

Locale Idols and the Creation of New Local Culture: Ehime Prefecture's Hime Kyun Fruit Can

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Abstract | Currently, the number of “locale idols” (*gotōchi aidoru*) active across Japan regionally is dramatically increasing. To examine this newly created cultural phenomena, it is necessary to distinguish between “locale” and “local” or “regional” idols. If local and regional idols have been unable to escape from the tropes of “center/capital” and nationalism, locale idols reflect a concept of place that has newly emerged in Japanese society, in which local colors disappear and the different regions have become increasingly culturally uniform. Ehime Prefecture locale idol group Hime Kyun Fruit Can (*Hime Kyun Furūtsu Kan*) provides a typical example of this. Formed under the influence of AKB48, Hime Kyun Fruit Can has offered an alternative to regional rock music that features a strong local sound and has established a musical space in Japan's provincial territories not so different from that of Tokyo. One cannot discern any local tradition or character in the music of Hime Kyun Fruit Can, which instead is sensitive to new Tokyo trends and attempts to convey them to local areas. The group thus demonstrates how “locale idols” create “locales” (*gotōchi*), places evoking a “local experience” not through unique local traditions or products but through the staging of local events that showcase the self-conscious reproduction of trends in the capital.

Keywords | Idol, place, local, tourism, popular culture

Introduction

The dramatic increase in the number of locale idols marked a transformation among Japanese female idols in the 2010s.¹ Previously, idols promoted them-

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1. The reason for focusing on female idols is that the majority of locale idols active in the Japanese countryside are women. While male idol groups based in the countryside are not totally unknown, compared with their female counterparts, they are extremely few, yielding scant materials to survey. The current study thus focuses on female idol groups to analyze locale idol culture.

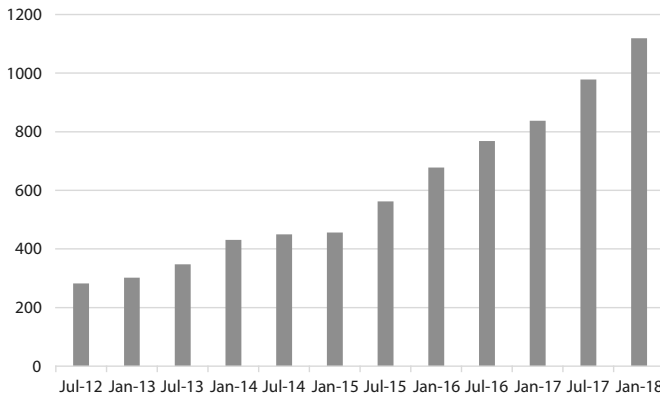


Figure 1. The number of female idol groups across forty-six prefectures (excluding Tokyo)

selves through nationwide broadcasts from Tokyo. Locale idols, on the other hand, are based outside of Tokyo and their activities mainly consist of local concerts or events. In 2012, there were as few as 282 locale idol groups in Japan. As of October 29, 2018, there were 1,371 female locale idol groups alone, among which at least twenty had been active for more than ten years.²

According to materials published by the “Japan Locale Idol Activity Association” (Kaneko 2018, 116), the number of locale idol groups has steadily increased since 2012. More specifically, the number of groups has increased by about two hundred per year since 2015. While this certainly means the locale idol industry is lucrative, its most important characteristic is its basis in Japan’s provincial territories.

As is well known, the Japanese countryside is experiencing a chronic recession due to its aging and decreasing population. For this reason, cultural industries that can attract youth to these territories provide a topic of intense interest. The existing literature in this regard tends to reference the successful cases of popular culture able to attract large numbers of tourists. This focus is partially because it is hoped that the promotion of locale idols might further contribute to the revitalization of the Japanese countryside.³ However, to analyze the topic of locale idols only in terms of the most financially successful cases would make

2. This calculation, including only idol groups active outside of Tokyo, is based on Japan locale idol activity association (Nihon Gotōchi Aidoru Kassei Kyōkai 2018), as cited in Kaneko (2018, 116). Kaneko Masao is a representative of the Japan Locale Idol Activity Association, which was organized and is still active in Japan.

3. For example, see Tamura (2014, 61-63), Tanaka (2016, 48-88), etc.

it difficult to elucidate their cultural significance. At the same time, most extant studies that have examined new regional cultural content primarily focus on the effects of cultural policies implemented by the national and local governments, and overlook the wider social context and historical significance of the birth of such new regional cultures.⁴ In sum, there is a tendency in the existing literature to evaluate local culture from the standpoint of either business administration or public administration studies. As such, the chance to explore these local cultures from within a humanities perspective has been ignored. The current study takes up this task, and gauges the trajectory of changes currently taking place within local popular cultural production in Japan.

This study begins by distinguishing the term “locale” (*gotōchi*) from the terms “local” and “regional.” It then presents and analyzes the case of Ehime Prefecture idol group Hime Kyun Fruit Can (*Hime Kyun Furūtsu Kan*)⁵ as a concrete example of “locale” culture. The reasons for focusing on Hime Kyun Fruit Can among the many locale idol groups that exist are threefold. First, Hime Kyun Fruit Can has been successful in small and mid-size regional cities. Even while based in Matsuyama City, Ehime Prefecture, a small city far away from the centers of popular music such as Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya, Hime Kyun Fruit Can has become a major success in a short period of time. Recognized by as much as ninety-five percent of Ehime Prefecture residents and having achieved a local economic ripple effect of sixty million yen in 2013 (Iga 2013),⁶ Hime Kyun Fruit Can is unquestionably among Japan’s most popular locale idol groups. Second, Hime Kyun Fruit Can has succeeded without funding from the government or a major entertainment agency. Although since becoming famous the group has come to enjoy sponsorship from both inside and outside Ehime

4. For example, Cho (2017, 125–29) analyzes how an app developed by the Saitama Prefecture Department of Tourism was used in a tourist enterprise based on animation content and how this contributed to local vitalization. However, questions of why the number of people desiring to visit animation stages has recently increased, what new local culture was created by this, and how it is different from traditional culture remained unexplored.

5. Hime Kyun Fruit Can formed in 2010 under Iga Chiaki, who manages a live music venue in Ehime Prefecture. The name is a composite of several elements. “Hime” comes from the name of the group’s home prefecture, “Ehime.” “Kyun” is an onomatopoeia referencing the sound of a heart beat (i.e. “kyun-kyun”). Finally, *furūtsu kan* is the Japanese pronunciation for the English term “fruit can.” The members of Hime Kyun Fruit Can can be divided into two generations. The first generation of members, active from 2010, all quit the group in October 2017. From November 2017, the second generation of members took over and are still active today. The current study focuses on the first-generation members.

6. According to Iga (2013), Ehime Ginkō (Ehime Bank) calculated this financial figure of sixty million yen. In an interview on July 1, 2018, Hime Kyun Fruit Can’s producer Iga Chiaki stated that Hime Kyun Fruit Can’s financial productivity had reached as high as 250 million yen.

Prefecture as a local representative, previously the group achieved popularity through their independent efforts alone. Third, the group did not form for the express purpose of promoting local attractions or products.⁷ This characteristic distinguishes the group from other idol groups in terms of how they have come to realize or represent a new form of local culture. Therefore, by examining the activities and popularity strategies of Hime Kyun Fruit Can we can reveal the characteristics intrinsic to locale idols, qualities which are difficult to approach and unpack within a strictly cultural policy or business administration studies focused analysis.

This analysis is based on interview and documentary research. The researcher conducted an interview with Hime Kyun Fruit Can producer Iga Chiaki at Matsuyama Salon Kitty on July 1, 2018 that lasted an hour and was recorded with Iga's permission. Internet sources were also consulted to substantiate and supplement the interview material. In this way, the study attempts to provide a comprehensive account of Hime Kyun Fruit Can.

“Local Idols” and “Regional Idols”

In Japan, idols active and based outside of Tokyo are referred to as “local idols” (*rōkaru aidoru*) and “regional idols” (*jimoto aidoru*). Based on the traditional distinction between capital and provincial regions, then, their meaning is distinct from that of “locale idols.” Before analyzing in depth the characteristics of “locale idols,” this section sums up how each of these terms differs in meaning.

The term “local idol” simply refers to provincially based idols. On September 4, 2004, an episode of NHK music program Pop Jam (*Poppujamu*) aired in which host Tsunku♂ used the abbreviated term “locodol” (*rokodoru*) to describe local idols,⁸ and the terms “local idol” and “locodol” thus came into popular use (Ryokō Gaidobukku Henshūbu 2015, 3). As is well known, Tsunku♂ exercised tremendous influential power in the idol industry as the chief producer of Morning Musume (*Mōningu Musume*), the most popular idol group at the time. Tsunku♂’s appearance on the NHK flagship program to coin the term “local idol,” then, can also be understood in terms of a certain form of power relations.

7. For example, each member of Hime Kyun Fruit Can is symbolized by a different fruit, namely, apple mango, blueberry, banana, pineapple, strawberry, green apple, passionfruit, and grapefruit. These fruits have absolutely nothing to do with Ehime Prefecture. Indeed, any fruits or foods special to Ehime Prefecture, such as tangerines, oranges, kiwis, and chestnuts, are nowhere to be found among the foods associated with the group.

8. Regarding this broadcast, see Kojima (2017, 74-81).



Figure 2. *Amachan*'s protagonist, a high school student and female diver



Figure 3. The idols' clothes are modelled on the local tradition of female divers



Figure 4. GMT47 Members meet with fans while dressed in clothes reflecting each prefecture's characteristics

As one can discern in Tsunku's introduction of the Niigata Prefecture idol group Negicco as "number one in terms of ability and looks among locodols," these "local idols" or "locodols" were treated as belonging to a different category from Tokyo idols. Epistemologically, then, the existence of local idols is entirely based on the distinction between "local/provincial" and "center/capital," a form of power relations revealed in the way in which Tsunku, a producer located within the "center/capital," christened and appraised them.

Meanwhile, the term "regional idol" (*jimoto aidoru*) was popularized through a performance on the NHK morning drama *Amachan* (2013) (Ryokō Gaidobukku Henshūbu 2015, 3). As one of the most popular cultural products of 2013, *Amachan* created the image of idols in Japan's rural territories. Regional idols, up until then known only by idol fans, became instantly famous through the NHK morning drama.

Amachan is set in a small fishing village in Iwate Prefecture beset by the twin problems of serious economic recession and aging population. The protagonist, a female high school student, works in the village's traditional profession of female diving before becoming an idol at the behest of the village tourism association. Drawing on the motif of "female divers," her idol activities elicit an

explosive response, attracting swarms of tourists to the village. The protagonist capitalizes on this popularity and moves to Tokyo to become a famous idol. When a great disaster befalls her village, however, she returns to Iwate Prefecture to participate in the “town revitalization” (*machi okoshi*) effort, using her power as a regional idol.

NHK morning dramas have long performed a role of connecting regions with the nation (Kojima 2014, 108-11). By broadcasting to the nation stories featuring protagonists with strong regional attributes, they promote interest in the prefectures and strengthen the connection between the nation and its various territories. *Amachan* also achieved this objective while becoming a popular hit. Japanese citizens across the nation expressed their support for this story in which the protagonist wears the attire of a traditional female diver and speaks in the Iwate dialect. In fact, the protagonist’s Iwate expression, “*jejeje*,” which she frequently used in the program, won the grand prize in the annual U-CAN buzzwords-of-the-year contest in 2013.

The drama’s emphasis on provincial color is made even clearer through the featured presence of GMT47, the idol group the protagonist joins in Tokyo. GMT47 is a “national idol group” made up of idols gathered from each of Japan’s prefectures. “GMT” refers to the Japanese word “*jimoto*,” which basically means “hometown,” and “47” refers to the forty-seven territories that make up Japan (forty-three prefectures, two urban prefectures, one circuit, and one metropolis). The character of this “national idol group” is well conveyed by the group’s members, who get along while speaking in various local dialects.⁹ The group’s debut song was entitled “Let’s Return to the Town” (*Jimoto e kaerō*) and featured the following lyrics: “Let’s return to the town / Let’s meet in the town / Your hometown, my town.” The song also features a melodious interlude in which the members declare their respective places of origin. In this manner, GMT47 conveys an image of harmoniously co-existing diverse local colors.

Such imagery and lyrics clearly convey the character of regional idols. The regional idols represented in *Amachan* display intimate relationships with other local idols while promoting the distinct features of Japan’s local territories such as dialect, local products, local railway lines, and so forth. In this emphasis on local colors, one can say, also lies the hidden intention of positioning each territory in the single frame of “Japan.”

Encouraged by *Amachan*’s success, NHK initiated the “National *Amachan* Map! Revitalize Your Village Campaign” (*Zenkoku Ama-chan mappu! Anata no*

9. Each member adopts a distinct identity. For example, the member from Tokushima practices a traditional dance called Awa Odori to introduce herself and dresses in the Awa Odori costume when meeting with fans.

mach okoshi kyanpēn) in 2013, which selected regional idols to represent each territory and drew up a national map linking them together (“Ama-chan” 2013). The campaign intensified in 2014 with the “Beloved Town Campaign” (*Koisuru jimoto kyanpēn*), which designated regional idols in each of Japan’s forty-seven territories as “campaign supporters” (*koijimo sapōtā*). The selected regional idols appeared on NHK broadcasts to promote their regions and regional products. NHK thus built on *Amachan*’s success to actually select and connect together idols representing Japan’s regions. In other words, through *Amachan* and the related campaign, NHK searched for and found regional idols to represent the common frame of “Japan,” yet who could also maintain their local colors and promote them through these national broadcasts. The concept of a regional idol, which derived from the popularity of *Amachan*, thus ultimately came to represent a nationalist tone through the actions of NHK, Japan’s national broadcasting company.

The Common Features of Locale Cuisine and Locale Idols

The concepts of “local idols” and “regional idols” described above fail to fully capture the character of Japan’s newly emerging regional culture. In order to understand this new culture, it is necessary to turn to the notion of “locale culture.” One example of such culture is “locale gourmet” (*gotōchi gurume*), which refers to affordable foods enjoyed by local residents on a daily basis, such as locale ramen, locale yakisoba, locale dumplings (*gotōchi gyoza*), locale hamburgers (*gotōchi bāgā*), locale curry (*gotōchi karē*), locale korokke, and so forth. Many of these locale dishes are composed of nonperishable foods acquirable anywhere in Japan but garnished with local sauces or additives.

Given its basis in industrial mass-produced foods, locale gourmet is a relatively recent phenomenon, and it is in this respect that this new “locale” cuisine can be strictly differentiated from “local cuisine” (*kyōdo ryōri*), which involves traditional recipes and unique local agricultural produce. For example, on December 18, 2007, Japan’s Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (*Nōrin Suisanshō*) selected the “One Hundred Best Local Cuisines” (*Kyōdo ryōri hyakusen*) representing Japan alongside the “Special Select Popular Locale Cuisines” (*Gotōchi ninki ryōri tokusen*). According to the selection committee, the “one hundred selected local foods of farming, mountain, and fishing villages” (*nō-san-gyoson no kyōdo ryōri hyakusen*) were defined as “*hometown flavors produced, developed, created, and eaten as part of the livelihood of farming, mountain, and fishing villages, [representative of] local traditions*”

(Nōrin Suisanshō 2007; emphasis added by the author). In contrast, the “selected popular locale cuisines” were “cuisines that are *rarely related to farming, mountain, and fishing villages* but that *currently enjoy popularity*, are a source of pride among local residents, and are expected to continue as such *into the future*” (Nōrin Suisanshō 2007; emphasis added by the author). Based on these definitions, local cuisine is rooted in a region’s natural environment and traditions and evokes the “hometown” of the past, whereas locale cuisine is born of the present and unrelated to a region’s natural environment or traditions but enjoyed by local residents. In other words, if local cuisine consists of traditional dishes sustaining “locality,” then locale cuisine consists of fusion dishes incorporating processed foods, which are a product of contemporary lifestyles.

As affordable cuisine without history or tradition, locale cuisine is also referred to as “B-level food,” that is, second-rate or casual food.¹⁰ Nonetheless, this status has done little to hamper its growing popularity within contemporary Japan as representative local dishes gradually disappear. Tamura Shigeru provides a succinct explanation for this phenomenon: “The homogenization and standardization of Japan’s dietary customs due to changes in the retail business with the emergence of convenience stores and supermarkets is an undeniable fact. The dissemination of simple frozen and instant foods is likely behind the deterioration of unique local dietary cultures” (Tamura 2014, 50). In this age of the standardization of dietary tastes, rather than local cuisine using unique local ingredients, people are attracted to locale cuisine, which uses slightly tweaked processed and instant foods. Indeed, they even travel to seek out local sites just to try such “B-level” locale food. Therefore, one can say that locale cuisine represents a new form of local culture emerging with the collapse of traditions and the further development of a high-mass consumption economy.

This phenomenon is also discernable in popular music. AKB48, for example, enjoyed such popularity in 2010 that they were labelled a “social phenomenon.”¹¹ The public has become accustomed to idol music conquering the music industry in this fashion. If convenience stores and instant foods have homogenized the nation’s palate, idol music has done the same for its musical tastes. The rock bands, jazz singers, and folk songs that once regularly graced local stages are

10. The term “B-level locale gourmet” (*B-kyū gotōchi gurume*) is also commonly used in addition to locale gourmet.

11. The number of studies on the influence of AKB48 on Japan’s music industry is extensive. A few notable examples include: Kim Ki-dōk and Chōe Sōk-ho (2014, 16-18), who pay attention to AKB48’s gaining of such popularity as to be a “social phenomenon”; and Okajima and Okada (2011, 14-48), who call AKB48 a “revolution”; and Sayawaka (2013, 152-210), who differentiates between idols before and after AKB48.

thus gradually disappearing, replaced by the increasingly prevalent spectacle of locale idols.

To observe this transformation, Ehime Prefecture locale idol group Hime Kyun Fruit Can provides a representative case. The group was formed by Iga Chiaki, a veteran producer of Ehime Prefecture's rock-music scene who founded Matsuyama Salon Kitty,¹² Ehime Prefecture's first live music venue. With Matsuyama Salon Kitty as his base of operations, Iga set out to discover local bands, quickly finding success as producer for Japaharinet (*Japaharinetto*), a band of university students. Formed in Ehime Prefecture in 1999, Japaharinet achieved fame with its 2004 hit "Sadness Crossing" (*Aishū kōsaten*), receiving the 2004 Japan Gold Disc Award for "new artist of the year." Despite such popularity, Japaharinet did not move to Tokyo but maintained its identity as a regional band and continued to work out of Matsuyama Salon Kitty. However, when the band referred to as "the strongest band in Shikoku" broke up in 2007, Matsuyama Salon Kitty began to encounter serious financial difficulties.

It was under such circumstances that Iga noticed AKB48's popularity (20's *Type Henshūbu* 2015).¹³ Inspired by AKB48, Iga set out to create a new female idol group rather than discover a new rock band like Japaharinet. Created in this way, Hime Kyun Fruit Can caused a sensation, and the popularity of their regularly held concerts helped Matsuyama Salon Kitty to overcome its financial difficulties. However, Matsuyama Salon Kitty also lost its identity as a venue showcasing new and upcoming rock bands. Regarding the difference between rock and idol music, Iga states, "Since [idol groups] are easier on the ear than rock bands, they are [more] easily accepted by a wide range of age groups" (Iga 2012). In other words, idol groups had a certain mass appeal that rock bands did not. In any case, this mass appeal that was "easier on the ears" was also engendered through the daily television broadcasts of AKB48's music. In pursuit of the production of such music, Ehime Prefecture's Matsuyama Salon Kitty thus lost its unique character.

The relationship between AKB48 and Hime Kyun Fruit Can is made clear by analyzing the latter's first single "The Law of Conservation of Romantic Energy" (*Ren'ai enerugi hozon no hōsoku*, March 2011). Entering the indie list of the Oricon Chart at number one, this song served to widely publicize the group. Viewing the music video, one can observe that the concept, fashion, dancing,

12. Iga Chiaki founded Matsuyama Salon Kitty in 1994. It is located at Kitty Building, Kawaramachi 138, Matsuyama, Ehime Prefecture. Able to host up to five hundred people, it serves as a venue for live concerts and also practice and recording.

13. Iga says that he decided to create an idol group after hearing from AKB48 associates that the group's fan club alone made a high profit.



Figure 5. A scene from Hime Kyun Fruit Can's music video for "The Law of Conservation of Romantic Energy" (*Ren'ai enerugi hozon no hōsoku*)



Figure 6. A scene from AKB48's music video for its major debut single "I Wanted to Meet You" (*Aitakatta*)

and melody are all very similar to those of AKB48. The choreography of the school uniform-clad members swaying to a cheerful melody in a school setting, moreover, is naturally reminiscent of early AKB48 music videos such as "Cherry Blossom Petals" (*Sakura no hanabiratachi*, February 2006) and "I Wanted to Meet You" (*Aitakatta*, October 2006). Within Hime Kyun Fruit Can's live concerts at this time, one could also witness their fans chanting the exact same slogans as those used by the Tokyo devotees of AKB48. This signifies how the provincial music scene has ceased to produce any individuality or difference with respect to Tokyo. To theoretically explain this change, one may turn to Edward Relph's (2005, 177) description of "cultural and geographic homogenization," which involves the "disappearance of exceptional and unique places" and the emergence of an increasing production of "placenessness."

This phenomena first appeared in Japan's non-capital territories in the 2010s, and one reason for the rise of such homogenization is the increasing weakness of local economies. Iga describes the composition of those who frequent Matsuyama Salon Kitty as follows: "Eighty percent of the audience [for Hime Kyun Fruit Can] is from outside Ehime Prefecture. These are people flying in from Tokyo. As long as this is the case, it's necessary to do live concerts once or twice a month in places like Tokyo, Nagoya, and Osaka—we need to ensure that [these audience members] want to see [Hime Kyun Fruit Can] again."¹⁴ With a population of around 510,000 (Matsuyama-shi 2018, 6),¹⁵ Ehime Prefecture's Matsuyama City (home of Matsuyama Salon Kitty) is the most populous city in Shikoku. Nevertheless, its economic scale is quite small compared with major Honshū cities and as result local residents fill only twenty percent of live-music

14. This content is from an interview with Iga at Matsuyama Salon Kitty on July 1, 2018.

15. As of December 31, 2017, Matsuyama City's population was recorded as 512,479.

venues. Hime Kyun Fruit Can make the long trips to Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya, and other major cities to attract the fans needed to fill the other eighty percent. In order to sustain local live-music venues, then, one cannot but be sensitive to the responses, preferences, and trends among audience members in major cities. In other words, to remain economically viable local cultures must constantly cater to non-local tastes. This is a necessity to preserve the provincial cultural industries within territories that possess low purchasing power, such as Ehime Prefecture's Matsuyama City.

It was this constraint that led Iga to avoid restricting his purview to the local scene and actively seek out non-local input. Since he was relatively unfamiliar with the nuances of the idol music industry, the experienced rock producer sought out Sakai Naoyuki,¹⁶ an active and popular writer in Tokyo broadcasting. Writing the lyrics for Hime Kyun Fruit Can's first and second singles, Sakai came to play a decisive role in defining the group's image. While Iga said that he did not like the initial Hime Kyun Fruit Can concept suggested by Sakai,¹⁷ he also admitted that without outside help from the likes of Sakai it would have been difficult for Hime Kyun Fruit Can to develop into a popular idol group.

The Emergence of Regionless Regional Cultures

While they are deeply affected by external trends, is it possible for locale idol groups to embody or convey a particular regional character? In order to further our investigation into the regional character of Hime Kyun Fruit Can, the previously mentioned Matsuyama rock group Japaharinet provides a useful case for comparison.

As discussed, Japaharinet was a rock band discovered by future Hime Kyun Fruit Can producer Iga that enjoyed popularity in Ehime Prefecture in the early 2000s. The band's debut single, "Sadness Crossing" (*Aishū kōsaten*, January 2004), is also their representative song. Its lyrics contain these lines:

On the road of sadness
I hoped to stand tall and say, "I'm back"
At some point I started walking, hoping just for recognition
Nowhere did I find sadness, the road was colorless

16. A broadcast writer native to Ehime Prefecture, Sakai Naoyuki wrote episodes for the famous animation *Doraemon* and for special-broadcast, ghost-story, and mystery programs.

17. Interview with Iga conducted at Matsuyama Salon Kitty on July 1, 2018.



Figure 7. Japaharinetto

Figure 8. The album jacket for “Sadness Crossing” (*Aishū kōsaten*)

The orange-colored countryside scenery was nowhere to be seen¹⁸ (Japaharinetto 2004)

What is particularly noteworthy about these lyrics is the contrast between the “colorless road without sadness” and the “orange-colored countryside scenery awash with sadness.” The song’s protagonist desires to “escape the colorless road” and return to “countryside scenery” but declares this impossible. The most well-known part of the song is the refrain, “I’ve returned” (*kaette kita yo*), which expresses nostalgia for the countryside and the desire for a glorious hometown return. One could say this song faithfully reflects the reality of young people leaving the countryside for big cities.

The song naturally evokes curiosity about the band members’ hometown. As if in response to this interest, the music video features an image of a fluttering flag adorned with the word “Matsuyama” written in roman characters. Meanwhile, the words “orange-colored countryside scenery” evoke an image of Ehime Prefecture, which is famous for oranges and tangerines. Japaharinetto’s fame aroused much commentary about the members’ tacky fashion. For example, the group’s lead singer wore his hair in a coif (*rīzento*) commonly associated with the old-fashioned working-class delinquent youth gangs of the countryside (*yanki*) (figures 6 and 7). In this manner, Japaharinetto actively embraced its provincial image.

By contrast, it is not easy to detect the presence of any references to Ehime Prefecture’s regional characteristics in Hime Kyun Fruit Can’s popular songs. The following lyrics are from “Harukanata” (April 2014), Hime Kyun Fruit Can’s most successful single in the Oricon Chart.¹⁹

18. Lyrics and composition by Kashima Hiroyuki. Released in January 2004.

19. The song reached number twelve on April 28, 2014. See “Hime Kyun Furūtsu Kan: Harukanata” (2014).



Figure 9. Ordinary A-edition album jacket for “Harukanata”



Figure 10. A scene from the music video for “Harukanata”

The scenery I remember gradually fades
 May we never return to that place again? *Ah, ah*
 Because it's impossible to stay with you in this dreamlike world
 We, in a spiral-like cycle
 In time that repeats
 Today is a little better than yesterday
 If we can encounter new selves
 Let's open the road to a new world (Hime Kyun Fruit Can 2014)²⁰

These lyrics describe a reality greatly separated from the “scenery I remember” and make clear the impossibility of returning to “that place” from the past. In a world severed from the past in this manner, “time repeats and spirals”; nothing but the uncertain present lies before the song’s protagonist.

At least Japaharinet could claim to have a place to “return” to, namely, the “orange-colored countryside scenery.” In Hime Kyun Fruit Can’s “Harukanata,” however, time and space are entirely obscure, like a dream. The song’s title, “Harukanata,” a neologism combining the words “*haruka*,” meaning “remote,” and “*kanata*,” meaning “other side” or “over there,” clearly conveys Hime Kyun Fruit Can’s sense of space. Whereas Japaharinet invokes a concrete image of the “hometown” with the Matsuyama flag fluttering in the wind and lyrics describing the “orange-colored countryside scenery,” the setting for “Harukanata” is a vast empty desert (figure 10). In the music video, a school uniform-clad Hime Kyun Fruit Can wanders aimlessly in a desert. In Japan, deserts or sand dunes exist in Tottori, Kagoshima, and Shizuoka Prefectures but not Ehime Prefecture. According to promotional materials, the music video was filmed in Hamamatsu City, Shizuoka Prefecture, the aim being to use a desert to depict a world in

20. Lyrics by Yamashita Tomoki and composition by Inoue Takuya. Song released in April 2014.



Figure 11. The first series for the animation *Attack on Titan* (*Shingeki no kyojin*)



Figure 12. Poster for the theatrical release of *Magical Girls Madoka and Magika* (*Mahō shōjo Madoka☆Magika*)



Figure 13. The three protagonists of *Coppelion* (*Kopperion*)

which humanity is extinct (“Hime Kyun Furūtsu Kan” 2014). For what would become its most popular hit, then, locale idol group Hime Kyun Fruit Can travelled all the way to Shizuoka Prefecture to film a music video set in an “apocalyptic world.”

In addition to singing about places totally unrelated to their hometown, Hime Kyun Fruit Can was also sensitive to prevailing trends. Just months before the release of “Harukanata,” several animated television programs featuring graphically envisioned apocalyptic worldviews were released in 2013. First, *Attack on Titan* (*Shingeki no kyojin*), broadcast from April through September 2013 and based in a dark dystopic world in which giants hunt humanity, became a national sensation. The following lyrics in the show’s opening theme, “Red-lotus Bow and Arrow” (*Guren no yumiya*, Revo 2013) are particularly remarkable: “Without even knowing the name of flower it has trampled / The fallen bird eagerly awaits the wind / Nothing changes through prayer alone / That which may change the present is the determination to fight.”²¹ The song provoked a massive response from the public as well as within the music industry. Rejecting the past and emphasizing the existential will of the present moment, the song’s lyrics reflect the sense of time discernible in “Harukanata,” which also conveys a feeling of being severed from the past and remaining only in the present. Second, the animated feature film *Magical Girls Madoka and Magika* (*Mahō shōjo*

21. Lyrics and composition by Revo. Released on July 10, 2013.

Madoka☆Magika) was released in October 2013 and portrayed the lives of five girls repeatedly experiencing the end of the world. Again, this film's worldview resonated strongly with the lyrics of "Harukanata," which describe a "spiral-like cycle." Third and finally, *Coppelion* (*Kopperion*) was an animated television program which aired from October to December 2013 and depicted high school students in the ruins of Tokyo following a nuclear disaster that wiped out ninety percent of the city's population. Its theme of school uniform-clad female high school students wandering through a destroyed world closely resembles the scenes of the "Harukanata" music video.

To be sure, "Harukanata" did not merely imitate these works, but rather the video was a sensitive reflection of a prevailing trend. This is in sharp contrast to Japaharinet, the lead singer of which stubbornly defied fashion trends with his hairstyle. Unlike Japaharinet, which sang the song "Sadness Crossing" modelled on the "orange-colored scenery of the countryside," Hime Kyun Fruit Can adjusted to prevailing trends by denying the "scenery I remember" and situating themselves in a "post-apocalyptic" world.²² Viewed in this way, the group's artistic style can be better understood as reflecting a national fad more than local culture.

Of course, this does not mean that Hime Kyun Fruit Can has totally neglected Ehime Prefecture and its unique traditions in its songs. For example, the song "Run Up That Hill!" (*Ano sakamichi o kake agare!* December 2015), produced in collaboration with official Imabari City mascot Bari-san, certainly showcased Ehime Prefecture's local colors. In the music video, local citizens from elementary school students to office workers wave the famous "Imabari City towel" along with Hime Kyun Fruit Can members against the backdrop of tourist attractions such as Matsuyama Castle, Dōgo Hot Springs, Gintengai shopping district, and so on. Despite the active support of the government, large businesses, and educational institutions, however, the song failed to provoke much of a response.²³ In other words, Hime Kyun Fruit Can's singles that reflected the dominant Tokyo trends were much more well received than those that showcased local character. Furthermore, it was the former type of song that came to define Hime Kyun Fruit Can's identity.

Considering this unspecific identity, does it make sense to call Hime Kyun Fruit Can a "local" or "regional" idol group? As mentioned above, local and

22. A science fiction genre usually involving a setting in which humanity has become largely extinct or been destroyed.

23. Although it was released as a limited edition, it failed to reach any higher than 134 on the Oricon Chart. Meanwhile, Hime Kyun Fruit Can's other two songs released around the same time rose to twenty-four and thirty-six.

regional idols symbolize the uniqueness and traditions of Japan's provincial territories, which are distinct from those of the "center/Tokyo." *Amachan* provides a typical example, with its narrative of a female high school student idol carrying on local traditions who becomes an internet sensation, attracting swarms of otaku tourists. In other words, *Amachan* is a story in which an idol attracts curious tourists from far and wide by recreating the culture of traditional female divers, a local cultural phenomena that is difficult to glimpse in Tokyo. Hime Kyun Fruit Can, on the other hand, does not showcase any particular aspect of local culture, and so no characteristics are discernible that might pique the curiosity of big-city otaku tourists in the manner of *Amachan*'s protagonist.

However, there are some idol groups that introduce the regional character and traditions of Shikoku better than Hime Kyun Fruit Can. For example, Hachikin Girls (*Hachikin Gāruzu*) is a group composed of former cheerleaders for the Kōchi Prefecture baseball team that was formed as a "special tourism envoy" for Kōchi Prefecture. The group takes its name from the word "*hachikin*," which is a term in the local Kōchi dialect meaning a "lively and diligent woman." The Hachikin Girls sing songs with titles featuring the names of local products or tourist attractions, such as the "eighty-eight Shikoku sites" (*Shikoku hachi jū hachi kasho*) (Ryokō Gaidobukku Henshūbu 2015, 91). There are also "agriculture idol groups" like Ainoha Girls (*Ainoha Gāruzu*), a band also from Ehime Prefecture. The Ainoha Girls were formed with the express purpose of promoting local agriculture by directly engaging in agriculture themselves. The group actively campaigns for the southern part of Ehime Prefecture, where agriculture is well developed. Unlike Hime Kyun Fruit Can, this group emphasizes local character to a much greater degree and displays a certain charm that cannot be found in big cities.

Nonetheless, it is difficult to deny the fact that Hime Kyun Fruit Can enjoys an overwhelmingly greater level of popularity both inside and outside Ehime Prefecture than the Hachikin Girls and Ainoha Girls. In that case, how might one define a culture that is popular both within and without a region but is disconnected from tradition and foregoes any special regional characteristics? The following section analyzes this new regional culture represented by Hime Kyun Fruit Can with reference to Martin Heidegger's theory of place.

Heidegger's Theory of Place and the "Local Experience" Created by Locale Idols

According to Kang Hak-sun (2010, 9), in terms of "place," Heidegger considered

the loss of “wonder,” local individuality, and the lack of distinct national character caused by homogenization to be one of the greatest ills of modern society. This lacuna of distinctive local quality he considered to be responsible for the countless “homeless nomads wandering toward arbitrary coordinates” and “indistinct and uniform nobodies [*das Man*] bereft of identity and particularity” (Kang Hak-sun 2010, 9).²⁴ His idea, in other words, was that the loss of place leads to the loss of existence. Heidegger’s solution to this problem was to reconceptualize “place,” defining it “not in terms of a closed or fixed location or space but a dynamic, open, and eventualizing state” (22). He thus denounced the distinction between human activity and place and called for the conceptualization of place as an event or state. From this perspective, a place’s character or identity is not predetermined but constructed; it is fluid, varying according to the events that human beings precipitate therein. It is precisely at the moment when “placeness” shifts in this dynamic manner that human beings recognize their place (Heidegger 2008).

Heidegger’s theory of place is useful for understanding locale idols such as Hime Kyun Fruit Can. By constructing a musical space identical to AKB48’s in Tokyo, Hime Kyun Fruit Can shows how Japan’s territories are undergoing homogenization. The group’s character is drawn into sharp relief when compared with Japaharinet’s outmoded fashion and lyrics about “orange-colored countryside scenery.” In foregoing their regional identity to follow the changing trends, however, Hime Kyun Fruit Can constantly precipitates events—creating “places” in the Heideggerian sense. Debuting in a manner reminiscent of AKB48, the group cycled through a series of character concepts in step with mainstream trends, including prisoners, a baseball team, skeletons, a school band, a motorcycle gang, and so forth before arriving at “Harukanata,” which resonated with the mood prevalent in popular animation at the time. No consistent identity is intelligible in these images, which are themselves completely irrelevant to regional traditions; just like a trend, everything flashes and then disappears.

In Tokyo, where trends emerge spontaneously, the shifting and changing of trends is an unconscious process. From the perspective of the countryside, however, these are the consciously accepted cultural trends of an external other. Hime Kyun Fruit Can thus hired a popular broadcast writer to learn about AKB48’s concept and created the unconventional post-apocalyptic space of “Harukanata” in Matsuyama City, Ehime Prefecture, despite the fact that this is a place where regional traditions still subsist.²⁵ To understand this phenomenon,

24. This critical awareness is also present in Edward Relph’s idea of “placelessness.”

25. Matsuyama City is known as “the city of the *haiku*.” It has established itself as a city of

one must pay attention not to a group's artistic style alone, but the manner in which they produce their performances. In other words, what is important is the circumstance and location of these performative events. In this respect, what is important is not an artistic work's level of excellence but the dynamic creation of a new local culture it engenders through the creation of locally staged happenings. Even if a culture is easily experienced in Tokyo, Tokyo natives seek out the site of its more dramatic manifestation in the provincial territories. Here, it is not a culture's "excellence" but the dynamic sense of locality that attracts people.

Viewing the sites at which idols from Japan's provincial, non-capital territories create culture, no term better captures their significance than "locale" (*tōchi*). In the Japanese term "*tōchi*," the prefix "*tō*" (this) refers to the event occurring "here and now," "right before one's eyes," "at this very moment," "immediately," and so forth. Locale foods such as yakisoba, ramen, and curry are popular because they are instant, produced "right before one's very eyes." In particular, the reason why locale cuisines enjoyed in the countryside are perceived to be so delicious is precisely due to their fresh emergence in conflict with deeply-rooted traditional local cuisines. Despite, and even due to its short history, locale cuisine was able to establish itself in the countryside by denying local cuisine; demonstrating that the conflict with tradition that has disappeared in Tokyo is still ongoing everywhere in the countryside. People trek out to the rural regions to indulge in foods like fried dumplings or korokke because they want to experience the vivid sense of locality present in places that is created through opposition to cultural tradition. The "locale" is precisely a place brimming with such antagonistic vitality. Therefore, this is a phenomenon that cannot be captured through using the words "local" or "regional."

Unlike Tokyo idols, who create (or have created for them) trends based on internal motivations, idols in the Japanese countryside inevitably endure conflict and self-denial through the necessary reception of externally originating trends. It is for precisely this reason, however, that these idols constantly precipitate events. And it is these events that produce the new space known as the "locale." Evoking the sense of locality created at the moment a place is born, a locale can only be directly experienced. This is the reason why people come from far and wide to see and meet locale idols.

traditional literature by erecting various monuments with *haiku* (Japanese seventeen-syllable poem) and hosting *haiku* competitions.

Conclusion

It is difficult to view Hime Kyun Fruit Can as the bearers of local tradition or representing a distinct notion of local identity. Instead the group's example illustrates how a provincial idol group has become popular by following Tokyo trends. Just as locale cuisine makes use of generic processed foods, Hime Kyun Fruit Can began its activities as a second incarnation of the prototype mainstream idol group AKB48. Furthermore, just as locale cuisines have displaced local cuisines to become representative local foods, Hime Kyun Fruit Can has come to occupy a representative musical space in the countryside, marginalizing other music that reflects more regional concerns and characteristics. The group can therefore be considered as exemplary of the ongoing homogenization of Japan's local cultures.

However, it is also important that Hime Kyun Fruit Can did not simply attempt to imitate a specific trend but constantly adapted its position in relation to the various fads current within Tokyo. Through this interaction and reflection a dynamic regional scene is thus created, with Hime Kyun Fruit Can serving as the locus for a constant occurrence of events. The tone which Hime Kyun Fruit Can pursues does not seek to embody local traditions but fleeting trends, a process of engagement through which regionality is instantaneously created and destroyed. This study defines such a place that changes from moment to moment in this way as a "locale."

Naturally, not all so-called locale idol groups share a character identical to that of Hime Kyun Fruit Can. There are also groups that promote unique local traditions and natural scenery to define their identities. In contemporary society, however, in which regional specificity and local color is disappearing, Hime Kyun Fruit Can demonstrates the potential for creating new local cultures by sensitively responding to prevailing national trends. Hime Kyun Fruit Can denies the past and marks its place in the "here and now" while ceaselessly digesting externally created trends. As a result, it has been able to nurture a sense of locality in terms of the "here and now" and attract fans from other territories. In order to evaluate the local culture created by locale idol groups like Hime Kyun Fruit Can, then, one must pay attention to the sense of locality of the present moment rather than the tradition of the past.

In focusing on idols in the countryside, however, this study has unfortunately left little room for a comparison of such with Tokyo idols. There are now idols in Tokyo known as "underground idols" (*chika aidoru*) that do not appear in the mass media but build their fan bases by performing in small theaters. Recently, the number of such groups has dramatically increased. Future studies might

compare the similarities and differences between these groups and the locale idol groups analyzed in this paper.

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