

# Japanese “Idols” in Trans-Cultural Reception: the case of AKB48

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## Introduction

On Feb. 1, 2013, a video clip of the Japanese entertainer Minegishi Minami (峯岸 みなみ) appeared on the official webpage of AKB48, the popular Japanese all female band of which Minegishi is a member. In the video, a tearful and repentant Minegishi apologized to her fans for the report in the prior day (the prior day’s report) that she had broken the band’s no-romance rule by dating a male singer. The real shock that captivated the audience was Minegishi’s newly shaved head as a form of self-punishment. This video was soon uploaded to Youtube and accumulated tens of thousands views in the following days. The story also made its way to major news webpages around the world.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, in an unexpected fashion, the Japanese band finally achieved the international notoriety that its founding producer Akimoto Yasushi (秋元康) had always craved for.

In this paper, I shall showcase and analyze AKB48 and its love ban on member in order to better understand Japanese idols – an important aspect of Japanese popular culture. Although there has been fruitful scholarship on Japanese film, manga, and anima, substantial scholarly studies on Japanese idols as a cultural phenomenon are still lacking. For instance, Aoyagi’s ground breaking study on idols is almost ten years old. My paper is an attempt to fill this gap.

1 Japanese Daily Press, 2013: <<http://japandailynews.com/akb48s-minami-minegishi-caught-leaving-mans-apartment-shaves-head-posts-tearful-youtube-apology-0122526>> (14.07.2014).

### 1. Idols in Japanese Culture and Society

In Japanese culture, female “idols” (アイドル) are media personalities (pop singers, TV personalities, models in photo spreads published in magazines, advertisements, etc.) in their teens and twenties who are considered particularly attractive and cute (かわいい). Aoyagi Hiroshi defines idols as “all-round popular talents” who sing, dance, act in dramas, and appear in commercials. Their performance is ridiculed by some as artless or “bubble-gum,” but their popularity is an unmistakable phenomenon in Japanese society.<sup>2</sup> The Japanese term アイドル is obviously a direct transliteration of the English word *idol*, which in turn came from the Latin word *idolum* (pl. *idola*). Initially *idolum* was mostly used in the religious context to refer to a material medium that rendered the intangible divinity visible for human adoration and devotion, examples of which include Christian images and statutes. In 20<sup>th</sup> century Western mass communication, the word *idol* has taken on the meaning of “an idolized celebrity.” Among early pop artists labeled as idols were the hugely popular singers Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley. Interestingly, in pre-1960 Japan, idol was a designator exclusively reserved for foreign celebrities, while a famous domestic/local entertainer was called a “star” (スター). A Japanese entertainer in his/her teens such as Sayuri Yoshinaga (吉永 小百合) was simply called a “young star” (青春スター). It was not until the 1970s that a newly minted concept of idol, with distinctive Japanese cultural and aesthetic connotations such as innocence, purity, accessibility to fans’ emotional attachment and adoration, started to gain currency in Japanese mass media (マスメディア).

From 1960 to 1964, Prime Minister Ikeda Hayato’s (池田 勇人) cabinet decided on a long term economic plan aiming at doubling Japanese citizens’ income in ten years of time (国民所得倍増計画). The plan focused on minimizing military budget, exporting orientated economy, achieving full employment, and modernizing agriculture and small businesses. Frowned upon by most politicians and economists for being overambitious at its inception, the plan ended

2 Aoyagi 2005, 3.

up a huge success. Since the 1970s, the economic prosperity as a result of the Japanese government’s successful economic policies brought with it unprecedented boom in the entertainment industry. A rapid growing middle class audience was hungry for entertainment. In the meantime, the rabid leftwing anti-American, pro-Soviet/pro-China student movement that had dominated the 1960s’ political scene finally came to an end. Back in 1960, the Kishi Nobusuke (岸信介) cabinet and the Eisenhower Administration signed Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, which officially made Japan a full sovereign state after its defeat in the WWII and sealed a military alliance between Japan and United States. As the memories of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were still vivid in many Japanese people’s mind, the Cold War time treaty tying Japan to the American camp was believed by many to expose Japan to the risks of a second nuclear war if conflicts were to break out between the Soviet Union and the United States. As a result, a coalition between senior politicians from multiple parties, workers’ unions, and radical leftist college students was formed. Aiming to sabotage the treaty, prolonged nationwide protests ensued. With time, the movement lost momentum as the prospect of an immediate nuclear war proved to be unlikely. Trying to sustain the movement and transform it into an all-out communist revolution, the radical wing of the movement, represented by the United Red Army (連合赤軍) began to resort more and more to violence and military actions against the police and the government. Founded on the Leninist and Maoist models, the United Red Army attacked military and civilian targets believed to be Japanese, American, and Western interests both in Japan and in Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Eventually, such actions turned into a slippery slope of meaningless killings and blood shedding as they turned against their own comrades in arms for the latter’s ideological impurity and reluctance in action. In the widely publicized Asama-Sanso incident (あさま山荘事件) in 1972, top United Red Army leaders were surrounded and arrested by the police in a mountain lodge in Karuizawa, Nagano prefecture after the former had lynched and executed their own members suspected of disloyalty. The televised nine-day police siege and the later revealed cruelty of

the culprits shocked the Japanese public and further dampened ideological fervors in Japanese society. Ordinary citizens found themselves interested in sports and entertainment guaranteeing instant gratification rather than any kind of grand political discourses promising a perfect future.

To satisfy this rising demand, beauty and talent contests mushroomed on television and lucky winners, mostly girls between 14 and 16, began their meteoric rise to stardom: “the flower beauty trio” (Mori Masako 森昌子, Sakurada Junko 桜田淳子, Yamaguchi Momoe 山口百恵) were promoted in the 1970s on the show “A Star is Born”; in the 1980s, Matsuda Seiko (松田聖子), Kokusho Shayuri (国生さゆり), Kudo Shizuka (工藤静香) made their successful debuts on the “Ms. Seventeen Contest”. They became instant household names as singers and actresses, and appeared frequently on TV talk shows and commercials. Their photo books, often times containing enticing yet somehow innocent images of the scarcely clad idols, were sold in large quantities, a commercial practice reminiscent of marketing Geisha portraits to their admirers in the pre-modern Edo period (1603–1868). Incidentally, the return of Okinawa Islands from American occupation in 1972 made year-round shooting of swimsuit pictures and videos possible on the scenic island beaches.

Idols dominated the pop music scene in the 1980s, and this period is known as the “Golden Age of Idols in Japan”. Besides names listed above, Yakushimaru Hiroko (薬師丸ひろ子), Nagamori Akina (中森明菜), Sakai Noriko (酒井法子), Nagayama Miho (中山美穂) were also beloved idols both in Japan and in East and Southeast Asian countries. In a single year, as many as 40 or 50 new idols could burst onto the scene, only to vanish from the spotlight shortly afterwards. The 1990s witnessed the waning power of female Japanese idols, as the music industry shifted towards rock musicians represented by such singers as B’z and Mr. Children. By contrast, male Japanese idols, mainly produced by the Japanese entertainment mogul Johnny Kitagawa (ジャニー喜多川) and his agency “Johnny and Associates”, displayed growing influence. Nevertheless, the legendary musician Komuro Tetsuya (小室 哲哉) managed to produce female idols

Kahala Tomomi (華原朋美) and Shinohara Ryoko (篠原涼子), while Okinawa natives Speed and Amuro Namie (安室奈美恵) made inroads in new spheres of R&B and club music. A diversification trend occurred in the 1990s: instead of a few idols vying for popularity, a large number of idols with specific traits started to divide the market. For example, Gravure idols did not perform on stage but only appeared in bikinis in “cheesecake” photographs. A new type of idols emerged on the internet and became known as Net Idols in the late 1990s. Kyoko Date, the first “cyber idol” or “virtual idol” has a fabricated history and statistics and her own songs. Some female athletes such as the table tennis player Fukuhara Ai (福原愛) and figure skater Masao Mao (浅田真央) are considered idols because of their sweet and cute images.

The late 1900’s and early 21<sup>st</sup> century witnessed a comeback of female idols in vengeance: the Hello! Project (ハロー!プロジェクト) is a umbrella project that oversees several female idol groups including the group with the longest history – Morning Girls or Morning Musume (モーニング娘). AKB48 and Peach Color Clover Z (ももいろクローバーZ) made their breakthroughs in the late 2000s and subsequently, many others jumped on the bandwagon hoping to reenact the two groups’ success. There were 111 idol groups participating in the 2012 Tokyo Idol Festival. The 21<sup>st</sup> century is also the age of globalization of idol culture. When South Korean and Taiwanese idols were landing in Japan en mass aiming at the second largest entertainment market in the world (Japan is only second to the United States in its annual sales of entertainment products), AKB48 launched two international sister groups JKT48 and SNH48 in Indonesia and China. The general producer of AKB48 Akimoto never concealed his ambition to dominate Asian, and even global, entertainment markets.<sup>3</sup>

For some people, female Japanese idols represent the perfect female form in Japanese society. They are female sex symbols and are often dressed provocatively. At the same time, they are expected to

3 For historical sketches of Japanese idols, see Ota 2011 and Stevens 2008.

be, or at least to appear to be, sexually and romantically inexperienced. While mass media has played a big part in inventing and promoting idols and greatly profited from them, magazines such as *Shukan Bunshun* (週刊文春) never missed the chance to prey on negatives news of idol groups. Entertainment magazines are eager to expose sexual, drug-related, and other scandals of the idols for a variety of reasons: some times to generate interest and readership and boost sales of magazines, other times to seek revenge against particular idols and their agencies. In the internet age, such negative messages spread around especially fast and often times put permanent dents in the idols' reputations. If the idol's agency cannot plausibly deny the allegation or explain away the evidence, the idol's career will suffer severe damage and sometimes come to a quick end, as we shall see in detail below.

To boost the ratings and related advertising revenues, it has become a routine practice for variety shows on TV to bully and humiliate their female idols guests for cheap laughs and shock effects (for instance, the idols' faces would be painted with white powder; they would even be pushed and kicked around in front of the audience so they would appear miserably "funny"). All these theatrics led to the common belief that idols were so desperate for fame and attention that they would do anything to show their faces on the TV screen. Also, based on the general conception, idols are placed on the lowest rung of the ladder in the entertainment circles. More accomplished female entertainers called themselves actresses (女優) or singers (歌手) and refused to be classified as idols. A telling example is that the "ace" of AKB48, Maeda Atsuko (前田敦子), at the height of her fame as an idol, left her then hugely popular group in order to embark on an acting career. Moreover, she repeatedly claimed that she hoped people would forget her idol past and take her seriously as an actress.

In the 1970s and 1980s, idols had an aura of mystique that kept much of their real life under the wraps. Their public and "private" lives were carefully orchestrated and staged for the public eye – they always appeared perfect in all situations and seemed to enjoy a lavish

lifestyle that most Japanese could only dream about. In reality, however, they were placed under continuous surveillance by their promoters and were unable to enjoy the private lives invented for them. They were often overworked. Their pay was surprisingly low. Even if their songs sold well, the profit went largely to the musicians and writers. In recent years, idols have become much more accessible to average Japanese people, partly because there are so many of them and smaller agencies with limited financial resources and networks in the entertainment world cannot afford to provide their idols the pretentious trappings. A recent documentary vividly depicts the daily life of a group of young idol hopefuls. In the film, the three young girls in a fledging idol group share a small apartment in Tokyo and lead a frugal life out of necessity. For instance, they write down their names on personal items, from food to toilet paper rolls, in case others who share the same apartment would take them by mistake. Another reason for the close to real-life type of idols is that business savvy promoters have discovered some fans are growing tired of idols with celebrity auras and start looking for the girls-next-door type. This is what the AKB48 general producer Akimoto came to realize when he launched the now hugely popular group. He intentionally picked homely-looking young girls without previous musical training to provide fans a unique chance to witness their idols’ growth. In addition, Akimoto believes that people have vastly different tastes in women/girls just like wine connoisseurs’ preferences in wine can be much varied. Hence his idols are allowed to show facets of their true personalities instead of constantly exhibiting a carefully crafted, perfect image and smile. For instance, one of his hand-picked group members, Shimazaki Haruka (島崎 遥香), is painfully introverted and does not connect easily with fans and reporters. Akimoto shrewdly marketed her shyness as a selling point based on his belief that some fans, who are timid themselves, prefer to identify with a bashful idol.

The female idols are often adored by both males and females. Male fans’ infatuations with an idol and their active imagination of her as ideal partner are fed with details about the idol: body measure-

ments, favorite colors, favorite food, hobbies, blood type, etc. Female fans are more interested in imitating the idol's fashion and style, hair color, etc. In particular, idols are marketed to a group of young to middle-aged males known as Otaku, whose lives are excessively preoccupied with video games, manga/anime, cosplay, and idols. Otaku, relegated to the fringe of the society and looked down upon by the mainstream, pride themselves in creating a subculture, an exclusive world of their own that no outsiders are capable of understanding, let alone appreciating. Perhaps for a shared sense of social marginality, many Otaku favor the so called "underground idols" who are greeted by mainstream public with suspicion and who are not part of the entertainment industry establishment. At its beginning in 2005, AKB48 was such an underground group with a small but devoted Otaku following. With time, the idol group has achieved national popularity. Some critics consider the success of AKB48 to be the proof of its abandonment of its Otaku roots and morphing into mainstream culture, while others argue the opposite and applaud that AKB48 has brought the awareness of the once obscure subculture to the general public. Indeed, the Secretary General of the incumbent Liberal Democratic Party Ishiba Shigeru (石破 茂) invited Takahashi Minami (高橋 みなみ), a leading member of AKB48, to his office for a conversation on effective leadership since both are leaders of their respective political and music groups. Prime Minister Abe Shinzo (安倍晋三) also extended hospitality to an ex-idol Maeda Atsuko (前田敦子) at a cherry flower watching party hosted at his official residence this year.

Another sign of increasing public acceptance of idol culture is: whereas in previous years an idol kept up her idol image until she chose to retire or was simply too old to continue being a credible idol, in recent years several ex-idols have successfully matured and transitioned from an idol to a full-fledged actress, singer or musician, who is respected for her craft instead of (or in addition to) being merely admired for her looks and image.

Interestingly, some idols became actively involved in Japanese politics, covering both ends of the political spectrum. For instance,



the idol group Uniform Improvement Committee (制服向上委員会) consists of female students from elite Japanese schools. They are produced by former anti-Vietnam War activist artists and have connections with the Japanese Socialist Party. In 2001, the group performed a song themed on banning nuclear power plants in Japan, a hotly debated political issue in recent years.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, a recent manga hit, “The Great Japanese Samurai Girl” (大日本サムライガール)<sup>5</sup>, features a school girl who dreams to get to the top of the entertainment world. What distinguishes her from other idol aspirants is that she calls herself the only real right-winger in Japan, and in fact the path to stardom is only a stepping stone for her ambition to reform Japan politically. Another example is the rightwing writer and scholar Ushijima Tokutaro, a professor at Nishi-nippon Junior College, who trains his students for a career in entertainment business. Ushijima teaches the would-be idols topics on European political theories, Japanese Constitution and revisionist WWII history. When asked about their take on these subjects, the students believed it to be helpful to learn about politics, especially because they might enter media, a crossover between entertainment and political worlds. Ushijima’s students launched their own idol groups on campus, named after Kamikaze jet fighters, on June 5, the anniversary of the Midway battle in WWII, thus stating their political agenda/ connotation explicitly.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. The Concept of AKB48

The British newspaper *Guardian* reporter Chris Champion once commented: “In the world of pop, Japan is a Neverland where the national obsession with youth has been rigorously commodified into a peculiar brand of entertainment: a luminous teenage daydream in which doe-eyed Lolitas and prettified Fauntleroy frolic at the behest of omnipresent Svengali figures for the delectation of audiences. To

4 <<http://www.j-cast.com/2011/07/21102145.html>> (14.07.2014).

5 <<http://news.nicovideo.jp/watch/nw314727>> (14.07.2014).

6 <<http://nikkan-spa.jp/451789>> (14.07.2014).

the outsider, its mores might seem alien and bizarre but the mechanics of its industry are oddly familiar. Indeed it seems as if many of the marketing techniques used to sell Western pop acts from the Spice Girls through to Britney Spears and Girls Aloud have been taken wholesale from Japan: the re-branding of girl group members as bikini-clad glamour models; the search for new talent through reality TV-style auditions; the introduction of sister and brother acts to established groups. All these have been proven as methods to generate hits in the East for decades.<sup>7</sup>

AKB48 is the prime example of such streamlined female youth dream production. It was founded in December of 2005 on its producer Yasushi Akimoto's "idols-you-can-meet" concept. Compared to conventional idols that appear distant, aloof, lofty and inaccessible to their fans like "goddesses in clouds", AKB48 emits more of a "girls next door" feel in their outlook. That is to say, unlike other Japanese idol groups that are mostly seen on concert stage and TV screen, AKB48 has its own theater in Tokyo's Akihabara area where they perform on a daily basis. The concept is that fans should have access to live performances and be able to meet the members they support as often as they desire (however, due to the group's immense popularity and high demands, nowadays tickets are distributed via a lottery). Loyal idol fans, who would repeatedly go to the same performance, are commonly known as Wota (ヲタ), a spin-off term derived from Otaku (御宅). The main sign of being a Wota is that he invests a large amount of time and money in their favorite female idols. Otaku and Wota are sometimes associated with negative images such as anti-social behavior, social ineptness, obesity, etc. While in the West fans of teen stars are mostly teenyboppers, Wota are Japanese men in their late twenties and thirties looking for emotional connections with underage girls. To the outsiders, the perceived sexual predatory/perverted nature of Wota's obsession deviates from social propriety, hence it is no coincidence that idol groups with strong appeal to the Wota audience occupy the bottom rung of the

7 <<http://www.theguardian.com/music/2005/aug/21/popandrock3>> (14.07.2014).

entertainment food chain even in Japan. For instance, on 2ch, the largest Japanese internet forum, topics regarding AKB48 are discussed in the “underground idols” section, despite the fact that AKB48 has well grown into an established national (国民の) entertainment entity.

At an idol concert like AKB48’s, one would witness a type of dancing and cheering gestures performed by Wota. These gestures are called Wotagei (ヲタ芸), which involve jumping, clapping, arm-waving and chanting. Wotagei began in 1970–1980 among idol fans and has prospered since the 2000’s. In Japan, audience participation is generally deemed as important as the singer/band/group performing on stage. The “sea of lightsticks” waved by fans are a staple at Japanese concerts and events. But the idols and their fans take audience participation to a whole new level with Wotagei. For AKB48 in particular, there are so called MIX, chants and cheers shouted by fans during the instrumental parts of the songs, which never overlap or interfere with the idol’s singing. MIXes are meaningless combination of words in Japanese, English and other languages (for instance Ainu, an indigenous Japanese language) that add to the atmosphere of the concert. The most well-known MIX is as follows: “Yoshi iku zoh!!! Tiger, Fire, Cyber, Fiber, Diver, Viber, Jya Jya!!!”

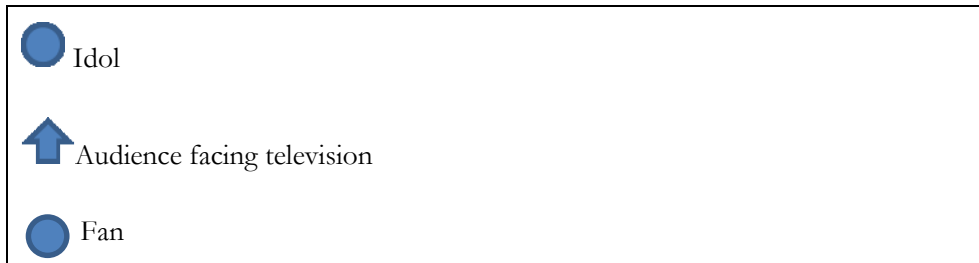
Moreover, AKB48 regularly holds “handshake events” (握手会), where fans get a chance to shake hands with and briefly talk to the group’s members. The practice of using a handshake event as an occasion for fans and their favorite entertainers to meet face to face originated in South Korea. But it is AKB48 that has perfected the practice and molded it into a formidable publicity and profit-generating weapon. A peculiar phenomenon of the Japanese music industry is that its profits still heavily depend on CDs sale in this digital age. As a rule, AKB48 releases four new CDs every year. In certain versions of the CDs, a handshake ticket is enclosed. The ticket can be used for AKB48 handshake events held in stadiums and exhibition centers in major Japanese cities. At a typical handshake event, AKB48 members would first perform their songs on stage. Following the performance, fans would wait in line for their turn to meet

individual members in booths. A ticket entitles the ticket holder to a few seconds of meeting time with his/her idol. In general, each fan usually has his/her own favorite member in the group (押しメン). Certainly there is place for DD fans (abbreviation for *daremo daisuki*, Japanese for “I love each and every one of them!”). The handshake event is the perfect opportunity for fans and their favorite idols to have a shared moment together: during the min-chat the fans would shower their idols with adoration and support. In order to get more face time with their idols, some fans would purchase multiple copies of the same music CDs simply for the enclosed handshake event tickets. This is the secret behind AKB48’s impressive CD sales (each of the 14 CDs released so far sold more than a million copies, a record that even trumped big name musicians such as B’z).

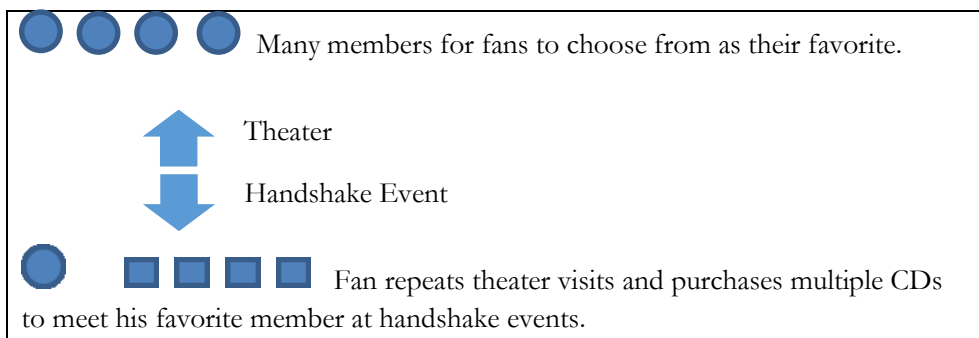
Another AKB48 hallmark event is their annual “General Elections”, which normally take place in the fall. Prior to the AKB48 election season, people who buy their CDs will receive a ticket with a unique number inside. They can use the number online or over the phone to “vote” for their favorite member or members. In the 2013 election, the highest ranking member was Sashihara Rino who received 150,570 votes from her avid fans. The higher the idol ranks, the more visible role she will play in singing, in stage presence, and in media. Because one can vote as many times as s/he likes, there is fanatic competition among fans to boost the ranking for their favorite members by purchasing large volume of CDs for voting tickets. Like the handshake tickets, the voting tickets are another effective big money maker for the ABK48 management. As cultural critic Hamano Satoshi pointed out, the difference between the traditional idol marketing model and the AKB48 model can be illustrated as follows:<sup>8</sup>

8 Sakurai 2012, 80, slightly modified by me.

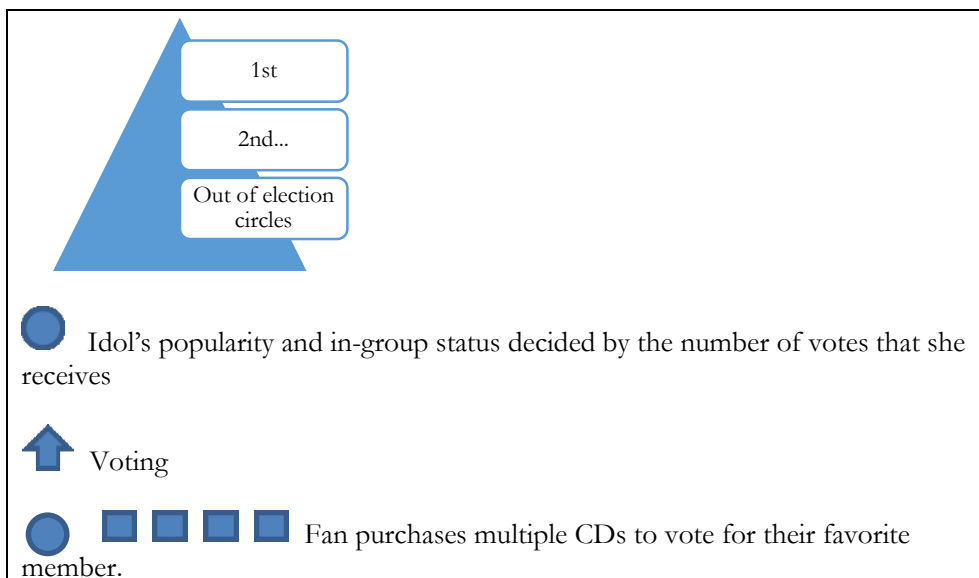
### Past idols



### AKB48



### AKB48 Elections



Like other Japanese idols, AKB48 members are imagined by their devoted fans as fantasy lovers. Their emotional availability to all their fans (みなのもの) are made abundantly evident in their performances. A song by AKB48's sister group NMB48 (also produced by Akimoto Yasushi and based in Osaka) called "Fantasy Girlfriend" (妄想ガールフレンド) is a prime example of the projected/imagined idol-fan-courtship. Because the song best showcases AKB48's idol culture and management philosophy, its lyrics are worth quoting in their entirety:

You're a girlfriend (girlfriend)  
 my girlfriend (girlfriend)  
 I love you forever and ever  
 At last, the love call from the bottom of my heart  
 had an effect on you  
 In the moment when I met you for the first time  
 you were smiling  
 within the TV  
 And so I fell in love with you  
 as though thunderstruck  
 Ah, you're a person  
 more beautiful than roses  
 Ah, this world is wide  
 and the future holds all my hopes  
 I'm a boyfriend (boyfriend)  
 your boyfriend (boyfriend)  
 I wanna boast about it a little  
 It's not a lie, and it's not a dream  
 We're the perfect couple  
 I'm a boyfriend (boyfriend)  
 your boyfriend (boyfriend)  
 I'll shout it out with a great voice  
 Even if we're busy and don't meet,  
 I'll be waiting for your call today too  
 When I touch them (when I touch them)  
 they'll vanish (they'll vanish)  
 you're an idol,  
 the flower of delusion  
 Hey, only I  
 spoke to you!  
 Please! Please! Please!  
 You're a girlfriend  
 my girlfriend

After all, we made a promise  
A scandal would be awful, but  
our love can't stop, can it?  
You're a girlfriend (girlfriend)  
my girlfriend (girlfriend)  
I love you forever and ever  
At last, the love call from the bottom of my heart  
had an effect on you.

The above song offers a vivid depiction of the typical dynamics between AKB48 members and their fans: fans fall in love with the idols they see on TV and pledge eternal love for them. The element of seduction is integral to AKB48 songs. In fact, the producer Akimoto is known for intentionally writing lyrics that are graphic enough to cause stirs in Western media and even shock the group members who perform them: “I want to take off my school uniform, I want to misbehave, you can do whatever you like, I want to experience adult pleasure.” AKB48 music videos often contain scenes with performers, dressed in skimpy miniskirts, swapping food from mouth to mouth or taking baths together. Such lyrics and images have rightly been criticized of feeding the teen schoolgirl fetish. AKB48 songs such as “My Dear Teacher” and “The Girl Selling Her Tears” are explicit with relationships between underage girls and older men, a common theme shared by other infamous media, for instance, adult-oriented manga magazines. Even the Japanese outside the idol fan circle often find it hard to distinguish idols’ glossy paper magazine pictures from pornography.<sup>9</sup>

Among AKB48 merchandise (グッズ) are photographs of the members that can be “tasted.” That is, a certain flavor is added to the photo paper so the fans can lick the images of their idols. Commonly the added flavor is of fruits such as of strawberry, but it can also be the body odor of a certain member. Another type of AKB48 merchandise is dating video games played on a console. In the game, a player can pick one out of 200 plus AKB48 girls and virtually ask her out. There is a pre-recorded scene in which the AKB48 girl confesses

9 Aoyagi 2005, 219.

her love for the game player, and then expresses her joy or disappointment depending on the player's "yes" or "no" answer.

On the other hand, for exactly the same reason that a fan could become emotionally attached to an idol, she cannot establish any real connection with a specific fan. The relation between fans and AKB48 members is supposed to be platonic and spiritual. Physical contact is strictly limited to handshakes at the public events. Any interaction beyond handshaking is prohibited. It is said that the brother of the most popular AKB48 member, Oshima Yuko, was once dragged out of a handshake event after affectionately touching his sister's head because the staff was unaware of his identity and took him as one of the fans. It is not surprising that AKB48 members are required to give up their romantic life in order to be "faithful" to their fans. Another NMB48 song "Virginity" (ヴァージニティー) sings:

(boys would say, give me a kiss  
It's not the end of the world)  
But if I were to kiss you,  
something would get smaller  
within me  
virginity.

A "tainted" idol would defeat her the purpose of her very existence. By definition, it is impossible for an idol to have physical intimacy with anyone, which means you can't put a price tag on an idol even though her daily job is to entice and seduce fans by selling out her image. The commentator Isayama Yuu aptly remarked that an idol never takes off two things: her cute (かわいい) image and her panties. Just as in Miyazaki Hayao's hugely popular anime film *Kiki's Delivery Service*, the heroine is no longer in possession of her magic power as soon as she falls in love. Since the loss of sexual innocence would lead to the loss of their idol power,<sup>10</sup> another song "Innocence Under

10 <<http://blog.isayama.info/archives/52081397.html>> (14.07.2014).



19” (純情U-19), put repeated emphasis on idols’ eagerness to preserve sexual purity by keeping their “iron panties on”:

I’d invited you over  
On the return from school  
“Come visit me tonight”  
My family’s all  
In the middle of a trip  
So we’ll escape at closing time together  
Ah, such days will come around at some point  
All the girls dream like this, but ...  
Till I’m 19 years old  
I’ll be protecting my pure heart  
Put on airs, go ahead  
But I won’t be tantalized by you  
Hey, I’ve already decided  
One of these days  
We’ll be able to become adults  
And so I’ll keep my iron panties on  
Just a bit longer.

Anneno Haruna comments that the Japanese idol industry has been manipulating the concept of female innocence – sexual and otherwise – all the time. An idol is almost expected to live in a fairy world like a two dimensional manga character. Her favorite food should be sweet parfait, and her lips have kissed no one. When it comes to their closest people, the standard answer should be “parents”. No wonder the idol Moritaka Chisato’s confession in having kissed a boy before caused a media uproar. An idol without the innocent image is compared to Chinese spicy oil without garlic, and customers are entitled to a refund. Throughout their career, idols indeed strive to keep up their facade of innocence. Once a reality TV show played a prank on one of the AKB48 group members Hirata Rikako (平田璃香子). A friend of Hirata’s was instructed by the host of the show to text-message Hirata an invitation to go party with boys, accompanied by a promise of secrecy. Obviously the faux party was a setup to test Hirata’s idol ethics. Fortunately for Hirata, she rejected the invitation outright and harshly admonished her friend in her response, and thus

passed the test with flying colors.<sup>11</sup> Another top member of AKB48 Kashiwagi Yuki (柏木由紀) is famous for her idol self-consciousness and self-awareness. In order to be “faithful” to Wotas, Kashiwagi would wear gloves when touching male characters in love scenes of her TV shows, as her bare hands are reserved for her fans. Kashiwagi told reporters that giving up personal and romantic life for AKB48 is a beautiful sacrifice that she and her fellow members have taken upon themselves. She conceded that idols are not robots without feelings. However, certain rules are necessary to keep a group together and fans’ enthusiasm high.<sup>12</sup>

Without being trapped by the usual orientalist pitfall, one can still argue that such obsession with female youthfulness and the intentional ambiguity between eroticism and sexual innocence are a distinct Japanese phenomenon. We would be hard pressed to find an exact equivalent in the West, despite certain impact on some obscure Western entertainment production mentioned above. As Ian Condry puts it, Japanese idol culture “provokes a kind of awkward revulsion” for Westerners.<sup>13</sup> It is true that Japanese popular culture has found wide-spread appeal in other East and Southeastern countries. Akimoto launched JKT48 (based in Jakarta, Indonesia) and SNH48 (based in Shanghai, China) as international sister groups of AKB48 in 2011 and 2012 respectively. The rationale behind the two locations is China and Indonesia are the two largest J-pop consuming countries in the world. While JKT48 has been relatively successful, SNH48 has struggled for mere survival because of inadequate local management team and the political tensions between China and Japan on the disputed Senkaku Islands. The degree of acceptance of the Japanese idol culture in general and AKB48 in particular is illustrated in the following chart. Columns are degrees of eroticism shown in the forms

11 <<http://www.nicovideo.jp/watch/1350617208>> (14.07.2014).

12 <<http://www.crank-in.net/movie/interview/22939/2>> (14.07.2014). Ironically, Kashiwagi was later found breaking the love ban and cause a major unrest among her fans: <<http://matome.naver.jp/odai/2136016971377206001>> (14.07.2014).

13 Bestor – Bestor 2011, 247.

of Japanese entertainment, and rows are demographic and geographic acceptance whereof:

	Degree of Eroticism	Audience	Acceptance
Adult Entertainment	Depiction of sex act	Wota	Japan
Late Night TV programs, Age Restricted Films, etc.	Nudity	Idol, manga and general J-Pop fans	East and South East Asia
Idols	Sexually suggestive images (bikini, Japanese school girl uniform, etc.)	General public	World

### 3. The Fall of Minegishi Minami

Minegishi is one of the founding members of AKB48, of whom Team A of the group consisted. Neither beautiful nor particularly good at singing or dancing, Minegishi hardly stands out among her peers. Rumor has it that the only reason for her successful audition is that her birthday falls on the same day as the AKB48 theater manager Togasaki Tomonobu (戸賀崎智信). Judging from the AKB48 elections, she might not be one of the members most popular with fans. But she is certainly one of the most recognized faces in the AKB48 family because of her seniority and her frequent guest appearances on TV shows.

On January 31, 2013, the weekly magazine *Shukan Bunshun* broke the news, accompanied by paparazzi photos as proof, that a few days after the New Year, Minegishi was seen taking a taxi from her residence to the apartment of Alan Shirahama, a member of the boyband Generations, and spending the night there. Even though Minegishi does not have the best looks, she was popular among fans: one of her fans spent a few million yen to buy CDs to vote for her in the 2012 election. Extremely courteous to everyone and with the look of a younger sister, she was well liked by other AKB48 members and the staff. She also enjoyed the reputation of being sexually innocent

and immune to romance. However, as it turned out many male entertainers' and sports stars' phone numbers were stored on her cellphone. She was popular among other AKB48 members simply because she was known for hosting wild parties for her friends and male celebrities. Shibuya area (the commercial area in Tokyo) taxi drivers testified to Minegishi's frequent visits to night clubs, in the company of male stars such as singers from the Johnny's (the largest entertainment agency in Japan) as well as soccer players from the Japanese national team. When at these questionable places, she was cautious and always covered her face with a mask and a hat. As bad as these all-nighters sound for an idol, the fatal damage was done by what happened on the night of January 17, as witnessed by a *Shukan Bunshun* reporter: At midnight, Minegishi entered the boy's residence and three hours later the lights were out. Another four hours later, the boy came out to take the subway. Half an hour later, Minegishi also emerged out of the door, bought her breakfast at a convenient store and went back home.<sup>14</sup>

Within hours of the magazine's circulation, it was announced through the AKB48 official blog that Minegishi would be demoted from the official member to trainee status as of February 1. On the same day, the AKB48 official channel uploaded/posted a video of Minegishi apologizing to her fans for her "thoughtless behavior" and pleading the management to keep her in the group. In the video, Minegishi's head was shown shaved, a sign of contrition in Japanese culture.

#### 4. The Forbidden Love in the Japanese Idol World

As aforementioned, the emotional availability and presumed virginity are the selling points of AKB48 and a ban on romances of their members is the unspoken rule of Japanese idol groups in general. However, such interference with private life obviously has no legal basis and is constantly questioned outside the Wota circles. Akimoto

14 <<http://shukan.bunshun.jp/articles/-/2305>> (14.07.2014).

often contradicted himself explaining the love ban rule in his group both before and after the Minegishi incident. On one occasion he acknowledged the existence of such a rule. The first-time offender is given a yellow card, and a second yellow card would lead to a layoff/dismissal.<sup>15</sup> Yet on another occasion, Akimoto denied that he ever meddled in members’ personal lives, and his idols are only free of romance because they are too preoccupied with their work to find time for relationships.<sup>16</sup>

But Minegishi’s demotion flied in the face of Akimoto’s denial. Although Minegishi claimed in the video that shaving her head was her decision alone, at no urging of the management conspiracy theory circulated widely among fans. If hair-cutting was indeed Minegishi’s own idea, how could the staff at backstage have not intervened? In addition, Minegishi appeared in the video in a uniform-style white shirt and sitting on a chair, which suggested an interrogation setting. One has to wonder: was this just another publicity stunt of the management?

Reactions to the scandal from Wotas, regular Japanese people and domestic and international press vary widely. Devout fans, shocked by the “betrayal” by their idol, believed that Minegishi deserved her punishment. For instance, one of Minegishi’s fans confessed that, upon learning of the scandal, he cried all night to the point of fainting. After coming back to consciousness, he found that his nose was bleeding profusely: “I recall the warmth of her hands at the handshake event, but now I realized it was all a big lie ... Still her bowing in the video reminded me of the beauties on the traditional Japanese flower cards. I loved her with all my heart, veins, and whole body. Why did she betray and forsake me?”<sup>17</sup>

Other less fanatic fans also concurred that the management’s action was appropriate. Commentator Miyatake Mine argued that the

15 <<http://www.j-cast.com/2013/01/30163314.html?p=all>> (14.07.2014).

16 <<http://www.j-cast.com/mono/2013/01/02159692.html>> (14.07.2014).

17 <<http://matome.naver.jp/odai/2135986403011638501>> (14.07.2014).

AKB48 love ban law should not be deemed a violation of the members' rights. Based on Article 13 of the Japanese constitution, citizens have the right to pursue happiness based on their own decisions. According to Miyatake however, the AKB love ban law constitutes an integral part of the contract between AKB48 and their members. In other words, AKB48 is a dream factory that markets and merchandises girls' innocence. Becoming a member of AKB48 is to acquiesce the terms of conditions of employment, including the love prohibition rules. AKB48 members chose their career premised on the ban at their free will. Since she violated the rules, it is only natural that Minegishi be penalized. A singer in disagreement of the love ban rule should instead join a free love group or just go solo. Others considered it necessary for a member living in a collectivist society like Japan to own up her responsibility for the integrity of the group. Without the love ban rule, the big group of young girls would be out of control.<sup>18</sup>

The conservative manga artist Kobayashi Yoshinori went so far as to congratulate Minegishi for her courage to take responsibilities and thus setting a good example for straying members. He contended that the love ban law is designed both to preserve the chastity of members and to ease the concerns of their parents (many members are under 18). Quoting the most crucial line of the SKE48 song, he applauded Minegishi's tearful apology as a vow of "iron panties from now on!"<sup>19</sup> A few Japan watchers in the West played the cultural relativist card and commented that the Western disgust at Japanese obsession with female virginity is simply hypocrisy: it is just the Japanese actually exploit young females in ways that Westerners do not dare to.<sup>20</sup>

Public relations expert Keiko Ishikawa praised Minegishi's apology as a textbook performance of crisis management: "For the agency, idols are its product. The most important thing to do is brand

18 <<http://blogos.com/article/55857/>> (14.07.2014).

19 <[https://www.gosen-dojou.com/index.php?key=joalma0am-13#\\_13](https://www.gosen-dojou.com/index.php?key=joalma0am-13#_13)> (14.07.2014).

20 <<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/japanese-pop-idol-shaves-her-head-in-public-apology-after-sex-scandal/article8102742/comments/>> (14.07.2014).

control.” For an apology to succeed, according to Ishikawa, it must convey a feeling of remorse to the audience and the audience finds the manner of expressing remorse sincere. In the video Minegishi confessed that her action was ill-advised and furthermore took on the punishment by shaving her head. For Ishikawa, the Minegishi video fulfilled some of the crucial requirements for an effective apology, namely, admission of the facts, remorse, regret and atonement.<sup>21</sup>

Yet most observers are critical of AKB48 management and the idol culture as a whole. Some questioned whether the AKB ban on romantic relationships was realistic. Mika Hashimoto, chairperson of the idol group Uniform Improvement Committee called the rule “outdated”. “What meaning is there to banning boyfriends after members are made to appear in public in their bathing suits?” she asked. Author Ikeda Kayoko compared it to corporal punishment at old time geisha houses. Hisamichi Okamura, a lawyer specializing in internet matters, felt something similar about Minegishi’s situation. “I shivered with disgust when I saw the video,” he said, pointing out that since it had been widely viewed not only in Japan but also abroad, it would likely continue to circulate on the Internet for some time. “I wonder if she considered how serious the effects would be before she approved of the act,” he said. “The ‘adults’ who manage the group could have made the decision to not release the video. While they have the right to upload the video, I also have my suspicions that they thought about the marketing effects of releasing such a shocking video.”<sup>22</sup> Machimura Yasutaka, a professor of law from Hokkaido University considered it sexual harassment and bully. Commentator Uno Tsunehiro compared it to the recent scandal in which the athletes in the Japanese national Judo team were physically abused by their coach. Film director Yamamoto Yutaka commented

21 <[http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind\\_news/social\\_affairs/AJ201302020050](http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/social_affairs/AJ201302020050)> (14.07.2014).

22 <[http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind\\_news/social\\_affairs/AJ201302020050](http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/social_affairs/AJ201302020050)> (14.07.2014).

that the video reminded him of images of Nazi concentration camps and it made him shake in horror.<sup>23</sup>

International press in general did not take very well the image of a shaved young woman for the crime of love. CNN for one found connection between the incident with Japan's military culture, saying if Japanese starlet Minami Minegishi's shaven head and tearful mea culpa looked more like a disgraced samurai trying to retrieve his honor, then it owes much to Japanese pop phenomenon AKB48's military structure.<sup>24</sup> Some Western news readers advocated a youth revolt against what they saw as age-gap exploitation, as AKB48's appeal rests first and foremost on the dubious dreams of dirty old men about frolicking with schoolgirls. However, reports from major Western media outlets were short in length and lacked of in depth analysis. Moreover, they read strikingly similar, giving the impression that they might have relied on each other's reports rather than independent investigation.

More meaningful gestures were made by insiders who understood the unspoken rule and tactfully defied it. Some entertainers tried to be cautious and diplomatic in their comments. The comedian Kato Kouji (加藤浩次) and the host Tamura Atsushi (田村淳), both of whom had frequently appeared on TV with AKB48, only spoke of the extreme nature of head shaving, without touching on the controversial love ban rule. The Enka giant Kitajima Saburo (北島三郎) also skirted around the controversy by telling Minegishi to keep her chins up because "there are always ups and downs in life."<sup>25</sup> Others were more upfront and outspoken. It is interesting to note that the reaction of AKB48 members was in sharp contrast to that of the management. Minegishi's fellow founding members, including the face of AKB48 Maeda Atsuko, the unique figure who double as member and staff Takahashi Minami, and one of the TV commercial queen Itano Tomomi (板野友美), showed their enthusiastic support on twitter

23 <<http://www.j-cast.com/2013/02/01163828.html>> (14.07.2014).

24 <<http://edition.cnn.com/2013/02/04/world/asia/japan-akb48/index.html>> (14.07.2014).

25 <<http://blog.livedoor.jp/spiral5405-spiral3025/archives/23904639.html>> (14.07.2014).



and G+ by flaunting a group photo of them with the shaved Minegishi in the center. Not a member herself but a close friend with AKB48, the comedian Hachima Kaoru, who had made a name by impersonating Minegishi, shaved her own head to show solidarity. Following suit, quite a few sympathetic fans shaved their heads as well. Facing internal and external criticisms, the AKB48 theater manager Togasaki Tomonobu made a public announcement on February 1 emphasizing that head shaving was Minegishi’s own decision and the uploading of the video to the official AKB48 channel on Youtube was by her request as well. As it had served its purpose of Minegishi apologizing to fans, the video has been removed from Youtube.<sup>26</sup>

The reality is that the AKB48 love ban has been hard to maintain in recent years. One love affair after another of their members has been exposed by the press, despite the AKB48 management’s best PR efforts to hush the reporters. Below is a list of recent incidents in which the love ban has been breached:

26 <<http://matome.naver.jp/odai/2135974200388847601>> (14.07.2014).

Name	Time	Highest Ranking in the Group Elections	Offense	Penalty
Hirajima Natsumi 平嶋夏海	January, 2012	26 <sup>th</sup> , 2011	Dating a boyfriend, ignoring the agency's warnings	Termination of employment
Sashihara Rino 指原 莉乃	June, 2012	1 <sup>st</sup> , 2013	Magazine report on prior boyfriend	Transfer to sister group HKT48
Masuda Yuka 増田有華	November, 2012	20 <sup>th</sup> , 2011	Magazine report on current boyfriend	Termination of employment
Mineshige Minami 峯岸 みなみ	January, 2013	14 <sup>th</sup> , 2010, 2012	Magazine report on current boyfriend	Demotion to probational member
Kashiwagi Yuk 柏木由紀	March, 2013	3 <sup>th</sup> , 2011, 2012	Magazine report on overnight party with male soccer players	None

An important trend is that as time progresses, penalties for breaking the love ban rule has become more and more lenient. While Hirajima Natsumi was fired upon the discovery of her boyfriend and subsequently largely vanished from the public eye, both Sashihara Rino and Mineshige Minami were able to stay in the AKB48 group after the scandal broke (Sashihara was transferred out of Tokyo to a sister group HKT48 based in Fukuoka. Yet she made an impressive comeback by achieving number one ranking in the 2013 AKB48 election). In Masuda Yuka's case, she opted to quit AKB48 after her love affair was exposed. The reason for her resignation was she had found another job prior to the scandal and her career was not in no way affected by the expose. Fans and the press have repeatedly predicted that the AKB48 management would grow more open-minded over time and lift the infamous love ban (or at least a partial lift for older

members who have reached the age of 20 and celebrated their coming of age day). It is interesting to watch whether such predictions would come true.

### 5. Analysis of an Obsession

Hamano Satoshi comments that there is a “time travel” phenomenon in Japanese academic circles. That is, fashionable Western theories normally reach Japan a few years after their heydays in Europe and North America. Japanese students would try hard to apply these somehow “retro-chic” theories to Japanese issues, only to find out after a while that they have already lost credibility in their home countries. A corny German joke aptly describes the dilemma of Western theory obsessed Japanese students: a man who is fanatically searching a room is asked by a friend what he is looking for. This man answers that he is looking for something he dropped outside. His friend is puzzled: “Then why are you looking in the room?” “Well, I want to see better and there are lights in the room.” The moral of the story for Japan watchers is they should focus on issues they study rather than how showing off their familiarity with imported theories. A facile yet counterproductive approach in cultural studies is to parade fashionable labels such as “exploitation of body in late capitalism” that seem universally applicable but in reality explain very little. For instance, Aoyagi cannot help pointing out the Japanese cultural specifics that are a hard fit for the Western theories that he is obliged to ornate his book with.<sup>27</sup> Against such label dropping and concurring Hamano, in our analysis of AKB48 we will mainly reference Japanese sources because the Japanese authors show more cultural congeniality approaching a rather uniquely Japanese social phenomenon.

Two questions need to be asked in regard to idol-fans dynamics. First, what is the nature of this one-sided fantasy love? Sakurai argues that the core concept of AKB48 is a well-structured game of unre-

27 Aoyagi 2005, 11 et seq.

quited love (片思い). In fact, any romance begins as one-sided infatuation, with one party developing a crush on someone and desperately hoping (fantasizing) the other party to respond with affection. This is certainly culturally neutral. Consider for instance, the song “Just My Imagination” by the band The Temptations. The lyrics goes:

Each day through my window I watch her as she passes by  
 I say to myself, “You’re such a lucky guy”  
 To have a girl like her is truly a dream come true  
 Out of all of the fellas in the world she belongs to me.

But it was just my imagination  
 Running away with me  
 It was just my imagination  
 Running away with me.

Soon we’ll be married and raise a family  
 A cozy little home out in the country with two children, maybe three  
 I tell you, I can visualize it all  
 This couldn't be a dream for too real it all seems.

But it was just my imagination, once again  
 Running away with me  
 I tell you it was just my imagination  
 Running away with me ...

For Otakus, what is unique about idol-fans dynamics is the blurring line between life and game. For instance, diehard fans of the hugely popular 2009 simulation dating game “Loveplus” (ラブプラス) are so absorbed into the fantasy world with the game characters that they travel with their Nintendo game console and book double rooms for themselves as well as for their imaginary lovers.<sup>28</sup> Yoshihiko Kihara also designates the current Japanese society as a society of multiple realities where game and life coexist and simulate each other, and as a result, traditional dichotomy of reality versus fiction collapses.<sup>29</sup> Hiroki Azuma in particular argues that the Japanese pop

28 Sakurai 2012, 157.

29 Minamida – Tsuji 2008, 149.

culture has reached a phase of “database consumption” rather than story consumption. By “database consumption”, Hiroki means that manga and anime fans pride themselves in accumulating large quantity of mechanical and chronological data of about their favorite manga and anime pieces rather enjoying the storylines in the old fashioned way. In so doing, everything in and about the two dimensional world of manga and anime becomes a piece of shared knowledge among fans, an insiders’ reference point, an equivalent of gangs’ sign language for Otakus. There is no need for a piece of information like this, called “neta” (ネタ), to make sense, as long as it generates a reasonable topic for fans.<sup>30</sup> Rather than to the group’s singing and dancing, AKB48 fans are more devoted to such “netas” as which member commanding the center stage in their performance and videos. Popular “netas” about AKB48 members include Shimazaki Haruka’s awkward interaction with fans at handshake events (“salty response” in the AKB48 jargon) or even Kawaei Rina’s stinking feet. “Netas” of AKB48 members’ abiding by or straying away from the love ban rule are understandably the best tabloid and gossip fodder. In fact, most fans are probably not particularly dismayed by the members who broke the love ban law, but news about these “scandals” makes a major contribution to a giant database, the “neta” reservoir that fans love to expand. To sum up, the fantasy love between idols and fans exhibits many parallels with what happens in and with manga/anime/video games. Both are a game of, as the Honda Toru calls it, a happy relationship with “a girlfriend in the brain.”<sup>31</sup> Live performances and handshake events with blood and flesh AKB48 idols are designed to provide the fans (gamers) a more realistic and authentic feel. Its producer Akimoto’s preference for homely looking, girls-at-your-school type of members marked a radical departure from previous generations of idols, the likes of Matsuda Seiko, who were packaged and marketed as super cute princesses. However, in the final analysis, it is still a simulation game in a post-technology era

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

when young people turn away from the tired, inhumane everyday world and actively seek to create their own reality.

From a sociological perspective, Koyano Atsushi points out that after WWII, there was a period of moral chaos in Japan brought out by the despair and confusion of military defeat. Hence starting from 1950's, the Japanese government and the Japanese society in general have campaigned to restore traditional values. As a result, generations of post-war youth have been given most prudent education in regard to sexuality, which makes them passive and awkward in pursuing love. As the 1960s singer Akiyuki Nosaka sang, "Between man and woman there is a deep, dark river." Youth back then struggled to cross that river, not always with success.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, many Japanese families retain the traditional parental authority with parents having an important say in their children's finances and personal life. In particular, controlling and overbearing mothers and tensions between mothers and daughters-in-law play a role in young men's failed relationships. Since the economic bubble collapsed in 1990's, economically restrained young people tend to postpone marriage.<sup>33</sup> According to the National Institute for the Study of Social Security and Population, 61.4% men aged 18 to 34 remain single in 2011.<sup>34</sup> It is not surprising that a love-starving generation looks for emotional substitution and outlet in idols.

Psychiatrist Doi Takeo also provided an interesting perspective in this regard. Doi believes that many Japanese men look for dependent and passive love in their relationship with women, to which Doi offers a psychoanalytic explanation of men's nostalgia for infantile attachment to mother's breasts.<sup>35</sup> In fact, a psychological approach can help us without having to resort to Freudianism. Hiroshi Ogawa explains that an imagined relationship remains perfect, free of rejection, quarrel, and other imperfections inevitable in real life relationships.<sup>36</sup>

32 Ueda 1994, 195.

33 Koyano 2012, 180.

34 Sakurai 2012, 150.

35 Lent 1995, 135.

36 Aoyagi 2005, 37.

Interestingly, for their shared love for a particular idol, fans form an ambient community in which they feel a sense of belonging; on the other hand, because the fan relationship with his idol is imaginary and highly individualized, each relationship is unique and exclusively his own. Thus the fantasy love is doubly emotionally satisfying, a feature shared by other pop cultural cults such as Japanese women’s fascination with handsome male horse racing jockeys.<sup>37</sup>

Secondly, why this obsession with female youthfulness and innocence? Aoyagi pointed out the connection between idol image whose typical catchphrase is “Pure, Honest, and Beautiful” and the Shinto concept of purity. Interestingly, for some idol fans, respecting female purity is an act of preserving Japanese tradition and an antidote to Western style feminist sexual liberation.<sup>38</sup> The columnist and idol commentator Nagamori Akio (中森 明夫) who is best known for his coinage of the now widely used term *Otaku*, compares an idol to *miko* (巫女) who is a supplementary priestess at a Shinto shrine. As a symbol of religious purity and medium of divine forces, a *miko* is always celibate. According to the same author, a parallel can also be drawn from the celibacy of a Catholic priest who gives up worldly responsibilities to devote his whole being to God. Does an idol possess any power of blessing, as a *miko* or a priest does? Nagamori’s answer is affirmative. He thinks that what is in an idol that draws fans to her is the power to love. As an innocent teenage girl, there is unlimited potential of love for her. Theoretically, anyone – a prince, a prime minister, or a rock star – could fall in love with her. Indeed, this possibility for bigger than life romance is the theme shared by the story of Cinderella and numberless other fairy tales. With the power of love, a female like Cleopatra could change the course of history. In an idol, however, the power of love is “canned up and compressed” because the impossibility of any real life relationships, which make the power even more overwhelming. That is why, according to Nagamori, fan stand in line for hours to meet with their

37 Martinez 1998, 167.

38 Aoyagi 2005, 218.

favorite idols at the handshake events that AKB48 is famous for. Nagmori insists that a semi religious power is transmitted from the idol to the fan thorough the touch of hands.<sup>39</sup>

In many parts of the modern world, free love is the norm for which relationships not based on one's own free choice is considered immoral. This free love practice gives an appearance of democracy and yet creates winners and losers in the process, as the female poet Takamura Itsue (高群逸枝) depicted in her book *To Ugly Men and Women in the World*. Nagmori argues that in a capitalist society, the competition for love is a zero sum game like other competitions. A free market of love ends with haves and have-nots, the latter need help obtaining love which idols provide. Idols give up their personal love to pass the illusion of love to fans. There is a degree of truth to their claim of sacrifice and idealism and idols do not always represent a cold game of love for sale. Indeed, there are many idols from well-to-do families who take the job for sincere interest.<sup>40</sup> Admittedly, many are in the business for the limelight and their fifteen minute fame. However, they also should the pressure that comes with it. One of the best known idol of all time Yamaguchi Momoe famously said "I want to be a normal girl."<sup>41</sup> It is in this sense of selfless sacrifice that Hamano Satoshi argues, partly tongue in cheek and partly seriously, that the ace of AKB48 Maeda Asuko "transcends Jesus Christ" in terms of her altruism.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand of the equation, idol fans had been viewed in negative lights as nerdy, antisocial, even dangerous crime-prone. In recent years, however, Otaku has become mainstream, more and more people finds an Otaku in himself or herself, so much so there is the expression of "the whole hundred million population of Otakus" (一億総オタク). Okada Toshio (岡田斗司夫) defines Otaku as someone who has an inexhaustible inquiring mind who absorbs and systematizing knowledge on a certain subject,

39 Kobayashi 2012.

40 For instance, the former AKB48 member Watanabe Shiho (渡辺 志穂) is from a family that owns a private helicopter.

41 Ibid.

42 Hamano 2012.



that is, manga, video games, or idols.<sup>43</sup> In terms of their rigorous and disinterested pursuit of knowledge, idol fans are not unlike scholars. For people who say “get a life!” to them, idol fans would probably answer, “what do you want me to do?” Indeed, what would be viable alternatives to their idol infatuation, a more “meaningful” life? Would the critics of idol fans suggest climbing up corporate ladders in a nine to five careerist life, or devoting idealist youthful years to a political idea and only to be disillusioned later? Put in perspective, idol fans’ choice does not look as strange as it seems to be.

Mishima Yukio argues that the modern concept of “love” as a continuous intimate relationship is alien to the Japanese psyche. Instead, traditional Japanese culture values “longing for love” (恋) that is one-sided and never fulfilled. Indeed, an unreciprocated longing is the most beautiful thing in the world, in contrast, its consummation, if possible at all, would be a spoiler that ends the longing and destroys its beauty.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, scholars such as Yanabu Akira have contended that the necessity of chastity before marriage was a foreign, largely Puritanical idea took up by Meiji era Japanese intellectuals who considered Japan backwards and unethical and idealized Western values. In contrast, the masses stressed out with hard labor had little time worrying about intact virginity.<sup>45</sup> In the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries Japan, however, it seems the indigenous and imported ideas meet each other on a piece of postmodern collage that is the idol enterprise. Here may lie the answer to the feelings that fans hold for their idols that baffles outsiders. Rather than accepting a crude reading that considers the idol culture as a form of capitalist perversion,<sup>46</sup> perhaps one should look beyond skimpy swimsuit and tantalizing song lyrics and keep one’s eyes open for lingering cultural vicissitudes.

43 Ishikawa 2005, 42.

44 Sakurai 2012, 26.

45 Koyano 2012, 4.

46 Galbraith 2012a, 193.

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