

# Behind the Scenes of K-Pop Fandom

Hong Kong's K-pop fans show their devotion to their idols

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A staff member outside Hall Two of the Asia World Expo announces: “The concert doors are now open for entry, please make your way to the arena.” The long wait is finally over for the thousands of fans who turned up early for the Hong Kong concert of Lee Hong-ki, vocalist of the Korean boy band FT Island.

Tickets for K-pop shows are known for their steep price tags but two 19-year-olds, Cindy Lau and Gladys Lo, who have been Lee’s fans for six years, justify the splurge to support their idol.

The event starts at 7.00 pm, but fans started arriving hours earlier. Most of them, like Lau and Lo, came early for the merchandise and souvenirs distributed by the fan clubs. Yamin, a member of the band’s fan group Eggball Team, says: “We arrived at two, mainly to set up photo booths and distribute souvenirs to other Primadonnas.”

Korean fan bases always refer to themselves by an official name given by their idols, such as “Primadonnas” for FT Island fans. This intimate sub-culture of Korean fandom gives Hong Kong fans a degree of affinity with their stars they are unlikely to experience with home-grown artists.

For K-pop fans, showing admiration for their idols is very important. All the decorations along the hallway in the concert venue, from large backdrops to small souvenirs, were designed and hand-made by fans, and they outdo the official swag. Props such as LED finger lights, paper banners and signs are handed out to ticketholders, and each prop comes with specific guidelines on how and when they should be displayed. As fan clubs prepare fan chants to cheer their idols on during concerts, lyrics sheets are also distributed. Volunteers remind concert-goers to practise them before the show.



Yamin, a member of Eggball Team distributes souvenirs to fans at concert

“It is a rewarding sensation when our efforts are recognised and appreciated by our idols”





It is at these concert events that fans can enjoy the ultimate K-pop experience. Eggball Team says such preparations can take months, two in the case of Lee's concert. They started planning and began crowdfunding shortly after Hong Kong was confirmed as one of the stations in the singer's solo tour.

If their idol's birthday falls on the concert day, they would also order a birthday cake a month ahead to celebrate during the concert. "Each member contributes \$100 to \$200 for a cake," says Cheryl Li, an administrator of a fan club dedicated to the Korean boy group BEAST. Li took a birthday cake and two suitcases of handcrafted decorations to the BEAST concert in Macau.

Despite the time and effort

required, fans regard these preparations and activities as enjoyment rather than a burden. "It is a rewarding sensation when our efforts are recognised and appreciated by our idols," Li says.

She began to pay attention to BEAST several years ago after watching a Korean TV drama featuring the group and started to follow their music and variety show appearances. Eventually, she joined the fan club and is now into her fifth year as a management team member.

At the moment, the fan club has 3,000 active members and its Facebook fan page has over 8,000 subscribed users. Li normally spends one to two hours daily to deal with fan club affairs and update its website and social media accounts. But when big events, such as concerts or fan meet-ups are

approaching, she may spend up to six hours a day because her main duties require communicating with management agencies and production companies. Since members depend on her to arrange perks such as ticket pre-sales for concerts and pre-orders for albums and merchandise, she says she has to take the negotiations very seriously.

As a full-time student, Li sometimes finds it hard to deal with the workload, especially during peak seasons for events. However, she says there is always help on hand.

"We have an arts and graphics team, members who are responsible for posting information updates, a translating team, a production team and so on."





BEAST fan club ordered a cake for their idol's birthday.



The BEAST fan club admin and her friend take the idol's birthday cake from Hong Kong to the BEAST concert in Macau.

In fact, Li does not really consider what she does as managing a fan base, but rather as coordinating a group of friends who share the same interests.

Li shows *Varsity* some of the fan club's self-made souvenirs, as well as some of the official merchandise. She has spent thousands of dollars over the years but she thinks it is worth the investment. "A few part-time jobs will cover the expenses," she says.

The term "groupies" is often used to describe irrationally fanatical supporters of celebrities, but the fans themselves say they have good reason to support their idol and it is not just for their looks.

"Korean celebrities have to undergo years of training before making their debut, it could be 10 years, practising every day," says Ingrid Tsang, the

17-year-old administrator of the fan Instagram account of another Korean boy group EXO.

What impresses Tsang the most is the attitude and professionalism of the Korean entertainment industry. Korean companies train their artists until they are completely proficient in performing perfectly coordinated and executed choreographies. They invest large sums of money on an album or a music video. Tsang thinks it is unlikely that Hong Kong companies would do the same for new idol groups.

Supporting idols from a different country can be challenging, but says Tsang, the hard work their idols put into their career deserves appreciation and applause. The fact that most Korean idols are in a similar age group as their fans means the idols'

success can motivate their fans too.

"Sometimes when I see them perform, or talk about their feelings, I will think about how much hard work they have done that brought them to today's success. Then I will use this to encourage myself in terms of academic studies," says Tsang.

*Edited by Kate Kim*

