

# Big hit searches for next big thing, are there too many K-pop groups?

## While BTS and big labels look towards future, questions arise about sustainability of K-pop's growth

SEOUL: Big Hit Entertainment, the label behind K-pop phenomenon BTS, is both riding a stunning wave of success and looking for the next big thing.

Over the past year, BTS, which delivered Big Hit most of its earnings, has achieved feats unprecedented for K-pop, including topping the Billboard Hot 100, performing at the Grammys and being named entertainer of the year by Time magazine.

Alongside the accolades have come impressive earnings. Despite the music industry coming under strain since the coronavirus outbreak, when big concerts and live events cannot be held, Big Hit is now valued at around US\$7.6 billion, with its stock price doubling since its initial public offering in October 2020.

The company brought in US\$176 million in revenues and US\$77 million in profits in 2020, up 36 per cent and nearly 20 per cent respectively from the previous year.

With the entertainment giant looking to move from strength-to-strength, Big Hit announced a project with Universal Music Group earlier this month. The two companies will collaborate to assemble and train a new K-pop group to carry on the momentum created by BTS.

Big Hit knows the members of BTS must undergo compulsory South Korea military service at some point and they will need to fill that temporary absence.

That national service sabbatical could be career-ending in an industry of short attention spans and insatiable fan appetite. And for all of BTS' huge successes, like all pop acts, they will not be cool forever.

In announcing the venture, Big Hit CEO Bang Si-hyuk said this combining of forces will "create a synergy that rewrites global music history", while Universal Music Group CEO Sir Lucian Grange said the companies' goal is to "further accelerate K-pop as a global cultural phenomenon".

The flotation of BTS' label Big Hit Entertainment will make its founder a billion-



aire

The thing is, BTS has rewritten the international conversation about K-pop and set a high bar for the next group.

No longer do labels, fans or observers wonder what it might take for the genre to find sustained success in the West.

With a message of "self-love" and active engagement with fans, BTS has reached global prominence that no one could have predicted.

BTS absorbed the lessons of their predecessors and learned from acts that came before them what didn't work. In the US, they entered a marketplace familiarised with Korea through exposure to acts like Psy, the

WonderGirls and Girls' Generation, all of whom had scored some degree of stateside success.

It's not just the music industry. The South Korean government too is committed to seeing K-pop remain a global force, in part due to the national pride the country gleams from seeing homegrown acts succeed abroad.

Well aware of the commercial and soft-power potential of the industry, the government is pledging continued support, such as tax breaks and subsidies.

The task now is to leverage that into something long-lasting. Big Hit hopes to create "synergy" in combining Universal's expertise in the global music industry with

its hit-making prowess.

The group will be formed in the US through K-pop's customary boot-camp style competition, where hopefuls will be drilled in singing and dancing as the group's architects select members through rounds of elimination.

BTS may sit at the top of the K-pop pile but are far from alone. Blackpink, Twice, Exo and TVXQ are heavy hitters with distinct identities.

Their own passionate fan bases follow their every move with dedication more typically associated with fans of sports franchises. As BTS and other big companies look toward the future, and the countless

competitors mull how to get their own slice of the pop music pie, the question becomes, how sustainable is all this?

While the industry is growing, it will surely eventually hit a point of saturation, with diminishing opportunities for each newly launched act.

And there already are literally hundreds of idol groups. The top notch of the industry are entertainment industry kingpins who rake in millions as they (in normal times) hold concerts in stadiums. Further down the totem pole are middling acts who travel around South Korea in minivans making local appearances for meagre pay or indie bands that put out music on SoundCloud

## Malaysian enthusiast builds and launches amateur rockets



KUALA LUMPUR: Growing up watching planes take off and land at Alor Setar airport in the northern Malaysian state of Kedah left Tan Zu Puayen with a long-standing fascination with aircraft and flight.

So much so that he chose to pursue aerospace engineering all the way to a doctorate in the United States and dove into amateur rocketry, building and launching rockets as tall as 5m.

These amateur, unmanned rockets are propelled by rocket motors, with some able to reach an altitude of over 100km above Earth's surface - the edge of space - before segmenting and falling back to the ground.

His first high-power rocket, called Boleh One and measuring at 2.5m, got 600m off the ground in 2011 from the rocket launch site in Alabama.

"When I launched Boleh One, the sound of it taking off stuck in my head for weeks after, like a musical earworm.

"Rockets don't actually go 'woosh' or 'pssh' as they launch. It's actually more like cracking thunder, you could hear the sound bouncing off the nearby hills," he recalled.

Tan's interest in aerospace was met with skepticism from his family at first, he recalled.

"I'd known a couple of family friends who had also done the same field, but they ended up in careers unrelated to their studies, and generally, if you take this field, there aren't many related jobs in Malaysia," he said.

Arriving in America in 2008 was a culture shock at first for Tan, especially when he discov-

ered that aerospace studies was a field one could pursue with the hope of eventually pursuing a career in.

When he began studying for his master's degree in 2011, he joined an amateur rocketry club at Georgia Institute of Technology called the Ramblin' Rocket Club and got hooked.

In the same year, he embarked on a personal project dubbed Boleh Rockets.

"Boleh" is Malay for can, and often evokes the can-do spirit in the context of Malaysia.

To date, Tan has built three Boleh rockets in the US and launched them multiple times. He was involved in the launch of a Low Altitude Demonstrator in Perak last December, a project spearheaded by Singapore-based launcher start-up Equatorial Space Systems (ESS).

Currently an assistant professor heading the Aerospace Systems and Aerodynamics Research Lab at Taiwan's National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University, Tan has another Boleh rocket in the pipeline - a Boleh Three model which he wanted to experiment getting off the ground with electrical ducted fans, instead of rocket fuel.

At its basic, an amateur rocket consists of an outer tube or rocket body to house the motor, which comprises a metal tube or casing and the propellant. And according to Tan, basic models could be bought quite cheaply from a hobby shop or chain stores like Walmart in the US.

Beginners could start off by enjoying small, fun models, and as they moved on to more sophisticated ones, rocketry became more difficult and at times, lonely, Tan told CNA.

Despite the supportive rocketry ecosystem in the US, the hobby could also get difficult for hobbyists and enthusiasts, especially for those trying to chase their amateur rocketry qualifications. This is due to cost of materials and the

stringent qualification criteria, he said.

"But we also feel that a rocket lifting into the sky is a direct metaphor for willpower and resolve, because the rocket punches through the air on raw engine power. It isn't graceful or compromising with the sky, like an airplane," Tan mused.

"I think each launch event, in a way, is us physically manifesting our subconscious resolve to break through challenges. And that's why we're addicted to it," he added.

In the US, amateur rocketeers can obtain three levels of certification through national organisations to progressively fly more powerful rockets.

The motors of amateur rockets are classed by alphabets, with A to D levels bearing cardboard or plastic casing and H onwards being high-power rockets. The further along, the more pushing force it has and the longer the motor burns.

"So the holy grail of high-power rocketry is from alphabets M to O and beyond, which are under Level Three and are enough to push all the way to the edge of space," Tan explained.

One reason basic rocketry and amateur rocketry were so accessible to the public in the US, he said, was the presence of an entire supporting ecosystem to encourage children and adults alike to pursue amateur rocketry.

"Meanwhile, research into aerospace studies is well-funded, because you have the United States' federal government, the corporations putting in money. Not to mention generous involvement from academia, and assistance from private makerspaces and workshops," Tan added.

Tan's Boleh One was launched in 2011 for him to obtain his Level One certification in high-power rocketry. "For this qualification, I decided to build a model which was taller than I am, with excess capacity so I could put in a more powerful motor down the road," he said.

The significance of the successful launch began to sink in after he shared photos and videos of the launch. "Friends in Malaysia and other countries were excited by Boleh One's launch," he recalled. Other rockets soon followed, such as Boleh Mini, a smaller rocket with a powerful engine that nearly broke the sound barrier, and Boleh Two for the highest amateur rocket qualification which he took in 2014. —CNA

## Meet 31-year-old Frenchman who runs foodpanda in Singapore

Thanks to the panda in its name and logo, you'd be forgiven for assuming that foodpanda is Asian-owned.

In actuality, the ubiquitous food delivery platform was founded in Singapore in 2012, but is now owned by Berlin-based Delivery Hero, which acquired the business in 2016. It is listed on the German DAX, following an IPO in 2017.

So, oddly enough, while the foodpanda brand remains most active in the Asia-Pacific (APAC) market, you would just as easily find its pink-garbed riders plying the streets of Romania and Bulgaria - the two Eastern European markets where the company has a presence - today.

And at its helm is Frenchman Luc Andreani, who assumed the role of managing director of Singapore at the tender age of 27 - believed to be the youngest MD the company has ever seen.

Now 31, Andreani is tasked with stewarding foodpanda through one of the most challenging economic eras the world has ever experienced.

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Before joining the tech industry, Andreani went from coordinating counter-trafficking operations with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime to working with the International Atomic Agency, which promotes the peaceful use of nuclear energy, and later to establishing diplomatic relations between the French and Chilean government with the French Embassy in Santiago, where he picked up Spanish.

"Those were super cool experiences and you meet amazing, fascinating people and you're exposed to things you only read in the news like negotiations on nuclear energy. But the reality is that those are environments in which age matters a lot and to get to a position of impact and power, you'd need to be of a certain age," Andreani explained.

While figuring out his next move, Andreani returned to Paris and juggled three jobs: Consulting work and political campaigning during the 2012 French presidential elections while also working for power company Electricite de France (EDF).

Armed with his liberal arts degree focused on Asian studies (where he picked up Mandarin) and a master's degree in corporate finance, strategy and entrepreneurship, Andreani eventually decided to move out to Asia to join Lazada Vietnam and Indonesia.

Those were the exciting days of early tech and the start-up space was exactly where ambitious and dynamic young individuals with entrepreneurial appetites could perhaps make the greatest strides.

Amid the pandemic, foodpanda MD Luc Andreani keen to grab marketshare from competitors. We chat with multi-linguist, Andreani speaks five languages, including Mandarin to find out what's in store.



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Andreani flourished in that environment, climbing from category manager to senior vice president in just three years due to his ability to quickly understand the dynamics of complex markets in the burgeoning e-commerce segment - and harnessing that understanding to power the company's growth.

Four years ago, foodpanda scooped him up to head up its entire regional business and Andreani moved to Singapore with the intention of steadily growing the platform.

While most businesses were struggling to stay viable during the circuit breaker last April, delivery orders unsurprisingly doubled for foodpanda that month. Its entire Singapore business doubled again the following month, and has maintained close to that peak since. With it, though, came a different set of challenges altogether. —CNA