

Admiring “Immaturity”

～Reconsidering Japanese Studies from the Perspective of Idol Fan Culture～

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This thesis is a sociological study from a gender perspective that focuses on contemporary Japanese culture and uses Japanese idol fan culture as a case study to find a new way to approach Japanese studies.

In a narrow sense, Japanese studies, called *nihon bunka ron* in Japanese, is a term that refers to academic papers in fields such as cultural anthropology and sociology that focus on Japanese people and their psychology, culture, and society (Aoki, 1990, p. 19). Japanese studies have changed depending on Japan's economic and political situation and international relations. It is said that the current Japanese society is entering an era of cultural capitalism and cultural nationalism where soft power is a main “weapon” (Sugimoto, 2010), so it is not the traditional culture or history, but the current popular culture, famous worldwide and leading the soft power policies of Japan, that might offer a lead that will help us develop a new approach in Japanese studies. The popular culture that has been overlooked as an insignificant one until now, might provide us with a clue to deepen our understanding of Japan's society.

To apply this approach, I selected the Japanese idol fan culture as a case study. Idol business remains one of the major entertainment businesses in Japan (Nomura Research Institute, 2005) with idols infiltrating all types of media and becoming an indispensable part of everyday life in Japan. In order to fill the gaps in the idol studies, I used my perspective of a foreigner to look at the idol phenomenon with fresh eyes and explore the uniqueness of the fan culture of Japanese idols.

However, are the characteristics of the Japanese idol fan culture really unique to Japan? How is the idol fan culture practiced overseas? In order to carry out such comparative research, a framework that allows to compare fan cultures across different countries is needed, and the main concept of a “fan” must be clearly defined. However, until very recently, both the media and academics have seen fans only as fanatics, not worthy of a proper study (Jenkins, 1992). As a result, the field of fan studies is very new and not wholly developed yet and the term “fan” is not yet clearly defined (Duffet, 2017). That is why a new conceptual framework is needed.

Based on the above, the purpose of this study is to look for a new perspective for reconsidering Japanese studies, using the idol fan culture as a case study. Therefore, first of all, I will clarify the uniqueness of the fan culture of Japanese idols, which has not been fully examined so far (Research 1). Second, I will consider what a fan is and how a fan community is formed, and construct a new concept for comparative research (Research 2). Finally, by combining these two research results, I aim to develop a new approach in Japanese studies.

The research method is an interview survey. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 35 Japanese fans (both male and female) of female idol groups part of the “48 Group” (e.g. AKB48,

NMB48) and “*Sakamichi* Groups” (e.g. *Nogizaka46*, *Keyakizaka46*) and male idols groups produced by Johnny’s Entertainment (e.g. *Arashi*, King and Prince).

Research 1 focuses on a peculiar phenomenon that I term as the admiration of “immaturity”. It refers to the fan practice of looking for a newbie idol who has potential to become a star and admiring how she makes effort to overcome her immaturity and improve her skills. I hypothesize that this phenomenon is the uniqueness of the idol fan culture.

Also, looking at this phenomenon from a gender perspective, allows us to see the power disbalance between fans and idols, which is difficult to grasp from other perspectives. I analyzed it from the perspective of gender theory and clarified gender issues in the fan culture of idols.

Do Japanese idol fans overseas also admire the "immaturity" of idols, or is it a peculiar behavior of Japanese fans? To elucidate this, a theoretical framework that enables comparative analysis is needed. Research 2 was conducted to construct this framework. In research 2 I reconsidered what a fan is. To that end, I used the theory of "Imagined Communities" by Benedict Anderson and analyzed it within that framework. Anderson (2007) analyzed that a nation is an "imagined community" that is based on the imagination of the people who belong to that nation. He also explained that nationalism is an ideology that integrates that imagined community. As a result of reconsidering the fan culture in analogy to that, I proposed a new framework that *fans* are an imagined community, while the ideology that integrates them is *fanism*. Using this new keyword and framework, I analyzed the community of Japanese idol fans. Specifically, I analyzed various discourses that have become established as "common sense" among fans, examined how *fans* are imagined, and how *fanism* of Japanese idol *fans* is formed.

Regarding the reconsideration of Japanese studies, I found that it is highly possible that the culture of admiring "immaturity" found in the fan culture of idols is also practiced in fields such as kabuki theater, sumo wrestling, and youth sports. Therefore, I suggested that it could be regarded as an aspect of the essential values of Japanese culture. Of course, additional research is needed to prove it, but it can be said that I have pioneered a new perspective in Japanese studies that focuses on the enjoyment of "immaturity."

Next, I proposed a new framework that can be used in comparative fan studies so I believe that international fan culture research can be further developed.