

LIFESTYLE

Leading a Korean invasion: K-Pop and all that Hallyu

Khmer parents beware: It seems that Cambodian youths, like most of their Asian counterparts, have contracted the contagious Korean pop-culture craze

BY JOEL QUENBY
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Like image-conscious students everywhere, 19-year-old Nguon Dalen spends time on his appearance. Mostly on his hair, it appears.

Nguon Dalen's lovingly sculpted coif, a multilayered mullet, looks distinctly high-maintenance.

"I like Korean hairstyles," he shrugs. "I'm young, so I need something new. I especially like Rain's style: His hair and clothes help him look handsome."

Nguon Dalen has been into Korean fashion since he was in high school. And he's not alone.

Many young Cambodians are likewise seeking to emulate "K-Stars", as they are colloquially known.

It seems that, having flooded Asia's airwaves and won the hearts of fans region-wide in the process, "the Korean Wave" – a pop culture phenomenon also dubbed "Hallyu" – has washed onto Cambodian shores.

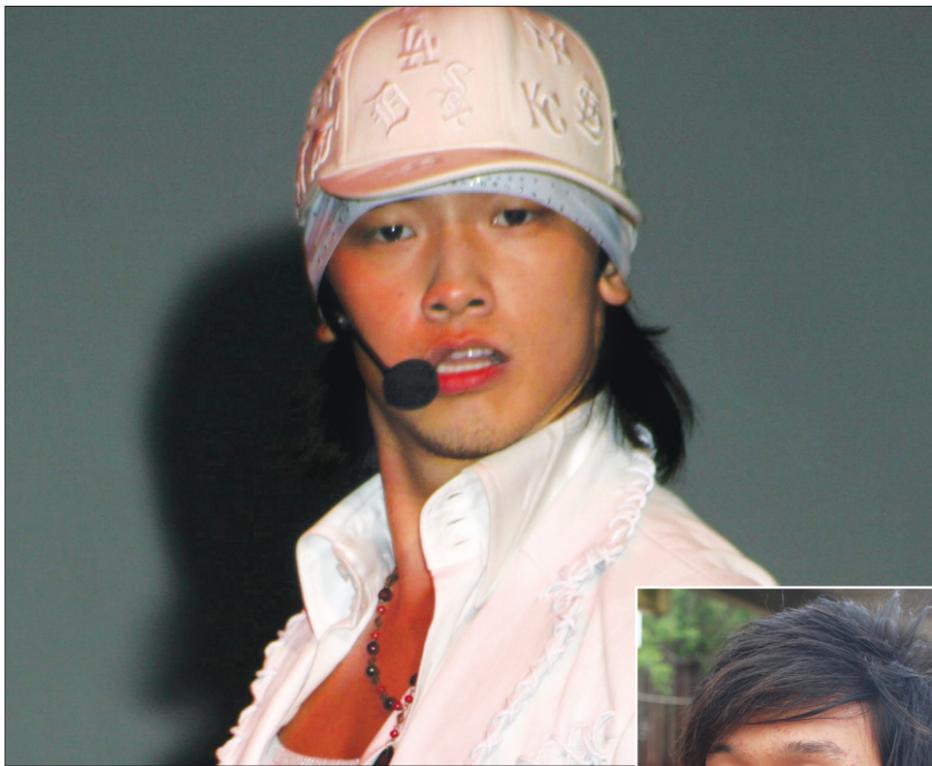
In November 2008, Glen Felgate, general manager of Cambodian Television Network (CTN), told Television Asia Plus magazine that Korean dramas were particularly popular in Cambodia. One, *How to Meet a Perfect Neighbor*, even visited the Kingdom on a location shoot last year.

"The reason many youngsters adapt to new waves of foreign pop culture is that young, influential Cambodian singers and film stars have followed the examples set by their Korean counterparts," says Vong Emsaman, sociology professor of the Royal University of Phnom Penh.

"We cannot stop the behaviour of those young people," he says.

But why would anyone want to?

The professor says he feels



(Above) Jeong Ji-hoon – better known as Rain. PHOTO SUPPLIED (Right) Cambodian Nguon Dalen, 17. HENG CHIVOAN

that the revealing ensembles favoured by Korean starlets impact negatively on the way well-mannered Cambodian girls clothe themselves.

His answer hints at a generational divide that has caused strife between parents and teenagers since Elvis first wiggled his hips on American network television.

Youth subcultures – from flower-power-spouting hippies in the '60s to the phlegm-gobbing punks of the late '70s – mutate over the years, but the nature of the conflict they bestride stays essentially the same.

After all, it's well-established that adolescents, if graced with the freedom and means, often instinctively rebel against their elders, seeking to distinguish themselves from the "squares", using fashion and pop culture tropes as their usual weapons of choice.

But the Korean Wave has been an especially pervasive love affair; this pan-Asian obsession has staying power.

Fans from Saigon to Shanghai await visiting K-Stars amid airport scenes reminiscent of Beatlemania.

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This is curious, especially when one considers the language barriers necessitating subtitles for non-native fans of Korean media.

So how did it all begin?

The inception of Hallyu is tied in with the march of capitalist culture into Asia in the early '90s.

South Korea, as one of the era's economic tigers, with close ties to Western culture

neutral K-Star power – a "soft" force based firmly in the material realm, nonthreatening and easy to aspire to.

China and Taiwan became the first converts.

The message then spread like wildfire to Southeast Asia, the Asia-Pacific, even the Middle East (although the phenomenon is now well-established enough to have faced nationalistic backlashes in both China and Japan).

So much for the movement – who are the protagonists?

As any K-Pop devotee would attest, no one embodies Hallyu more emphatically than Jeong Ji-hoon – better known by his stage name Rain.

Riding the crest of the Korean Wave, Rain's meteoric rise saw him in 2004 become the first-ever winner of the MTV Asia Grand Slam, securing top honours in every country broadcasting MTV Asia.

By 2006 he was being listed in *Time* magazine's "100 Most Influential People Who Shape Our World" and selling out gigs in Vegas and at Madison Square Garden.

Rain's march has been hindered by legal wrangles recently, but there's no doubting the impact he and his ilk have made



and rapidly emerging technological wizardry, was well-placed to take advantage.

Newly minted transnational media corporations churned out slickly produced pop videos starring whiter-than-white (often cosmetically modified) stars.

Meanwhile, TV soap operas promoted ultramodern "middle-class" lifestyles, starring sensitive male protagonists who made teens and housewives alike swoon.

Perhaps just as importantly, South Korea wasn't as politically loaded as Japan or the US. Audiences thus felt freer to embrace comparatively

across Asia.

A Thai concert promoter, for example, ran a competition in which the prize was a night's stay in Rain's Bangkok hotel suite after he'd checked out – but before the maid had cleaned up. (The winner presumably spent a rapturous night alternately sniffing and sobbing into Rain's rumpled towels.)

Jaruwan Supolrai, 26, of Bangkok's Thai Volunteer Service, says that, "many Thai teenagers are crazy for Koreanisation, especially those living in the city."

"They're big fans of Korean singers, stars and fashion. Of course, that makes them want to be like their idols."

His elder Vong Emsaman concurs.

"I lived in Japan for seven years," says the sociology professor. "And I saw that many women in that country may be dressed in sexy clothes, but they are still considered good in their society."

He adds that the solution is to set appropriate dress-code regulations at school.

Trust the powers that be to spoil kids' fun. Some things never change. ■

WHAT'S NEW

Streisand's ex-flame to auction early tapes

A former boyfriend who says he put Barbra Streisand on the road to stardom is to auction three tapes he made of the singer almost 50 years ago. Barry Dennen said the tapes would be sold with bids starting at US\$1 million on MomentsInTime.com. "I'm a little trepidatious. I don't know what the fallout will be. I don't like upsetting Barbra, and I don't want her fans angry at me," Dennen was quoted as saying. He says he met Streisand in 1959 while acting on Broadway and they became lovers. He heard her sing, and he persuaded her to start performing in public.

RELAXNEWS

British censors reject Japanese horror flick

A Britain's film censors have banned the Japanese sadistic horror film *Grotesque*, saying its tale of extreme torture featured unrelenting brutality and minimal narrative. The British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) rejected the DVD, meaning it is unclassified and therefore cannot be legally supplied anywhere in Britain. *Grotesque* focuses on the sexual assault, humiliation and extreme torture of a male and female victim, the board said. "The torture becomes even more extreme, leading to the gory and violent death of both hostages," the BBFC said. The distributors, who were hoping to receive an 18-certificate for the straight-to-DVD film, can appeal. AFP

Family's final farewell to Jackson delayed

Michael Jackson's family has announced that its final farewell to the late 'King of Pop' will be at a Los Angeles funeral on September 3, not August 29, as had been announced. The ceremony, to be held for relatives and friends, will take place at



7pm at the Great Mausoleum at the Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Glendale, California. No reason was given for the change of date. The Great Mausoleum is watched by multiple security cameras, and access is carefully regulated. The public part of the site contains a reproduction of Leonardo Da Vinci's painting *The Last Supper* and multiple copies of statues by Michelangelo. AFP



Tragic Korean actress Jang Ja-yeon. THE GUARDIAN

STORM IN SOUTH KOREA OVER SUICIDAL STARS

WHEN Jang Ja-yeon killed herself in March, she not only deprived South Korea of a wildly popular soap star. In a damning letter naming the men responsible for the distress that may have caused her to take her life at age 26, Jang heaped shame on the country's entertainment industry with allegations of sexual abuse. The villain of the piece, according to reports, was her agent, Kim Sung-hoon. Jang reportedly claimed Kim had regularly beaten her and forced her to have sex with a string of VIPs, including directors, media

executives and CEOs. When police raided Kim's office, they discovered a shower and bed in a "secret room". The South Korean media has finally condemned the industry for the way it treats its most marketable – and usually female – talent. Film and TV viewers are now wondering how big a part abuse and the demands of "slave contracts" played in a spate of celebrity suicides originally put down to the pressures of fame. Jang's suicide was one of several among South Korean entertainers over the past year. THE GUARDIAN