

KPOP INNOVATION

FEATURE



THE K-POP WAVE

YOUTH ICONS



BY ——— Vincent Brunner

In a little over a decade, France has become one of the world's biggest consumers of K-pop music and, as such, an unmissable stop on the global concert tours of such iconic bands as BTS, Black Pink, or Stray kids. A success story that knows no bounds.

On 21 December 2012, YouTube broke an all-time record: it was the first time a single music video garnered over one billion views in the history of the platform. Only six months prior, the artist behind the record-breaking video, the South-Korean pop star known as Psy, was completely unknown outside his native country and neighbouring Japan. Intended as a playful satire poking fun at the Gangnam-Gu lifestyle (one of the snobbiest districts of Seoul), "Gangnam Style" transcended cultural and linguistic barriers with its relentless energy, catchy chorus, and viral choreography. For the first time, a Korean artist had truly gone global, his music played in homes around the world. In so doing, he became a national hero. According to the French National Union of Phonographic Publishers (*Syndicat national de l'édition phonographique*, or SNEP), "Gangnam Style" ranked 4th place in the top-selling singles of September 2012. By 2013, the song had dropped to 16th place, but its remarkable staying power was bolstered by another Psy track, "Gentleman", which climbed to 123rd place. Though Psy may be the most publicised and widely recognised ambassador of K-pop thanks to this summer hit, others in the genre have made their mark abroad as well. Other South Korean acts like Super Junior and Girls' Generation have also struck a chord with Western audiences and are now firmly established on the international scene. Performing for the first time in France in February 2012 at the Zénith Paris, the two outfits shared the stage with fellow boy bands TVXQ and SHINee, and girl band f(x).

SÉOUL-SUR-SEINE

Since 2011, the SM Town Live '10 World Tour organised by Korean entertainment agency SM Entertainment has systematically included the French capital in its concert calendar alongside Tokyo, Shanghai, Los Angeles and New York. Founded by former musician and visionary entrepreneur Lee Soo-man, SM Entertainment built the show around a simple concept: to showcase the agency's range of talent with an impeccably choreographed, non-stop performance with no less than 45 songs on the programme. Initially, only one concert date was scheduled in Europe, to be held in Paris on 10 June. But after concert tickets sold out in fifteen minutes, disappointed fans refused to take no for an answer. After a flash mob staged near the Louvre pyramid that drew three hundred fans—an event that went viral in Korean media—a second date, 11 June, was added to the tour schedule and sold out in record time. This community of devoted fans would become the

foundation for K-pop's growing success in France. In 2012, Girls' Generation returned to French soil to play a concert at the Palais Omnisports de Bercy, a major event featured on the Korean television channel KBS's music programme "Music Bank". The local media coverage when the band released the European edition of their third album *The Boys* (the first to be released in France) serves as a useful indicator of K-pop's rise in popularity. They were featured in a segment on France 2's 8PM. news, another on TF1's "Sept à huit" programme, and even made the daily newspaper *Le Monde*. To top it off, Girls' Generation was invited to appear on the leading talk show of the time, "Le Grand Journal". After performing their hit song "The Boys" to an ecstatic audience of devoted fans, the group gave a brief interview and Sooyoung, the band's spokesperson, could barely be heard over the cheering crowd. At the time, K-pop merchandise was mainly available in specialist shops such as Musica and Tai You in Paris's 13th arrondissement, the two main importers of new releases in the genre. But this was soon to change.

THE SOUND OF SOFT POWER

This wave of music exports from South Korea, a country with a population of around 50 million, was no random occurrence but the result of a comprehensive government policy to promote Korean's culture and lifestyle. Elected in 1993, president Kim Young-sam set out to modernise the country by leveraging its rich and fascinating culture to develop Korean influence abroad, a concept that American professor Joseph Nye later termed "soft power". This came at just the right time as, in 1992, the explosive success of a track by trio Seo Taiji and Boys shook the Korean music industry. Blending features from a number of American musical styles that were immensely popular in the early 1990s—namely R&B, rap, powerful guitars riffs and catchy pop melodies—the hit song "Nan Arayo" was the starting point of a musical revolution. With 1.5 million copies sold and seventeen consecutive weeks at number one, "Nan Arayo" paved the way for Lee Soo-man, who would go on to become the guru of K-pop. After moving to the United States to complete a PhD in the 1970's, the man now known in his country as "the president of culture" saw Michael Jackson and Madonna rise to world fame in the 1980s, their music promoted by booming music channel MTV in music videos scripted like short films or mini pop ballets with high production value. Following in the footsteps of their American role models, the artists signed at his agency, SM Entertainment, were taught to sing and dance in finely tuned choreographies, and even learned to speak several languages in order to appeal to audiences around the world. The goal was to create a cult following around these pop idols, an army of fans eager and willing to support their favourite music stars. Lee Soo-man's two first success stories, boy band H.O.T. and girl band S.E.S., were essentially prototypes in a formula he refined over time. Each band was the result of a careful selection process, head-hunting individual talents through numerous auditions.

The nine young women of Girls' Generation, scouted well before they turned 18, are a perfect example. Years before they even met, they had to undergo intensive training. To succeed as artists and athletes, the future idols were expected first and foremost to develop a rigorous work ethic—they would have to prove themselves to SM Entertainment decision-makers before ever making it to the stage. Working with boy band NCT, Lee Soo-man took his formula to the next level with the concept of “cultural technology”—the name NCT stands for Neo-Culture Technology—a concept built around the idea of limitless potential. The band counts 25 members and this number has no upper limit according to SM Entertainment's visionary leader, who believes NCT could even become a legion of artists established in every local market. The agency's 25-strong boy band is routinely divided into distinct “sub-units” to meet specific needs or cater to distinct audiences. For example, the teenage members of offshoot band NCT Dream were so chosen to appeal to audiences of the same age. WayV, on the other hand, is made up of exclusively Chinese members to appeal to their young compatriots specifically. With its unlimited members, sub-units, concepts, genres, regions, and languages, NCT was described by EnVi Media, a platform specialising in Asian pop culture, as a “cultural reset”, an unprecedented hybrid model positioned halfway between strategic globalised marketing and tailor-made solutions.

Other entertainment agencies quickly followed in the footsteps of SM Entertainment, most notably YG Entertainment, founded by Yang Hyun-suk (formerly of Seo Taiji & Boys), JYP Entertainment, launched by J.Y. Park, and Hybe Corporation, owned by producer Bang Si-hyuk (formerly of Big Hit Entertainment). K-pop bands were quick to capitalise on YouTube as a marketing platform with polished music videos showcasing their dance moves. The next step involved developing an abundant and diverse range of merchandise around these artists, to the delight of hobby collectors. One accessory in particular quickly became a must-have at concerts: the *lightstick*, a glow stick unique to each band which fans would wave as they danced during shows. CDs came packaged with countless goodies that became powerful purchasing triggers, including mini-magazines, stickers and, above all, photocards. These photos of band members, distributed at random in each album cover, grew to become more coveted than the CD itself, especially the exclusives that were only available in select countries. France, with its booming taste for K-pop, soon became one of these select markets.

"FANS WILL SPEND SIGNIFICANT AMOUNTS OF MONEY TO COLLECT THE VARIOUS EDITIONS."



GLOBAL ICONS WITH POWERFUL FANBASES

In April 2012, boy band Super Junior returned to the Zénith Paris. This time, they were the main event. Five years later, G-Dragon, leader of Big Bang, performed at the Accor Arena, marking a new milestone in the growing popularity of K-pop in France. In 2016, the KCON convention—a one-day festival featuring several groups—invited BTS for their first appearance in France. The band quickly won over fans who in November 2017 created the BTS Army France fan club, a loyal community dedicated to supporting their idols via social media, online voting, and “strategic album purchases”. Building on this collective movement, BTS became the first K-pop band to fill the Stade de France for two major shows in 2019. They further established their status as a global sensation with two diamond-certified tracks (50 million streams each): “Dynamite” and “My Universe” (featuring Goldplay).

It's important to note that BTS is no outlier in this regard. Other major K-pop artists, notably Blackpink, regularly sell out their concerts in France. In December 2022, the girl band gave two concerts at the Accor Arena, attended by first lady Brigitte Macron. In her capacity as patron of the *Pièces Jaunes* charity initiative, she invited Blackpink to the 2023 edition alongside Gims, Pharrell Williams and Pascal Obispo. Band members Lisa, Jennie, Rosé and Jisoo have since launched thriving solo careers. Rosé's single “APT” featuring Bruno Mars was even certified diamond in France. K-pop was once again given a prime time spot during the 2024 *Pièces Jaunes* gala, represented this time by headliner Stray Kids. With Fnac sales (a major French music outlet) rivalling those of the Rolling Stones, Taylor Swift, and Mylène Farmer, the band delivers a savvy blend of hip-hop, dubstep, and rock, collaborating with legends such as Tom Morello, guitarist of Rage Against the Machine. In 2024, they became the first K-pop artists with three albums—*ATE*, *Hop* and *Rock-Star*—to rank in the annual top 200.

A NEW MODEL BUILT ON EMOTIONAL MARKETING?

This success completely changed the landscape of K-pop distribution in France, shifting away from imported releases as French distribution channels like Warner and Universal take over domestic markets. Nowadays, you can walk into Fnac, Cultura, and even your average French supermarket and see K-pop products on the shelves, easily recognisable thanks to their unique designs and formats. The merch and packaging of “Supernatural”, hit single by female quartet NewJeans, was an instant success designed by Japanese artist Takashi Murakami. French record industry professionals are taking note of this highly-curated approach to merchandising and how it can effectively drive physical album sales. According to Guénaël Geay, International Director at Universal Music France: “*The commitment to quality is obvious in everything they do, a genuine desire to deliver innovative products. It has inspired us to apply the formula to other types of artists, as this marketing strategy built on goodies and merchandising can drive business further than we have been able to in the past. In fact, when we started working with K-pop artists, the photocards immediately reminded me of the Panini stickers I used to collect as a child!*”



Éléonore Karoutchi, brand manager at WEA, Warner Music France's international label, had similar thoughts on the subject: “*Fans absolutely love these products and will spend significant amounts of money to collect all the different editions. There is a strong sense of community, with fans often placing joint orders to reduce shipping costs.*”

The French public's enthusiasm for K-pop can be seen in other ways, too. Consider the many TikTok videos with titles such as “*Why be sad when you can buy K-pop albums with the Pass Culture?*” (A popular French membership programme with rebates on cultural products and activities for 15 to 21-year-olds.)

But what are K-pop fans really like? Savannah Truong, who founded Kick Café in 2020, a K-pop-themed concept store and restaurant in Paris's 2nd arrondissement, paints a detailed picture of her clientele. “*The market is 90% female, with most in the 18 to 25 age range. Next come the 25-35 year-olds, accounting for around 30%, then the under-18s and over-35s, each accounting for 10%.*” As the numbers show, the audience is in no way limited to high school students. It's safe to say that the French public's interest in K-pop is here to stay. The recent Songwriting Camp organised by Sacem in Seoul, featuring key members of major Korean publisher CTGA's roster of artists, has shown that, thanks to K-pop, French composers are discovering new and exciting avenues to explore.



Follow the link to watch the video

SONG

BY ——— Vincent Brunner

A HIGH NOTE FOR FRENCH-KOREAN MUSIC DEALS

The second Sacem Songwriting Camp that took place in Seoul in March 2025 brought together a diverse group of Sacem members and K-pop creators. For five days, talents from both countries collaborated closely to explore one of the richest and fastest-growing musical trends in the world today.

"This was a great experience, I remember it fondly. Meeting the other members of the French team, travelling to Korea together, working on K-pop with Korean composers and songwriters... It really drove home the fact that we all speak the same language: music!" Last March, talented topliner Noémie, who works with rappers such as Youssoupha and KeBlack, was one of the lucky Sacem members to fly out to Seoul to take part in the songwriting camp accompanied by Alexandre Mahout, Director of Development and Repertoires at Sacem, and Jean-François Ferrier, Head of Rap Repertoire Development. The Franco-Korean collaborative event was the brainchild of Caroline Champarnaud—Director of International Development at Sacem—and the French market representative of Korean agency CTGA, who first met during the Midem music industry trade show. This synergy serves as a testament to the opportunities made possible when professional music organisations work together to expand their role beyond the mere collection of copyright royalties.



NECKWAV



TOYO AND NOÉMIE

WRITING

S(E)OUL MUSIC

The Songwriting Camp featured 15 talented French artists: Elior, Béesau, Jen Jis, Kozbeatz, Maddy Street, Mammouth, MKL, Renaud Rebillaud, Sam Tiba, Marie Monti, Noémie, James BKS, Joa Touch, and the duo Argo & LTD. For five days, the French delegation teamed up with Korean creators including Jinbo, the mastermind credited on several tracks for K-pop superstars BTS, and beatmaker Ditch David (Onew, CLUB BOYBND), working in partnership with Korean agency CTGA. The songwriting camp was also an opportunity for artists to meet Lee Soo-man, the "emperor" of K-pop, who had attended the previous edition in France in June 2024. *"Lee Soo-man was the one who briefed us,"* explains James BKS, the name behind the album *Wolves of Africa*. *"He helped us learn all about the work methods of Korean bands and really immerse ourselves in their world. The process is very structured in Korea. They are serious about being on time for work, but also when it comes to taking breaks."* Despite the seven-hour jetlag, the French delegation barely had time to catch their breath. Every day participants would form new Franco-Korean pairs and trios, keeping the teams in constant rotation. Before long, talents from both countries had learned to harmonise and compose together, collaborating seamlessly without any creative barriers.

Joa Touch, artistic director for Shay and co-producer of various tracks for Akon, Wiz Khalifa, and Niska, shares his experience: *"I've been listening to K-pop for years and I was curious to learn how Korean songwriters craft their songs, the technical process involved, their specific approach... Was it a well-practised routine or more of an intuitive process? What I discovered on site is that they are true masters of the craft. If they walked into the studio with a brief or a concept in mind, the first thing Lee Soo-man would say was: 'Don't worry, and don't hold back if you have an idea. If you come up with something that doesn't really fit with any of our artists, we can always form a new band.' In that moment, it was like all my creative inhibitions fell away."*

BREAKING WITH ESTABLISHED CODES

This open-minded work environment proved the perfect storm of inspiration



MARIE MONTI

for beatmaker MKL, who also produces the band Lefa: *"Koreans artists really pay attention to evolving trends and music styles, they are always open to new experiences. In some ways they can seem quite rigid, but deep down they don't let any set rules limit their creativity. This sense of creative freedom is kind of like having a superpower. In fact, while visiting Korea, I started writing the kind of music I don't usually work with in France."* Renaud Rebillaud—the producer we can thank for the stellar success of such artists as Gims, Vitaa & Slimane, to name a few—is equally enthusiastic about the experience, despite being unfamiliar with K-pop: *"I quickly realised that the Koreans wanted to work with French artists to draw inspiration from our unique vision of music-making, not just do the same things they were already doing back home."* *"This Songwriting Camp was a revelation, and I was surprised all over again by the sheer passion of French creators. It really motivated me to bring this boundless energy to the world of K-pop,"* echoed Kim Minkyung, director of the CTGA agency.

When it comes to royalty payments, they do things very differently in Korea. *"They have a very straightforward approach,"* explains Alexandre Mahout. *"They count the number of songwriters working in the studio and simply divide shares equally among them... And contracts are signed before anyone even turns on their computers. This avoids any potential source of conflict."* Many participants echoed Joa Touch's sentiment that *"the Songwriting Camp changed [their] relationship to music."* And as Topline writer Noémie said quite beautifully to sum up her feelings about the adventure: *"K-pop is an incredibly rich form of music. As we'd expect, everything has to be super catchy, it has to appeal to the crowd, but there are few constraints otherwise, styles can range from rap all the way to classical opera. In Korea, we had the space to let our imagination run completely free, to try new things we wouldn't really try at home. Because the truth is that, in France, we tend to limit ourselves to tried and tested music formats, but I like to think we can change things for the better."* One thing is for certain: initiatives such as this one can definitely move things in the right direction.

CAMP