

It was the shot heard 'round Korea.

Ji-wan Bae, a charismatic rookie infielder for the Pittsburgh Pirates, hit a stunning walk-off three-run homer in the bottom of the 9th inning against the World Series defending champions, the Houston Astros.

Bae, watched the ball drop into the stands in deep right-center before tossing his bat up high in the air, and jogging to home plate, leaping high into the air in the arms of his teammates, as confetti rained down on the scrum.

Interviewed on the sidelines soon after, Bae grabbed the mike like it was karaoke night and disdaining his translator told the crowd he recalled seeing a video of Andrew McCutcheon doing the same kind of leap his rookie year and wanted to copy it. McCutcheon, much beloved in Pittsburgh and a former National League MVP who returned to the team this season after five years playing for other teams, was the one of those who broke Bae's fall at the home plate celebration.

In the clubhouse, Ji-Man Choi, a veteran power-hitting first baseman the Pirates acquired in the offseason, posed for a photo with his South Korean teammate – Choi had homered earlier in the game to break a tie with the Astros. 23-year-old Bae and 31-year-old Choi were the first Korean-born players to homer in the same game.

"I feel very bad because I didn't get the spotlight. He took it," Choi jokingly said through a translator.

Choi, who has a reputation for being a good clubhouse guy as well as some pop in his bat, showed off his own Gangnam style after his homer, brandishing

a toy sword in the dugout in front of a TV camera. The two players' heroics and bravado give new meaning to "K-pop".

Such antics are staples in the 10-team Korean Baseball Organization. I had a chance to attend a game or two when I was posted in Seoul for several years for Reuters. Bat flips like the one Bae executed are routine (in MLB, that might merit some "chin music" from a mound opponent at the player's next at-bat for showing up the pitcher).

Korean games are nine innings of cacophony and sideshows. Each club has a cheerleading team that leads the crowd in boisterous songs, including walk-up tunes for each player. It's like being in an English soccer stadium or a rowdy American football game.

The Korean players are closely followed by their country's media. An audio tweet of the Korean announcers calling the game for the folks back home shows them losing it on air, as if they were calling the winning goal in a World Cup championship match. Or maybe Bobby Thomson's famous walk-off home that won the pennant for the New York Giants in 1951, "the shot heard 'round the world'. Daniel Kim, styled as an ESPN KBO insider, tweeted that Bae's homer was the lead headline on the sports pages in Korean media on Tuesday morning.

Bae, with his long hair, million-dollar smile and boyish looks, could easily be mistaken for a singer in a K-pop boy band. Indeed, the influx of Korean-born players into MLB (25 since 1994 when Chan Ho Park debuted as a starting pitcher for the Los Angeles Dodgers) coincides with what's called "the Korean Wave" or *Hallyu* that's been trending for the last decade or so.

Before Korean Cool was born there was “Korea, Inc.”, the government-industrial complex that produced grey salary-man conglomerates like Samsung, Hyundai, and LG.

Then, along came the catchy “Gangnam Style” dance craze, soon followed by the wildly popular BTS boy band. In 2020, the movie “Parasite”, by director Bong Joon-Ho became the first international film to win the Academy Award for Best Picture. The Korean-made “Squid Game” and a parade of Korean horror movies, such as “8th Night” have become must-see TV on streaming platforms.

The Pirates, a small-market club always on the lookout for any competitive edge, have been especially interested in Korean players, having two of the five currently active Korean-born players on major league rosters.

Earlier this year, the Pirates signed Jun-Seok Shim, a high-school pitcher with a blazing fastball, rated the second-best pitcher and the No. 10 prospect on the international market by MLB Pipeline.

Looks like the Korean Wave has a strong future in Pittsburgh. Could singing cheerleaders in the stands be next?