

## INTERVIEW

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*The Journey of a Hong Konger Chasing K-pop Stardom:*  
Interview with Leung Cheuk Ying (Cherena)

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## The Journey of a Hong Konger Chasing K-pop Stardom

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### *Leung Cheuk Ying (Cherena), Girl's Planet 999 Contestant*

*"I think K-pop is becoming more diversified and international. I just hope that every hard-working singer or idol gets an equal chance to show themselves and to be recognized."*

*Leung Cheuk Ying (Cherena) is a former contestant of the K-pop reality audition program Girls Planet 999 (2021). Born and raised in Hong Kong, Cheuk Ying dreamt of conquering the K-pop industry since the Korean Wave hit her homeland during her teenage years. After stumbling across a global audition advertisement on social media, Cheuk Ying decided to follow her lifelong dream of becoming a K-pop star and moved to South Korea to compete on Girls Planet 999. 99 contestants were selected out of 13,000 applicants and despite a lack of professional training prior to the competition, Cheuk Ying finished 18th among the Chinese-speaking contestants. Since then she has continued to pursue her dream of being a K-pop star with dedication and determination by posting dance cover videos on social media platforms. In this interview, we explore Cheuk Ying's journey thus far, from her love of K-pop and performing on stage, to her thoughts on the Korean Wave, foreigner representation in K-pop, and the language and cultural barriers faced by a foreigner navigating the K-pop world.*

**YJIS: Hello Cherena, so firstly, for any of our readers who are not familiar with you, can you please introduce yourself?**

*Cheuk Ying (CY): Hello everyone! I'm Cherena from Hong Kong. Some people may be more familiar with my original name, Cheuk Ying Leung. This is the name that I used in the audition program, Girls Planet 999, from Mnet. I turn 25 this year and I've been interested in K-pop since the age of 16. Ever since then, I had dreamed of becoming a part of the K-pop industry.*

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**YJIS: You mentioned being from Hong Kong, so I would like to ask, how would you describe the music industry in Hong Kong?**

CY: Ten years ago, as I remember, the Hong Kong music industry was not so vigorous or diversified. It was mainly dominated by solo singers, and slow love songs were mainstream at that time. However, in the last two or three years, the industry has changed a lot. For example, nowadays there are more idol groups. Also, fan culture is becoming unprecedentedly huge. So, I think the Hong Kong music industry is now experiencing great changes.

**YJIS: What would you say were the main factors that prompted you to seek a music career in Korea?**

CY: As I mentioned, I have been attracted to K-pop music since I was 16 years old. At that time, K-pop was super popular in Hong Kong. Quite a few of my classmates back in high school were K-pop fans and would play K-pop music videos and K-dramas during recess. Together we would talk about these videos and shows, making comments to each other like “Which group is having a comeback?,” “He’s so handsome!,” “So have you seen the latest episode of the drama called ‘별에서 온 그대 (*My Love from the Star*)?’” Back then, the Hong Kong music industry was dominated by solo singers, whereas K-pop was dominated by idol groups performing pop songs. I was attracted to the singing and dancing elements of K-pop, as well as the fancy, decorated stages idols performed on. I have loved dancing since I was small and have created a lot of dance covers. One day, my classmate asked me, “Why don’t you try going to auditions and become a K-pop singer?” and that was how my dream started. Since then, I’ve gone to various auditions and K-pop events. Just last year I saw the news about *Girls Planet 999*, so I decided to audition, and eventually got into the program.

**YJIS: How did your participation in *Girls Planet 999* change your perspective on the K-pop industry, if at all?**

CY: Participating in this program definitely helped me see the K-pop industry in more depth. Participating in this program was like taking an express train, because I had never been a trainee before, so to experience a trainee’s life, such as being onstage, and participating in music shows—I

did all these in a short period of time because of the program. And also, I had heard that the K-pop industry is stressful and not easy even before I joined the program, so while I was participating in the show I was like, “Yeah I expected this, I expected that” when I faced some stressful moments.

**YJIS: Girls Planet 999 consisted of Chinese and Japanese contestants alongside Korean contestants. How did you cope with the language and cultural differences?**

CY: I personally know Korean. I'd been studying Korean at Yonsei in 2018 for 6 months. So, that experience helped me a lot with communication and adapting to the cultural differences I experienced while on the show. In fact, most of the time I became the interpreter. I helped translate between the Korean and Chinese contestants. On the other hand, there were some Japanese contestants who did not speak much Korean, so I tried to communicate with them using body language together with some simple Korean. But, since I seldom got in touch with Koreans back when I was studying Korean, it was really the first time for me to spend a long time with Koreans, by living together with them. So of course, language problems still occurred from time to time. On the show, sometimes we got an instant translator device if it was a performance day or if we were on the main stage. However, when practicing alone in our room, we didn't have this and had to depend only on ourselves. Overall, I would definitely say that it was a great opportunity to improve my Korean.

**YJIS: Have you had to make any sacrifices throughout your journey in pursuing a career in the K-pop industry?**

CY: The K-pop industry is very big and competitive, and there are lots of good-looking, young, talented people out there. It can be difficult to navigate at times and I have had to make a number of sacrifices. One of the biggest sacrifices I made was quitting my job in Hong Kong in order to join *Girls Planet 999*. But I've also had to make sacrifices before that. When I was younger, I spent a lot of time practicing alone and canceled appointments with friends and family in order to prepare for auditions. Unlike in Korea, auditions in Hong Kong are overseas and occur just once a year, so I spent a lot of time preparing for each audition.

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**YJIS: What do you think has led to the huge success of K-pop/Korean Wave in Hong Kong and throughout the world?**

CY: Before the Korean Wave hit Hong Kong, Hong Kong people enjoyed Taiwanese, Japanese, and local Canto-pop music more. But after the Korean wave hit, most people, even those who were not necessarily fans, became familiar with mainstream K-pop bands such as Super Junior, Bigbang, etc.

I would say the reason for the success of K-pop globally is that people are attracted to K-pop's fully-packaged idol system. Every idol trains for a long time to develop strong dancing and singing skills, to become a perfect, well-rounded idol. Also, K-pop has high-quality music, music videos, and stages. A lot of money is invested here. This is what has made me and, I think the global audience too, so interested in K-pop.

I also think including members of different nationalities, going on international tours, and releasing K-dramas on Netflix have attracted audiences worldwide and helped to spread K-pop and Korean culture. Recently, I have seen K-pop songs published in different languages, such as Chinese versions. More and more groups are publishing English songs too, in order to establish themselves in foreign markets. They've also begun to include different countries' styles of songs, including Latin-style music.

**YJIS: Do you think the K-pop phenomenon will be able to sustain its current level of popularity, say maybe in 5 years from now?**

CY: Actually, I am not sure about this because I have heard people saying, "Oh, K-pop is not as good as before", but I personally think the quality is getting better and better. It's becoming more international, but at the same time, more countries' local music industries are rising as well. For example, in Thailand, there is T-pop. So, although there might be a dispersion in popularity, I believe that in the next 5 years, the level of popularity will likely be sustained.

**YJIS: What aspects of the K-pop industry do you wish were talked about more in public media?**

CY: I think the behind-the-scenes of the idol's life should be talked about more, which includes online hate. Many idols receive negative comments and hateful messages on the internet. I think it's a serious problem that needs to be tackled.

It's important for the public to know about the effects of such words on the mental health of idols so that we can create a healthier environment for everyone.

**YJIS: From your observation, how has COVID-19 affected the K-pop industry?**

CY: Things switched from offline to online, and online became the new way to communicate. As for our show, *Girls Planet 999*, we didn't have a live audience, which was really a shame because we were just performing in front of the camera. Back in the days of the show before COVID-19, like the *Produce 101* series, they had a lot of live audiences, which I think must have been really different.

In Korea, offline concerts and fan meetings stopped for almost two years, and have just recently started again. International tours were stopped and international fans were not able to see their idols for a long time. I think because of this a lot of fans stopped liking their idols because they were not able to see them.

However, online concerts and one-to-one online fan meetings have allowed K-pop idols to keep in touch with fans. The main benefit of an online concert is that they don't have a seat limit and it's easier and more affordable for fans to engage, so I think there are still some benefits of the switch from offline to online.

**YJIS: Over the recent years, there certainly have been changes in the K-pop industry. So, in what ways do you think the industry has changed in the past years, and are there any future changes that you would like to see in the K-pop industry?**

CY: I think K-pop is becoming more diversified and international. There are more and more groups that were already popular before their debut, but there are also groups that have taken a long time to be recognized. The K-pop industry is definitely becoming more competitive than before. I just hope that every hard-working singer or idol gets a fair chance to show themselves and be recognized. I also hope future K-pop artists can continue to provide international music for international fans.

**YJIS: You previously mentioned that K-pop groups are starting to include members of different nationalities. Now that there are more non-ethnic Korean K-pop idols in the K-pop industry, do you think Koreans are becoming more open to accepting non-ethnic Korean**

### **K-pop idols? And do you think this trend will continue in the future?**

CY: Yes, I think Korea is becoming more open in this regard. The K-pop industry actually started to include idols of different ethnicities a very long time ago—more than 10 years ago and it's becoming more and more common nowadays. From my experience as a foreigner being on a Korean show, I felt very welcomed by Korean people. In the comment sections, it seemed like the Korean audience was very appreciative of the foreign members because they could see us working so hard to join the K-pop industry and they appreciated us for trying to learn their culture and language, etc. As K-pop becomes more of a global phenomenon, I think this trend will definitely continue.

### **YJIS: What do you think are the common struggles that foreign trainees tend to face that are not frequently discussed or the general public may not be aware of?**

CY: With regards to foreign trainees, there are two types. The first type is like me, an individual foreign trainee that doesn't have any company or agency. We just train by ourselves in our hometown and go to auditions. It's full of uncertainty and loneliness—this is the main problem. And you have no idea regarding “Am I doing it right?” or “Should I go on?” It's really hard for individual trainees to not give up and to keep pursuing their dream. Even for the other type, the foreign trainees who get into a Korean entertainment company, uncertainty can still be a major struggle for them. Sometimes I get direct messages from Hong Kong people that are now trainees in Korea, who say that they feel lost and are suffering from stress. There's also the struggle of adapting to Korean culture and getting along with the other trainees, most of whom are from different countries. The language barrier can also be a problem. I think these are the common problems that foreign trainees face. So, I think it's really important for foreign trainees to have a strong passion and a healthy mind.

**YJIS: K-pop music has been dominating the Asian market and has paved the way for the rise of its “local version idol groups”, particularly in Southeast Asia – T-pop (Thailand), P-pop (Philippines), and M-pop (Malaysia). Is there also a similar phenomenon in Hong Kong, and do you think this poses a threat to the contemporary cultural identity of these countries?**

CY: Yes, obviously there's a rising number of local idol groups like MIRROR. Most of these idol groups came from audition programs too, so I think the K-pop culture is having a certain extent of influence here. I think this is a great thing though, because it's kind of a fusion of K-pop culture and local culture, and I think the local groups still have a strong local style. In Hong Kong, for example, they still have a strong Hong Kong style and culture in their music. I think combining these cultures can really help the music industry to grow.

**YJIS: Do you think K-pop has helped Korea to establish good relations with other nations? In what ways would you hope that your aspiration as a K-pop idol would help to enhance the relationship between Korea and Hong Kong?**

CY: Because of the Korean Wave, more people are interested in Korean culture and language, and as a result, more people travel to Korea. But in terms of country relationships, I have no idea about that. At this stage, I don't think I can help enhance the relationship between Hong Kong and Korea because I'm not in Korea and am not a K-pop singer, but I hope some other Hong Kong K-pop singers can do that. Let's say I debuted as a singer, then, I think I would like to introduce some local Hong Kong tourist spots to Koreans and also possibly introduce some places in Korea to people from Hong Kong.

**YJIS: Do you see yourself being more active in Korea than Hong Kong as an idol, maybe in the near future?**

CY: I would love to, but I believe age is a very important factor in becoming a K-pop idol in Korea. I am turning 25 this year, which is considered too old to become a rookie K-pop idol. Weekly auditions of the entertainment companies in Korea have an age limit, and yesterday I saw that the oldest age that you can be to join an audition is being born in 2006, which I was like "okay, it's none of my business". So, I would say it's very difficult for me to debut as an idol in Korea in the future. However, my experience on *Girls Planet 999* definitely gave me more inspiration and reminded me of my passion for being a singer and artist. So I think in the future, I will continue seeking opportunities to try different things, and I will not limit myself to only Hong Kong or only Korea. I will continue seeking different opportunities in different places.

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**YJIS: Now that there are some audition programs in Hong Kong like Good Night Show – King Maker from ViuTV, would you ever consider joining a show like this or even attempt to join a Hong Kong girl group?**

CY: A lot of my friends encourage me to join the audition programs in Hong Kong, like King Maker. I have been thinking about it recently. I used to think that the Hong Kong and Korean music industries are pretty different, and I never considered becoming a singer in Hong Kong before, but now I am actually thinking about it, and if there are opportunities in Hong Kong, then maybe I will give it a try.

**YJIS: In the future, will you continue to post dance videos and update your Youtube channel?**

CY: Yeah, Youtube videos are one of the new things that I have been trying recently. But it's not easy. I am still trying because I can see that there are friends and fans that want to continue to see me, so I'm trying my best to create content such as dance videos. I will keep posting them because it is my hobby and dancing is one of the things that I really like to do.

**YJIS: You mentioned earlier that passion is very important for people who want to join the entertainment industry, so apart from that, do you have any further advice for other non-Koreans like you who are interested in following in your footsteps?**

CY: I do think passion and continuing to chase your dream are the most important tips I can give. You also have to be confident and believe in yourself. But equally, I think it's important for foreigners to learn about Korean culture and language to make sure that they can adapt to the industry in Korea. In my case, I started to learn about Korean culture and Korean language when I was 16, and then I went to Korea to live for a while to make sure that I fit in the culture. Knowing the language particularly helps a lot when you are alone in Korea.