

Second chance: Faded K-pop star competes for comeback

When Ryu Sera made her debut with K-pop girlband Nine Muses, the years of intense training and ruthless competition seemed worthwhile, her dreams of stardom finally coming true. A few top 10 singles followed, but within four years she had been cast on the K-pop scrapheap, sacked by her management company as it reshuffled the band's line-up. An attempted solo career foundered, she was left in debt, battling depression and contemplating suicide. But six years after her dismissal, she has been given a second chance on a groundbreaking new television show for failed and former idols—and is speaking out against a structure that consumes young hopefuls with only a tiny minority surviving to stardom. “The K-pop industry has a factory-like mass-production system,” she told AFP.

K-pop is the latest and biggest instance of the so-called Korean Wave, as the South's popular culture gains overseas recognition—epitomized by the global success of boyband BTS, who topped the US Billboard singles chart earlier this year. The phenomenon earns billions of dollars for the world's 12th largest economy and scores of groups are launched each year to try to capture a slice of the pie. Unlike many groups elsewhere, K-pop bands are not normally formed by the members themselves who then try to secure a record deal, but are instead usually assembled by their managing agencies. They put the members through intensive training programs and control everything from their music and lyrics to their looks and many aspects of their daily lives. But most acts quickly disappear, leaving barely a trace on the score of musical history.



This picture shows South Korean singer Ryu Sera (second right) dancing with other competitors during a recording of a television show “Miss Back” in Seoul. — AFP photos

‘Like an addict’

Ryu was 22 when she passed an audition to become a trainee with Star Empire, a medium-sized agency in Seoul. She was among 40 to 50 contenders for a place in Nine Muses. “It was an endless contest with tests every week, and those who ranked bottom on dancing, singing skills and looks were kicked out.” At first, she often scored poorly for dancing and singing, but she “practiced like an addict”, she said. A year later she was chosen to be Nine Muses’ lead singer. Even after their debut, there was no let-up in the regimen, and she was subjected to constant reviews, often critical, of her appearance. “Managers would say things like ‘Why are you so fat?’... be-

cause I did not fall into their category of elegant, sexy women,” she said. “I doubt they are even aware that they hurt me with their words.”

But she complied with their demands: “When they told me to cut my hair, I did... There was an atmosphere that we should be grateful for being given a chance to become idols.” When her contract came up for renewal, she demanded that the Nine Muses members take part in every concept meeting, that they would have control over what clothes they wore, and no more members would be replaced. The producers did not offer her a new deal. “There are so many trainees, so many artists, so many young people that want to get into this industry,” she said. “So, they sometimes



South Korean singer Ryu Sera speaking during an interview with AFP in Seoul.

consider us replaceable products.” A Star Empire representative told AFP the firm and Ryu had been “unable to agree on new contract terms”, adding: “We wish her all the best.”

Illness and shame

In an attempt to build a solo career, Ryu borrowed money to produce her own albums and put on concerts, but without the backing of a major agency none of them generated a profit. “I felt like I had accomplished nothing and was being forgotten,” she said. South Korea is an intensely competitive society and has an unusually high suicide rate, with recent celebrity deaths including singers Goo Hara and Sulli, both of whom had been subjected to vicious cyber-bullying, and Kim Jong-hyun of the boyband Shinee. Ryu also considered killing herself. — AFP

Pandemic proofing offices

By Engineer Yousef Al-Samhan, Interior design consultant and CEO of MY12 Creations Interior Design and Contracting Co.

As many nations cautiously make their way toward relaxing Covid-19 lockdowns, many of us are starting to envision a time when we can stop working at our kitchen tables and return to the office. Yet, in the absence of a vaccine, aspects of modern workplaces will have to change if employees are to safely return to their desks. The first phase of resuming office life will involve making basic changes to keep employees safe and allay fears. We may have lived with the flu for many years, but this is the first time our generation has experienced a pandemic. We're now hyperaware of health risks, whether real or imagined. And employers are hypersensitive about the potential for liability if people get sick at work.”

For years, offices have crammed more employees into smaller spaces, while creating an open collaborative atmosphere. As companies plan to bring their workforce together again in the office, numerous calculations are being made to provide an environment that will keep workers safe, healthy and productive. After coronavirus: The office of the future is the office of the past: Say hello to the high-walled cubicles made famous in the 1999 film, “Office Space,” because they're about to make a comeback,

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Think about tech companies that are highly dense and working in those ‘benching work stations, Now with Covid-19, things like “benching” are the opposite of what employees want to face as they return to work. As companies plan how to bring their workforce together again in the office, numerous calculations are being made to provide an environment that will keep workers safe, healthy and productive, and architects are thinking about the actual physical design of offices. “First and foremost, people need to feel safe,”

Changes can be like:

- Wider corridors with one-way foot traffic
- Better air filtration
- Touchless elevator controls
- Antimicrobial materials in new construction
- Videoconferencing even within the office to avoid the conference room

Distributed offices and rotating days

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many are heralding the end of the open-plan workplace and the return of small, private offices.



Huddle rooms, for example, could be used as offices until social distancing protocols are relaxed.

Offices that resemble hospitals

In the longer term, experts predict that society's heightened awareness of contagious diseases could usher in a new type of office - one that has elements in common with a hospital.

Health cops

And get ready for the health cop. Companies will have to deputize someone to be in charge of making sure employees follow the new rules about distancing.