future.

The Impact of J-Pop in Asia

J-pop is now one of the most influential music forces in Asia and it is no exaggeration to say that Asian music has been somehow Japanized. The Japanization of Asian music can be seen from the following five aspects: 1) the popularization of Asian cover versions of J-pop songs, 2) the introduction of the Japanese idol-making system, 3) the adoption of Japanese methods, 4) the use of Japanese words in lyrics or as aliases and 5) the collaborations with the Japanese.

Photo: YAMAHA MUSIC FOUNDATION

Collections of Asian Covers of Nakajima Miyuki's Songs (This CD is only available in Japan)

Making cover versions of J-pop songs is a common practice in Asia. It is cheaper, faster and safer to make cover versions of J-pop than to write original songs. Smash J-pop hits usually have multiple Asian cover versions. For example, Chage & Aska, Nakajima Miyuki, Southern All Stars and Anzen Chitai, each have more than 20 songs made in different Asian cover versions. *Ruju* (lipstick) by Nakajima has more than 10 different Asian cover versions (including Mandarin, Cantonese, English [in Singapore and Thailand], Thai, Vietnamese, Indonesian and Burmese). Taiwan and Hong Kong have produced a large number of Mandarin and Cantonese cover versions. It is said that 20-35% of Cantonese pop songs made in Hong Kong in the early 1990s were cover versions of Japanese songs. Sometimes, cover versions can be more popular than the original songs in Asia. Examples include the Cantonese version of *Manatsu no Kajitsu* (by Southern All Stars), the Mandarin version of *Otoko to Onna* (by Chage & Aska) and the Mandarin version of *Nagai Aida* (by Kiroro).

The Japanese idol-making system has been introduced to Asia. Japanese music companies (such as SME and Avex Trax) and talent agencies (such as Horipro Inc. and Inoks) have set up regional headquarters and branches in major Asian cities. One of their main objectives is to scout, train and promote Asian pop singers in the Japanese fashion for the Asian market. For example, SME has been holding auditions called "Voices of Asia" in eight Asian nations to choose promising new talents. In Mainland China, SME signed four young females to form the Shanghai Performance Doll, a dancing and singing group modeled after the Tokyo Performance Doll. They were sent to receive training in Japan and their Mandarin songs were produced and written by the Japanese. In the late 1990s, the Singaporean composer Dick Lee, who worked for SME (Asia), signed more than 10 singers from Southeast Asia. Inoks chose three young women from Singapore from 3,000 participants in auditions in Southeast Asia to form Mirai ("future" in Japanese). Trained to sing and dance by Inoks under the Japanese system and recording in Mandarin, English and Japanese, Mirai targets the entire Asian market. Komuro Tetsuya hand-picked new singers in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Mainland China to join his "Komuro Family." His family members went to Japan for training. Horipro holds auditions in Mainland China, Taiwan and Vietnam to look for new singers.

Music companies and talent agencies in Asia also learn from their Japanese counterparts in creating idol singers. For example, the Emperor Entertainment Group (EEG, Hong Kong) and the Comic Ritz Productions (Taiwan) are managed in a Japanese fashion. Like Johnny & Associates and other Japanese talent agencies, these Asian companies sign long-term contracts (usually 5-10 years) with good-looking people in their teens and train them to sing, dance, act and talk. The companies arrange different kinds of jobs such as music recording, TV dramas, TV commercials, concerts and movies for them, and acquire a very high commission (usually 30-50%). The singers under these Asian companies have a strong Japanese feel. For example,

Photo: Searchina & CNSPHOTO

Comic Boyz (Comic Ritz Production)

Photo: Searchina & CNSPHOTO

Twins (EEG)

Twins under EEG is modeled after Puffy and Comic Boyz under the Comic Ritz Production are the Taiwanese version of V6. Likewise, Sky under Go East (Hong Kong) is the Hong Kong version of SMAP. These five young Hong Kong men even sing a number of Cantonese cover editions of SMAP's songs. EO2 (Star East Hong Kong) and Energy (Universal Taiwan) remind us of Da Pump in music and dance. Cookies under EMI Hong Kong is regarded as the Hong Kong version of Morning Musume. Similar copied groups can also be found in other parts of Asia.

Asian companies and artists are learning from Japan about different aspects of music production and marketing, such as music composition, MV, stage design, sound effect, costumes, make-up, dance, promotion, jacket design and public relations skills. In Asia, Japan is playing the role of "recycling" Western music. Euro-beat, R&B and Hip hop have largely been introduced from Japan rather than directly from Europe and the United States. How do Asians learn from Japan? Usually the Asians study and apply these Japanese methods by themselves. Sometimes they ask the Japanese to transfer know-how. Taiwanese and Hong Kong talent agencies send their hottest or most promising singers to Japan to receive special training in music, dance and stage performance. For example, EEG sent Nicolas Tse to study guitar and music composition as well as Joey Yung to improve dancing in Japan under Sam (Maruyama Masaharu), the ex-husband of Amuro Namie and a dancer of TRF. In late 2003, Twins received a three-day intensive dancing lesson from Yamato Fumiko, the dance teacher of SMAP. EMI and Universal in Hong Kong also send their singers to receive music and dance training in Japan.

The Japanization of Asian pop music can also be seen from the use of Japanese in lyrics and aliases. Taiwanese singers use Japanese words and phrases in lyrics very often, sometimes even the entire section is in Japanese. Hong Kong singers also like to insert some Japanese in the lyrics such as *"aishiteru"* (I love you), *"suki"* (I like you), *"sayonara"* (goodbye), *"kawaii"* (cute) and *"ichiban"* (the best). The lyrics also contain many hot spots or famous symbols in Tokyo such as the "Yamanote" region, "Shinjuku," "Shibuya" and "Harajuku." Even song titles can be in Japanese (such as Sammi Cheng's *Arigato* [a cover version of Kokia's *Arigato*], Joey Yung's *Aishiteru* and Miriam Yeung's *Futari mae*. Some Asian singers (in particular females) use Japanese names (such as Yoko, Miki, Yumiko, Sakura, Junko, Yuki and Taro) as aliases.

The collaborations between Japanese and Asian musicians have increased tremendously in various forms such as music production, composition, arrangement, recording, singing, playing music and co-organizing concerts. For example, Black Biscuits (disbanded) and Core of Soul are groups combining Japanese and Chinese artists. The guitarist from Luna Sea and the drummer of Shiina Ringo played the music for Nicolas Tse on one of Tse's Cantonese album. Nicolas Tse and Mayday (a Taiwanese Band) were guest performers in one of Glay's concerts in 2001. In 2002, LMF (a disbanded Hong Kong hip hop band) performed with Rip Slyme in concerts in Japan and Taiwan. In 2003, Glay performed as guests for Mayday. Takuro, the leader of Glay, made music with Yundi Li, Vanessa Mae and Sakamoto Ryuichi. Kawamura Ryuichi and Sugizo (Luna Sea) wrote songs for Kelly Chan and Nicolas Tse respectively. Chage & Aska wrote a song for the Chinese singer Naying, and Yuming (Matsutoya Yumi) wrote a song for the Hong Kong singer Dior Wong who studied under her in Japan. Sakai Noriko and Yamaguchi Yuko were guest singers on Hong Kong albums. These kinds of transnational music exchange will generate new artistic ideas and business opportunities and are likely to increase in the future. JS

Ng Wai-ming is an associate professor of Japanese studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He has been researching the impact of Japanese popular culture in Hong Kong and Singapore, and has published articles on Japanese comics, animated films and programs, video games, popular music, TV dramas, sushi and Hello Kitty in academic journals. His current research on Japan's influence on the Hong Kong entertainment industry is supported by a grant from the Research Grant Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.