

“SMAP: A case-study of J-pop”

Japanese pop music, also known as J-pop, evolved from Japanese people's imitation and adoption of western popular music as early as the 1950s. Back then, the Japanese admired many American popular songs and imitated them by singing them in Japanese. Over time, J-pop emerged as a unique blend of American pop music and Japanese traditional music and ideals. In J-pop, the instrumentation consists of electric guitar, drums and synthesizer, the lyrics center on themes of youth, love and friendship, and the artists are often in their teens or 20s. As part of the Japanese popular cultural movement, J-pop has become an important part of contemporary Japanese popular music, primarily due to the craze over idol girl and boy bands. However, the popularity of idol bands is baffling to many observers, as most idols cannot sing or write their own songs. On a closer look, Japanese idols compensate for their lack of musical talent through their good looks, chic dance moves and “nice” personalities that attract a fan base consisting mostly of adolescents. In particular, boy bands in Japan have become so popular that their members are versatile artists starring in TV dramas and commercials, hosting TV and radio shows and writing books. As additional evidence of the popularity of boy bands in Japan, tickets to their concerts are exclusive to the fan club members through a lottery process (Darling-Wolf). To investigate this boy band phenomenon, this paper explores the rise of the J-pop idol movement and takes a closer look at an all-time popular boy band, SMAP that is representative of many characteristics of Japanese boy bands.

J-pop is part of the Japanese popular cultural movement that began with influx of American movies and popular music into Japan during the post-World War II era. In turn,

Japanese people admired the imported music and created their own versions of the music on TV and in records (Garland). For example, Kosaka Kazuya made a Japanese version of Elvis Presley's "Heartbreak Hotel" that became a hit in Japan in 1956 (Fujie). The trend of recording western popular songs in Japanese marked the "Rockability" phenomenon and catalyzed the westernization of Japanese popular music (Fujie). As the admiration and interest for western popular music grew, the Japanese were listening to artists such as the Beatles and Bob Dylan by the 1960s. Western bands also toured Japan, beginning with the Ventures in 1965 and then the Beatles in 1966 (De Launey). These visits inspired many Japanese youths to make their own music, take on electric guitars and drums, and form their own bands in a movement known as the Elec Boom (Garland). With the prevalence of youths playing in rock bands and singing like the Beatles, commercial rock groups emerged and consisted of "four to seven long-haired male singers wearing identical clothes" (Fujie). The movement was known as the Group Sounds movement, which was characterized by electric guitar, drums, strong beat, vocal harmony and the idea of music for youth by youth (Garland). Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Japanese began developing their own versions of western rock and pop music that would eventually evolved to J-pop.

After the Group Sounds Movement of the 1960s, Japanese in the 1970s witnessed the rise of Idols pop that was marked by the adolescent female singers who were extremely cute and good dancers but somewhat lacking in musical talent. The driving force behind the Idol pop movement was the "artistic" production companies that conducted talent searches for the next teen star and determined the fate of that star by giving her an image, writing her songs, choreographed her dances and marketing her.

Since the popularity of each star usually lasted two or three years, the production companies were adept at producing generations of idols and girl bands. In turn, many Japanese youths were inspired to enter talent search contests to try out their luck as the next teen star. Consequently, the TV show “Star is Born” was introduced as the reality-TV contest to find the next new star among the Japanese youths. Amidst the craze over girl idols, the Japanese were enjoying post-WWII affluence and were able to attend concerts, buy cassettes and learn music on their own. The successful packaging of teenage girl idols, coupled with Japan’s affluence in the 1970s, were instrumental in establishing the Idol-pop movement that paved the way for the boy band craze that began in the 1980s.

Girl bands appealed to a wide range of Japanese audiences for their cuteness and closeness to the fans. First, the Japanese men liked the cute female idols whose sweet and generous character embodies that of an ideal wife and mother. The images of cuteness and youth are traditionally valued in Japanese society, as seen in the prevalence of “sweet little girl” featured in books, magazines, advertisements and movies at the turn of the nineteenth century (Aoyagi). Second, the Japanese women looked to the female idols for contemporary fashion and lifestyle trends. Often, idols were featured in fashion and teen magazines as spokespeople for cosmetic and clothing brands and as romance advisors. Finally, as the most enthusiastic fans, adolescents looked up to their idols for companionship, advice and fashion trends. The relationship between the idols and their adolescent audience was very close, primarily due to their similarity in age that helped them relate to each other’s experiences growing up and working hard to become adults.

Overall, the idols were able to appeal to such a wide range of audience because they personified the audiences' idealistic views.

In packaging each pop idol, production companies follow closely to the golden rule of depicting the idol as a life-sized, above average person. According to Aoyagi, modesty and deference to the social norm are highly valued in Asian society and are best summed up in the following idiom: "the nail that sticks out gets hammered down." In following the traditional values of Asian society, Japanese idols are often depicted as the typical girl or boy next door chosen to be lucky stars and to represent their generation (Aoyagi). In maintaining their life-sized image, the idols are extremely close to their audience. For example, idols hold get-togethers with fans, correspond with fans by letter and keep online diaries. In turn, the fans feel the constant companionship of the idols, who would always smile and never let the fans down. This feeling of companionship is even stronger among the adolescent fans, who feel like they are growing up and working hard together with the idols. The life-sized image conveyed by Japanese idols is effective in making them closer and more likable to the audience.

In addition to the life-sized image, idols have to be cute. Cuteness appeals to the audience in a society that highly values youth and innocence (De Launey). In expressing cuteness, idols are always smiling, singing, acting and speaking in a "sweet, meek and adorable" way (Fujie). In response to the cuteness of the idols, the audience feels the need to "protect" them and help preserve their innocence by cheering for them in singing contests, concerts and autograph events. With the rising popularity of idols, the marketing strategy of depicting the idols as extremely cute and innocent has become a standard in the J-pop music scene.

Embodying many qualities of Japanese idol-pop stars, SMAP has become the most popular boy band in Japan since the 1990s. SMAP stands for Sports Music Assemble People and is a product of the Johnny's Talent Agency that is known for producing generations of boy bands. SMAP was first formed in 1988 and consisted of six members who were the skateboarding backups to an older boy band under Johnny's management. Although SMAP's debut single in 1991 was not well-received in Japan, Johnny's continued to promote the band through appearances on billboards, commercials and TV show "I Love SMAP." Through these publicity venues, the band members were able to reveal their own unique personalities that attracted the Japanese audience's attention. For example, Katori Shingo is known for playing androgynous roles in TV shows and dramas, in which he would dress as "Shingo Mama" wearing heavy makeup and a short skirt. Because of his frequent androgynous roles, Shingo's ambiguous sexual orientation often headlines the gossip columns in Japan and hence helps publicize the group. With members' unique personalities and high visibility in media, SMAP dominated the J-pop scene throughout the 1990s, releasing over thirty singles with two of them selling more than one million copies. At the same time, SMAP concerts became exclusive to fan-club members who had to enter a lottery in order to obtain tickets. The history of SMAP showed that publicity played a key role in promoting SMAP to stardom.

Using unique personality as a marketing strategy, Johnny's also cultivated images for the other four band members. Nakai Masahiro, the band's leader, is a "notorious bachelor and trickster" who changes his appearance all the time (Wikipedia). Kimura Takuya, often voted the sexiest man in Japan, likes to show off his body and conveys a sexy, heartthrob image. Kusanagi Tsuyosi casts a sensitive image from his soft features

and often wears pink to convey his feminine side. Lastly, Inagaki Goro is seen as quiet and self-absorbed (Wikipedia). The different personalities of the band members help the band appeal to a wider range of audiences who can find the one band member that share similar character as the fan. Overall, the unique personality of each SMAP member is an effective marketing strategy to publicize SMAP as life-sized band.

In increasing their presence and appeal to the audience in Japan, SMAP members have become versatile arts who sing, dance, star in TV dramas and commercials and host the TV variety show “SMAP x SMAP.” Despite their inability to sing, SMAP is known for their happy, upbeat songs that describe “romantic encounters and meaningful friendship” (Darling-Wolf). Recently, SMAP has been promoting individuality and peace in their lyrics. For example, the song “The Only One Flower in the World,” released in 2003, describes how everyone is beautiful and unique like different kinds of flowers, and how pointless it is to compare people when everyone is equally beautiful (Riku). SMAP’s upbeat sound and social messages in the lyrics help convey the youthfulness and righteousness of the band members and help them gain approval from a wider range of audience. SMAP members’ roles in TV dramas also help reassert this nice and life-sized image. For instance, in “Gift,” Kimura plays an amnesic gangster who slowly regained his memory of his violent past and chose to become a “kind, sensitive” person (Darling-Wolf). In addition to TV dramas, SMAP members engage in cooking contests as part of the “Bistro SMAP” segment of their TV show “SMAP x SMAP.” Through their culinary skills, the five men further impress the female audience with their capabilities of being good husbands who can take on housechores. In order to appear more life-sized, SMAP members often make mistakes when singing or acting and then joke about them in a

casual setting. Not only does the versatility of the SMAP band members increase their visibility in Japan, it also reasserts each man as life-sized and understanding of women.

In maintaining their image as “life-sized” and “good,” SMAP members extend their good behaviors to real life. For example, Nakai and Kusanagi are often seen on television as mentors to young boys and caretakers for infants (Darling-Wolf). Their community service efforts are highly looked upon by the Japanese audience and help publicize the band members as caring individuals. In addition, Kimura cultivates the image of a “devoted” husband and father in real life with the birth of his daughter in 2001 and his marriage to Japanese popular singer Kudo Shizuka (Darling-Wolf). Through their “good deeds” in real life, SMAP members further solidify their images as good, caring people that are approved by the Japanese public.

To top off their good and caring personalities, SMAP members’ good looks and physique help attract a bigger female and homosexual male following. As the most popular member of the band, Kimura likes to show off his “perfectly trimmed body” in commercials, concerts and TV dramas, as he is often the first one to take off his shirt in concerts (Darling-Wolf). In his nighttime radio show, Kimura enjoys publicizing his “sexual prowess, masturbating habits and consumption of pornography” that reassert his masculine and sexy image (Darling-Wolf). Furthermore, SMAP members frequently appear on the cover of women’s magazines and Kimura and Shingo, in particular, have posed nude in two magazines (Darling-Wolf). The SMAP members use their physical appearances as another marketing tool to attract more female and homosexual male followings.

Finally, SMAP's popularity has also extended across Asia as the group appealed to Asian audiences with their pan-Asian identity. For example, Kusanagi's ability to speak Korean has helped him break into the Korean popular music scene with a solo album of songs sung in Korean and with TV drama appearances. Kusanagi's presence in Korea also symbolizes the improved cultural relation between Japan and Korea, despite the political tensions between the two countries since Japan's annexation of Korea from 1910 to the end of World War II (Aoyagi). Consequently, SMAP has also invited Korean guests on their show as judges of Bistro SMAP cooking contest or as music collaborators. Through extensive media publicity and prevalence of Internet, SMAP has also reached Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia and Taiwan with albums and TV dramas starring SMAP members (Darling-Wolf). SMAP appeals to the Asian audience because SMAP conveys youth, hope and happiness that provide the audience a break from the real world (Aoyagi). Most importantly, Asian audience is receptive to idols that look like them "with black hair, black pupils and yellow skin" (Aoyagi). Therefore, overcoming language barriers and emphasizing the pan-Asian identity are instrumental to SMAP's widespread popularity in Asia.

Despite their lack of artistic talent, SMAP members are able to gain a nationwide following for over a decade because of their versatility in the entertainment industry and their image as life-sized and physically attractive men who also possess a feminine side. The marketing strategies for these stars traced back to the "packaging" of idols in the Idol-pop movement and proved to be important in SMAP's continued success. Overseas, SMAP members help solidify the pan-Asian identity that appeals to non-Japanese Asian audiences.

References

- Aoyagi, Hiroshi. "Pop idols and the Asian identity." *Japan Pop! Inside the World of Japanese Popular Culture*. Ed. Timothy Craig. Armonk, NY: M.E.Sharpe, 200. 309-326.
- Darling-Wolf, Fabienne. "SMAP, sex and masculinity: Constructing the perfect female fantasy in Japanese popular music." *Popular Music and Society* 2004;27-3:357-370.
- De Launey, Guy. "Not-so-big in Japan: Western pop music in the Japanese market." *Popular Music* 1995;14-2:203-225.
- Fujie, Linda. "Popular music." *Handbook of Japanese Popular Culture*. Ed. Richard Gid Powers and Hidetoshi Kato. New York: Greenwood P, 1989. 197-227.
- Riku, Shan. Personal communication.
- Wikipedia. "SMAP." <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SMAP>. Searched on 4/20/2005.
- Wikipedia. "Boy Band." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/boy_bands. Searched on 4/15/2005.