

MNL48 and the Idol Culture Phenomenon: An Emerging Manifestation of Japanese Soft Power in the Philippines

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Abstract

AKS, the talent agency that manages idol groups in Japan, announced in 2016 that they will be establishing AKB48 sister groups in Thailand (BNK48), the Philippines (MNL48), and Taiwan (TPE48). The Groups of 48, commonly referred to as 48G, is being spearheaded by AKB48, the world's largest pop idol group with more than three hundred members. It already established international sister groups in Indonesia (JKT48) and China (SNH48) to propagate the concept of 'idols you can meet' in Asia. Currently, the original Japanese songs were already translated in the Bahasa Indonesia, Mandarin Chinese, and Thai languages. Due to their popularity, AKB48 is constantly being invited by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to perform in its events all around Asia, where the fans spending a lot of money to see their favorite idols. This paper discusses the possibility of Japanese cultural hegemony in the Philippine popular culture industry. Utilizing the lens of Roland Robertson on globalization and glocalization, this paper implicates three scenarios that could affect popular culture in the Philippines: (1) the role model image of 48G can be used spread the Philippine government's programs such as suicide prevention, improving local security, among others; (2) the raffle system to get tickets for performances will only be a money-making venture for AKS; and (3) if MNL48 will be used by the Japanese government to sell their country's products in the Philippines, it will further prevent national development and the emergence of local industries.

Keywords: AKB48, Philippines, idol groups, popular culture, glocalization

INTRODUCTION

Japanese talent agency AKS, Inc. announced on March 26, 2016, the establishment of AKB48's new international sister groups in East and Southeast Asia (MNL48, 2016). As of this writing, BNK48 (an abbreviation of Bangkok 48) has been successfully established in Thailand. Meanwhile, MNL48 (an abbreviation of Manila 48) is in the process of accepting applicants for auditions and TPE48 (an abbreviation of Taipei 48) is on the process of building connections in their respective countries to formally start the auditions for the said groups. Established in 2011, JKT48 (an abbreviation of Jakarta 48) in Indonesia is AKB48's first international sister group and is one of the most popular idol groups in the said country. The establishment of these performing groups is a manifestation of the globalization of Japanese popular culture. From the usual anime, drama series, and Japanese comics commonly known as *manga*, it can be considered that these idols groups are relatively new to the taste of Southeast Asian audience. This paper aims to discuss the possible implications of the establishment of MNL48 to the Philippine popular culture industry.

The World's Largest Idol Group

Japanese talent manager Akimoto Yasushi established the talent agency AKS, Inc. in 2005 to manage the establishment of the idol group AKB48. AKB is an abbreviation of Akihabara, the central district of Japanese popular culture in Tokyo. It consists of five teams: Team A, Team K, Team B, Team 4, and Team 8. The respective groups, meanwhile, consists of young ladies aged eleven to twenty-five.

Akimoto founded the group with the concept of ‘idols you can meet,’ wherein each team takes turns in performing at their base, the AKB48 Theater, every day. After singing and dancing, the idols, as the young ladies are being referred to, do handshake events to personally see, feel, and talk to their fans. The Guinness Book of Records (2011) and the CNN (Liu, 2017) declared the group as the world’s largest pop girl group with its 322 members in Japan alone. They also hold the record of having the best-selling singles in Japan, according to the Japanese entertainment body Oricon (2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016). Adding to their commercial success is their record of having the most singles sold in Japan wherein they were able to sell 36 million copies of it (The Japan Times, 2011). Even though they are in the second place in 2017, their goal to sell out was a success because according to a SoundScan Japan report, AKS, Inc. was able to sell their physical-format audio/visual releases such as CDs, photobooks, shirts, towels, and other products which amounted to 3.6 billion Yen (or almost 32 million US Dollars) in the first six months of the year alone (Billboard, 2017). Judging from the said numbers, it can be said that despite the hugeness of the Japanese popular culture industry, AKB48 has maintained their influence in it.

Establishment of International Sister Groups in (South-) East Asia

As of this writing, AKB48 has two international sister groups in Southeast Asia, the JKT48 which was established in Indonesia in 2011, and BNK48 in Thailand in 2016. The latter started performing in 2017. Just like their sister Japanese idol groups, JKT48 has its own theater where its teams perform every day and hold various activities for their fans. Due to the hastened establishment of BNK48, they are currently doing online live sessions every day until their theater is ready to hold performances. AKS, Inc. established the Chinese pop idol group SNH48, which has its base in Shanghai. The talent agency, however, cut the contract with the Chinese partners as the latter decided to establish local idol groups in China, just like what AKB48 is doing, without the parent company’s consent. AKS, Inc. did not allow this to happen since the contract stated that all the rights to 48G and the only institution that can manage those idol groups is them (JPopAsia, 2016). Meanwhile, MNL48, which is based in the Philippines, is currently on the process of accepting applicants for auditions all over the country. TPE48, which is based in Taiwan, is on the process of formally establishing the said idol group in the country.

The establishment of these groups in various Southeast Asian countries is part of the pop culture diplomacy program of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was spearheaded the public diplomacy office of the Ministry and has been an official foreign policy agenda of Japan in 2007 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2017). As its primary focus, Japan first exported anime and *manga* products. The Ministry also declared the internationally-known anime character Doraemon as the “Anime Ambassador of Japan” as part of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics campaign. To gain more support from the wide fan base of anime and video games, the Ministry formally partnered with the organizers of the World Cosplay Summit as well.

Before AKB48 had their international sister groups, they already took part in the activities of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs overseas. In 2010, the group led the campaign of the Tokyo police force educating the Japanese population about traffic laws. They also led the suicide prevention and mental awareness campaigns of the Japanese government (Fujii, 2014). The direct international activities that they took part in were the campaign to encourage other countries to buy reconstruction bonds so that the Japanese government would be able to raise funds for the rehabilitation of those affected by the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami (AFP, 2012), and also being the main act (performance) in the ASEAN-Japan Commemorative Summit in 2014 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2014).

AKB48 first set their feet on the Philippines in 2015 to advertise the Cool Japan stores to their fans in the country. The said stores were established by Japanese business along with their local partners to sell Japan-made products. The idol group returned in 2016 to announce the planned establishment of their international sister group MNL48 and performed during the celebration of the 60th anniversary of Philippine-Japan bilateral relations.

METHOD AND FRAMEWORK

Globalization, Glocalization, and the Pop Culture Industry

As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, the aim of this study is to discuss the possible implications of the establishment of MNL48 to the Philippine popular culture industry.

The eventual establishment of MNL48 and other international sister groups of AKB48 are manifestations of globalization. According to Guilianotti and Roberston (2006), local culture is only a result global product reproduction due to the influence of Americanization, Japanization, and other cultural hegemonies. For this study, the researcher will base his analysis on the idea and concept of Roland Robertson on globalization and *glocalization*. Robertson (2000) discussed that globalization may cause the death of one culture or it might accommodate and contextualize foreign ideas which will result in cultural diversity. Due to this claim, the researcher sees the need to notice the connection of the local to global relations, and one cannot veer away from the discourses of cultural imperialism. This is part of Robertson's discourse on *glocalization*. The term *glocalization* is a wordplay of the terms *global* and *local* that means the accommodation of foreign cultural sensibilities by local actors.

To ascertain the manifestation of glocalization in an international sister group of AKB48, the researcher provided images screen-capped from the Japanese music videos of 48G hit singles 'Heavy Rotation' and 'Pareo wa Emerald' and the Indonesian versions of the said songs performed by JKT48. The said songs belong to the best-selling singles of AKB48 and its sister group SKE48. The same is done to a Filipino idol group that was established to advertise a Japanese idol drama series.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As of this writing, JKT48 in Indonesia and BNK48 in Thailand are the active sister groups of AKB48 in Southeast Asia. For the purposes of this study, the author only included Southeast Asian sister groups due to their geographic and cultural proximity to the Philippines. This section will discuss the manifestation of glocalization on the said groups.

Manifestation of Glocalization in JKT48

JKT48 is the first international sister group of AKB48 and is based in Jakarta, Indonesia. The said country is known for its conservative culture due to the influence of Islam, a religion which most of the Indonesians associate with. The process of glocalization can be distinguished in the music videos of JKT48 as seen in Figures One (1) to Four (4).



Figure 1 Music video of AKB48's "Heavy Rotation"



Figure 2 JKT48's version of "Heavy Rotation"



Figure 3 Music video of SKE48's "Pareo wa Emerald"



Figure 4 JKT48's version of "Pareo wa Emerald"

In the original Japanese version of AKB48's hit single and music video 'Heavy Rotation,' the group's members are wearing lingerie while being in an indoor setting. For SKE48's original Japanese version of their hit single 'Pareo wa Emerald,' their members are wearing two-piece swimsuits. These clothing are simply unacceptable to the standards of Indonesian culture. The local managers of AKS, Inc. in Indonesia incorporated local cultural standards in the performances of JKT48. It can be noticed that in the Indonesian versions of 'Heavy Rotation' and 'Pareo wa Emerald' that JKT48's members are fully-clothed and are showing way less skin compared to their Japanese counterparts.

Manifestation of Glocalization in BNK48

BNK48 is the second international sister group of AKB48 in Southeast Asia and is based in Jakarta, Indonesia. It is officially the third international sister group if we are going to include the now-defunct group SNH48. Unlike in Indonesia wherein, religious conservatism is manifested in its media content, Thailand is relatively open to more daring content. While the said daring scenes are not scened in the music videos of the Bangkok-based girl group, glocalization of its visual production exist as seen in Figures Five (5) to Eight (8).



Figure 5 Music video of AKB48's 'Kimi Wa Melody'



Figure 6 BNK48's version of 'Kimi Wa Melody'



Figure 7 Music video of AKB48's 'Koisuru Fortune Cookie'



Figure 8 BNK48's version of 'Koisuru Fortune Cookie'

The aesthetics of the music video of AKB48's 'Kimi Wa Melody' features that of traditional Japanese nobility as seen in Figure 5. This aesthetic was contextualized in Thailand wherein BNK48 members wore dresses that resemble the clothing style that is being worn by Thai royalty. In 'Koisuru Fortune Cookie,' meanwhile, AKB48 wore their signature majorette uniforms. In their post-daring era, they have been recognized wearing this more conservative clothing style. BNK48 has adapted this clothing style in their own music video of 'Koisuru Fortune Cookie,' featuring Thai jasmine leaves as a design on the uniforms.

The original Japanese songs of AKB48 and SKE48 also underwent glocalization as they were translated to the Bahasa Indonesia (for JKT48), Mandarin Chinese (for SNH48), and Thai (for BNK48) languages. The case of JKT48 is an exceptional example of glocalization due to the cultural situation that they are facing. The People's Republic of China, Thailand, Taiwan, and the Philippines have relatively more open cultures in terms of clothing, which is why AKS and their local partners in the said countries will not be as strict as that of Indonesia's.

The Philippines has a history of managing idol groups as well. As part of the marketing campaign of Japanese television network NHK for the airing of their drama series *Amachan* in the Philippines, they guided Philippine television network TV5 in establishing a Filipino idol group in 2015. The all-female Filipino idol group was called Kawaii 5. *Amachan*'s popular songs such as 'Koyomi no Ue de wa December' and 'Jimoto ni Kaerou' were translated into the Filipino language and had the titles 'Kawaii 5' and 'Hiling.'

Implications of the Establishment of MNL48 to the Philippine Pop Culture Industry

The researcher sees that, just like other international sister groups, AKS, Inc. will manage the recruitment process, training, and performance aspect for the future members of MNL48. However, due to the limitations set by the 1987 Constitution on foreign ownership of companies, the marketing and operations aspect of sister group will be handled by the local partners of AKS, namely the Hallo Hallo, Inc. On September 23, 2017, Philippine television giant ABS-CBN formally signed a contract of partnership with AKS, Inc. It is in that network that they will be broadcasting the performances of MNL48 (Kyodo News, 2017).

AKB48's pop idol genre is relatively new in the Philippine entertainment scene. It will offer new performances that to the renditions done by artists at present. The researcher, however, has three implications on the eventual establishment of MNL48 in the Philippines.

The scheme of AKS, Inc. for fans to get tickets for the performances of 48G is through a raffle system. In this system, fans are required to spend a specific amount of money on merchandise to get a raffle ticket that, in turn, has to be registered online for them to get a chance to win a ticket to the AKB48 Theater and see their idols. In a critical perspective, it is clearly a money-making venture to increase profits of AKS, Inc. Local partners are also paying big money on royalties as they are being allowed to use the rights to the 48G. If that will be the case, considering that operations of the base theater have to run every single day, it will be too costly for the fans to spend and for the management to do such operations.

AKB48 as role models by the Japanese community as they are the ambassadors of the government's programs in local security, suicide prevention, mental awareness, and agricultural

development, among others. This particular foreign cultural sensibility needs to be incorporated into MNL48. In a time where everything is being commodified, being part in solving social issues would be of great benefit to the greater Filipino masses.

Lastly, there is a great likelihood that the group will be utilized by Japanese companies to their marketing strategies in order to sell their products. These said products, may it be electronics, vehicles, or clothing are manifestations of cultural imperialism when we talk about popular culture. The Philippines already has a long experience of letting in multinational companies in the country to manufacture goods. This will further prevent national development and industrialization. It will not allow emerging small industries to compete with global giants.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Due to globalization, the international sister groups of AKB48 went through the process of glocalization, wherein original Japanese hit singles were translated into the Bahasa Indonesia, Mandarin Chinese, and Thai languages. Aside from accommodating foreign cultural sensibilities, glocalization contextualizes the global to the needs of the local. It is evident in the clothing used by JKT48 that was appropriate to the conservative culture of Indonesians.

Utilizing the image of 48G members as role models to the youth can spread awareness on programs such as local security, suicide prevention, and agricultural development, among others. The existence of such groups would also offer a new taste in the Philippine entertainment industry, as most artists today only do renditions of old performances.

In a critical perspective, the raffle system of AKS for the fans to get a chance to win a ticket to see the performances is too costly for the Filipino audience. If implemented, it is clearly just a money-making venture of the companies involved. Another negative implication would be the possible exploitation of MNL48 by Japanese companies to sell their products in the country. Instead of taking part in national development and helping the emerging small industries, they will only prevent it.

An interesting aspect that future researchers must look into is the 'love ban rule' of 48G. Supposedly, members are not allowed to be in a relationship while they are part of 48G. Considering that the career of many artists in the Philippines usually involve having a love interest or getting into a romantic linkage, it will be a direct conflict to the said rule.

Upon the formal launch of MNL48 in the country, it would also be interesting to know the contexts and discourses behind the soon-to-be translated songs AKB48 into Filipino. Feminist discourses on the establishment of the group would also serve as a topic that should be tackled on.

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