

THE CONVERSATION

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Australia's 2016 Eurovision contestant Dami Im performing with Conchita and Guy Sebastian in Sydney earlier this year. SBS

How 'Asiavision' could be a boon for cultural diplomacy

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Jess Carniel

Lecturer in Humanities, University of Southern Queensland

Damien Spry

Honorary Associate, University of Sydney

SBS's deal with the European Broadcasting Union to develop a Eurovision Song Contest equivalent in Asia is a welcome chance for Australia to develop stronger ties with the Asia-Pacific region.

The development of an Asian Eurovision - an "Asiavision", we might call it - is an exciting project for regional unity. In particular, it's a chance for Australia to forge a stronger sense of belonging within the region through finding some common pop cultural ground.

The idealistic aim of the original Eurovision, was a "song to unite Europe" after the ravages of the Second World War. (Its more prosaic intention was to promote the European Broadcasting Union as a pan-European distribution network.)

Still, the political, cultural, and economic impact of the contest should not be underestimated. Despite Eurovision's rule prohibiting overtly political statements and gestures, it has been an important stage for expressing both intercultural tensions and friendships.

Several former contestants have even gone on to political careers. Ireland's winner in 1970, Dana, became a member of European parliament in the late 1990s. The 2004 winner, Ukraine's Ruslana, secured a seat in the Ukrainian parliament after backing the Orange Revolution.



Ruslana addressing a protest rally in 2014. Francois Lenoir/Reuters

Tensions in Asia – stemming from the legacy of Japanese imperialism and the muscularity of China's regional reassertion – will certainly add a political undercurrent to an Asian version of Eurovision. Still, “Asiavision”, which will start in 2017, appears to be an opportunity more for harmony than discord.

Historically, Australia's relationship with Asia has been ambiguous at best. It has forged economic ties, but struggles with deeper acceptance. Former Singaporean Prime Minister [Lee Kwan Yew](#) once famously said that Asian countries would continue to build useful links with Australia but, “[we could never regard you as family](#)”.

Lee was not alone in this sentiment. Australia's “outsider” status in Asia is also visible in its relationship with the Asian Football Confederation.

Despite emerging as a strong side, acceptance of Australia within the confederation has been tenuous. When asked in 2010 if he would support [Australia's bid for the 2018 FIFA World Cup](#), former AFC president Mohammad Bin Hammam said, “You are considering Australia as an Asian country?”

Australia's hosting of the 2015 Asian Football Cup may have gone some way to addressing this. Analysis suggests the Asian Cup resulted in a significant increase in [Asian media coverage from Australia](#). The stories foregrounded team performances but the backdrop was Australia as a safe, welcoming host for thousands of engaged Asian fans. As one Seoul editor replied when asked what topics he thought were associated with Australia: “Soccer – I had no idea there were so many Koreans there”.

It's easy to imagine something similar arising out of Australia hosting a celebration of Asian pop music.

In fact, outside of football through the Asian Champions League, and perhaps other sporting events, it's hard to imagine a better opportunity to increase attention from Asian populations and participation with Asian cultural industries.

With "Asiavision", Australia is taking the initiative. This could work either for or against us. But SBS has laid the groundwork with its recent embrace of Asian pop culture programming, such as [PopAsia](#) and [If You Are The One](#).

Asian Australian personalities have also been central to SBS's Eurovision branding in recent years. Sam Pang, Lee Lin Chin, [Jessica Mauboy](#), [Guy Sebastian](#), and now 2016 Eurovision contestant [Dami Im](#) have all helped SBS to represent Australia as multicultural, but also as part of the Asian region.

Lee Lin Chin: a multicultural trailblazer. Tracey Nearmy/AAP

Foreign Affairs Minister Julie Bishop has already demonstrated a keen eye for exploiting pop cultural trends through "[emoji diplomacy](#)".

The potential benefits of Asiavision for Australian public diplomacy are such that she should perhaps consider throwing support behind SBS's efforts.

The budgetary requirements for staging the event should be negligible, as it aims to be profitable. But the government could provide support (DFAT and Austrade have some experience in this) and leverage the event into other areas of cooperative engagement and relationship building. It's a low risk and minimal investment, with considerable conceivable benefits.

The key might be to get the big Asian acts, like Korea's popular boy-band [BIGBANG] ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big_Bang_\(South_Korean_band\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big_Bang_(South_Korean_band))), and their massive pan-Asian fan communities, involved as supporters and on-air talent. This would mean reaching out to the agencies that tightly control them. A second tactic could be to create opportunities for showcasing developing cultural industries from smaller countries.

BIGBANG's G-dragon performing in 2013. Kim Hee-Chul/EPA

Australia could also gather multicultural talent from around the region to host, judge, and generally promote the show. We'd suggest they could do worse than including Dami Im and [Sam Hammington](#) (an Australian superstar celebrity in Korean television) in that roster.

Eurovision is not always just wind machines, costume reveals, and bearded drag queens (not to diminish the significant cultural and political impact of Conchita).

It has been an important stage for European nations to perform their national identities, and to debate issues about human rights and regional belonging.

“Asiavision” will be a similar opportunity for Australia and the Asian region to negotiate these questions. Failing that, we will at least be united by song.