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Transnational migration of the AKB48 paradigm: a localized transformation of the "open work" logic in China's underground idol scene

Wenjun Ruan[1], Xining Luo[2]*

[1]Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts, Shanghai University, Shanghai, China
[2]Nihon University College of Art, Tokyo, Japan

*CorrespondingAuthor. Email: ruanwenjun@shu.edu.cn

Abstract. This paper analyzes the aesthetic mechanisms of Chinese underground idol performances. Underground idols deliberately maintain technical "incompleteness" to create gaps for audience interaction. From the perspectives of "open work" and "reterritorialization", the study shows how audiences appropriate localized practices—such as supporting idols using regional dialects—to reinterpret foreign texts. These practices transform flaws and gaps in the performance into points of intervention, injecting regional identity and emotion into the live experience. As a result, the traditional one-way spectator model shifts toward a collaboratively co-constructed performance, revealing audience agency in cross-cultural communication and the construction of youth identity.

Keywords: underground idols, creative misreading, open work, localization, subculture

1. Introduction

Within the long and complex trajectory of East Asian popular culture, the idol industry has long carried a certain stereotypical label. It is often viewed as a highly standardized, commercialized product—a "pseudo-individuality" production line characterized by a lack of subjectivity. This industrial model is oriented toward perfection: every smile, every dance move is meticulously calculated and rehearsed, striving for zero error.

Yet, beneath the surface currents of history, alternative forms have always emerged at the margins. Since the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, accompanied by the transnational diffusion of Japan's so-called "Idol Warring States" period, a distinct subcultural formation—underground idols—has quietly taken root in Livehouses (small-scale live performance venues) in China's first- and second-tier cities. Unlike idols under the mainstream media spotlight, meticulously packaged and radiating the sheen of "finished aesthetics", underground idols exhibit a rougher texture. Their defining feature is "incompleteness" [1]; their visual presentation lacks standardized refinement, their interactive segments are filled with improvisational contingencies, and technical flaws are often visibly present. It is precisely these apparent imperfections that construct a unique and tension-laden aesthetic space.

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For audiences accustomed to polished audiovisual spectacles, stepping into such a space for the first time can be disorienting. The seemingly rough, even slightly rudimentary form is often misread as either a resource-constrained necessity at the early stage of the industry, or a crude imitation of Japan's Akihabara otaku culture. Such interpretations reflect a certain elitist arrogance. If research on cross-cultural communication remains confined to this superficial comparison, it risks overlooking a crucial variable: the audience's agency.

When Japanese cultural texts with an "incomplete" attribute cross borders and are transplanted into China's unique local contexts, a fascinating chemical reaction occurs. The performance cannot fully preserve the near-religious sanctity or rigid ceremoniality of its origin. In Chinese live shows, we observe the intrusion of highly heterogeneous elements. Originally closed idol texts are pried open; strict Japanese-style cheering is replaced with regional dialect shouts; the hierarchical idol-worship gaze is transformed into a horizontal, even playful, mode of interaction. This cultural fusion and transformation is not a simple degradation or distortion. Rather, it provides an exemplary case to examine how local culture engages in a deep negotiation and integration with foreign cultural forms.

Historically, scholarly discussions of idol appeal have often been trapped in a binary evaluative framework: a zero-sum game between "professionalism" and "amateurism". A typical example occurred in the 2018 program *PRODUCE 48*, where members from Japan's AKB48 competed alongside Korean trainees. Differences in dance synchronization and technical skills were laid bare. Judges attributed these gaps to "cultural differences", yet the discourse subtly highlighted that, in Japan's idol logic, uniform perfection has never been the primary standard [2].

Previous research has largely focused on macro-level industrial-economic analyses, exploring the commercial viability of the idol system, or on sociological perspectives analyzing fan psychology. For instance, Takashi Kouzuki cleverly employed the high/low context theory to distinguish the essential differences between Japanese and Korean idols. He argued that K-POP belongs to a low-context culture, relying on direct, high-level audiovisual performance that can be appreciated without prior background knowledge [3]; by contrast, Japanese idols, exemplified by AKB48, operate in a high-context culture where audiences must follow members' growth trajectories and understand the narrative contexts to fully grasp the value of their performances. Similarly, Tsunehiro Uno conceptualized the idol industry as a "training game", where fans' pleasure derives not from consuming perfect artworks, but from participating in the idols' growth narrative through voting, purchasing, and other actions. Here, "incompleteness" functions as a deliberate setting, providing space for fan intervention [4].

From an internal aesthetic perspective, Kentarō Ogura made a pioneering contribution by applying Umberto Eco's theory of the "open work" to show that the "incompleteness" in AKB48 theater performances is not a flaw, but an intentionally designed "poetics of openness" to invoke fan participation [5]. This concept denotes a creative procedure or aesthetic strategy in which structural gaps or "incomplete" states are deliberately left within the work, allowing the audience or performers to co-construct its final form through active interpretation, performance, or interactive engagement.

However, Ogura's study, while explaining the interactive logic in the Japanese context, falls short when applied to Chinese live performances. It overlooks the potential rebelliousness of audiences in cross-cultural contexts and cannot account for the uniquely exuberant, near-carnivalesque phenomena seen in Chinese venues. The research emphasizes the producer's intent, framing openness as a top-down design within which fans operate. In China, the situation is fundamentally reversed. The openness of underground idol performances often manifests as a bottom-up, sometimes disruptive force. Chinese audiences do not passively fill the gaps left by idols; they actively rewrite the rules and reshape the order.

Against this background, the present study seeks to move beyond simple "imitation theory" and passive "reception aesthetics," shifting the focus from producer creativity to consumer agency. The central argument is that Chinese underground idol performances are not a mere continuation of Japan's "open work" model. Rather, they constitute a form of "creative misreading". Drawing on Michel de Certeau's theory of everyday practices, this study closely examines how Chinese audiences, through dialectal support and embodied practices, achieve the "reterritorialization" of this imported cultural symbol within a local context.

2. From "passive filling" to "active poaching": a shift in theoretical perspective

To truly understand the distinctiveness of Chinese underground idol performances, it is first necessary to clarify the aesthetic role of "incompleteness" within the idol industry. This mechanism is far from a mere technical flaw; it is, in essence, a structured delegation of creative authority. However, the nature of this delegation undergoes a fundamental shift when situated in the divergent cultural contexts of Japan and China.

2.1. Producer-centered "open work"

In his seminal work *The Open Work*, Umberto Eco keenly differentiates between two types of artistic forms: classical works, which pursue a single, determinate ending and resemble closed fortresses that resist modification, and "works in movement", in which the creator deliberately cedes partial control over the composition of elements to performers or audiences [6].

The Japanese idol industry, particularly AKB48 theater performances, exemplifies this theory in practice. Whether through reserving specific time segments in songs for fans to chant slogans (the MIX) or designing spaces that create visual obstructions, this industry adheres to what Eco describes as a "poetics of openness". Yet, it must be emphasized that audience participation in this model is strictly guided by a "poetics of necessity". Every cheer, every gesture from the fans is intended to align with the idol's performance, collectively completing the work and maintaining the integrity of the show [5].

In traditional Japanese idol performances, producers demonstrate masterful use of "negative space". As Kentarō Ogura notes in his analysis of AKB48 theater shows, producers intentionally leave structural gaps in arrangements to create opportunities for audience engagement. AKB48 producer Ayaka Murayama has explicitly stated that when selecting songs, she deliberately chooses tracks with sufficient time in the intro or interlude. This is not random emptiness, but a strategic space that allows fans to precisely insert standardized cheering patterns, commonly referred to as MIX [7]. This practice reveals the bounded nature of authorial delegation: these song segments are not left empty due to creative deficiency; if a song were entirely saturated, fans' scope for individual contribution would be entirely squeezed out. These segments exist as a "negative space" awaiting fan input. Here, authorship flows: idols provide the skeletal structure of the work, while fans inject its lifeblood through their voices. Only in this integration does the performance achieve completeness.

2.2. Consumer-centered "textual poaching"

When this seemingly perfect yet essentially closed structure enters the Chinese context—particularly in markets where strict otaku-style etiquette is absent—a qualitative transformation occurs. The "invitation" in Japan becomes an "incursion" in China. Audiences no longer content themselves with passively filling gaps; they reject performing according to the predetermined script.

Michel de Certeau's concept of "textual poaching", as elaborated in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, provides a penetrating theoretical lens for interpreting this phenomenon. De Certeau argues that readers are never

passive consumers; rather, they resemble nomads, "hunting" within lands that are not their own—that is, within mass-cultural texts. They dissect, recombine, and collage these texts to generate meanings of their own [8].

In Chinese underground idol performances, audiences exemplify this "poaching". Where Japanese shows obsessively pursue "correctness", Chinese fans keenly detect gaps in the idols' technical execution—malfunctioning sound equipment, forgotten lyrics, or pitch deviations. They exploit these gaps to insert localized dialect chants, Internet memes, or playful commentary unrelated to the performance itself.

This practice goes beyond mere participation; it constitutes a substantive "alteration" of the original intent. As Dick Hebdige observed in his study of subcultural style, such practices constitute a "signifying practice", in which subcultural groups, through bricolage, articulate resistance to mainstream order [9]. In Japan, the MIX and call rituals are highly institutionalized, forming a new mainstream paradigm and an etiquette that must be observed. In China, however, this paradigm is precisely the object of resistance and deconstruction. Fans no longer content themselves with reproducing Japanese-style cheering; they insert local dialects or culturally specific subcultural slogans in Mandarin. Far from undermining the original work, this intervention becomes, in a sense, an essential stage in the performance's completion within the Chinese context.

3. Auditory reterritorialization: sonic revolt and reconstruction

The concepts of "deterritorialization" and "reterritorialization" offer particularly powerful explanatory tools in this context [10]. Idol culture, upon crossing from Japan into China, undergoes a process of deterritorialization: it is severed from its native Akihabara otaku context and becomes a floating, rootless cultural symbol. Chinese audiences, however, forcibly anchor this floating symbol within local social reality through the insertion of dialects and localized memes, a process that constitutes reterritorialization. The vibrancy of Chinese underground idol performances emerges precisely from the tension generated during this process of "poaching" and reterritorialization.

Within the sensory structure of idol performances, the auditory dimension serves both as a carrier of information and as a medium of power. While Japanese idol producers predefine empty spaces for audience calls, these gaps are typically subject to strict formal regulation. Fans must use specific Japanese or English lexicon—such as "Tiger", "Fire", "Cyber"—to construct the MIX (Mixed Call). This standardized soundscape is designed to produce a homogeneous "second-dimensional" utopia, suspended above the mundane reality. Yet, when this auditory structure enters Livehouses in Chinese provincial cities, audiences do not meekly emulate the original pattern. Instead, through the forceful intervention of local dialects, they assert a fierce claim over the sonic territory.

3.1. Sonic overwriting: from tacit coordination to subversion

Kentarō Ogura has noted that AKB48 producers deliberately leave temporal gaps in intros or interludes to allow fans to insert the MIX. In the Japanese context, this functions as a tacit "fill-in-the-blank" exercise: the producer sets the parameters, and fans provide the standard answer, collectively maintaining the illusion of professionalism.

In Chinese underground idol performances, however, this "fill-in" transforms into a more subversive form of "overwriting". Consider the underground idol group Blossom in Changchun, Northeast China. Field observations reveal a striking auditory phenomenon: when idols perform songs with a strong Japanese pop style, attempting to evoke a dreamy, sweet Akihabara-like atmosphere, the audience's response is unexpectedly

localized. Fans do not chant the prescribed Japanese MIX—"Tiger, Fire, Cyber…"—but erupt instead with dialect-specific slogans such as: "Changbai Mountain, Ula Grass, the Black-and-White Rivers are treasures…"

This auditory practice is not only a linguistic translation but also a reversal of cultural power. The standard Japanese MIX points to a fictional, deterritorialized second-dimensional world, whereas the Northeast dialect forcibly reanchors this fictional space in a rough, embodied local reality. Here, symbols such as "Changbai Mountain" and "Ula Grass", laden with embodied significance, literally drown out the delicate but alienated Japanese pop industrial signifiers through high-decibel shouts.

As de Certeau's notion of "poaching" suggests, audiences assert sovereignty over a textual domain that is not originally theirs, using sonic revolt. Fans cease to be mere repairers of the original work; they become modifiers. Utilizing the melodic skeleton provided by the idols, they infuse the performance with local flesh and emotion.

3.2. Disenchantment of the sacred: Bakhtinian carnival

This localized reconstruction is often accompanied by a dissolution of the sacred. In Japan, the precision of the MIX signals respect for the idol and sincerity in cheering; it is a solemn ritual. In Chinese "rustic cheering" *(tǔwèi yìngyuán)*, however, accuracy is suspended in favor of a Bakhtinian carnivalesque experience [11]. This experience aims to bring the "sublime" into the material and corporeal realm, undermining the absolute authority of official order through a "playful relativity". In dismantling hierarchical distance, it produces a locally grounded, rough yet vital "idol-fan" collective.

Fans deliberately employ vocal timbres and gestures that clash with the idol's sweet image: coarse voices, exaggerated social dance moves, and various Internet memes, generating a pronounced aesthetic contrast. Importantly, this contrast is not intended to ridicule the idol but to dissolve the distancing inherent in imported "idol worship". By bringing the high-status "imported product" down to the everyday experiential level, Chinese audiences enact a psychological disenchantment. In this moment, idols are no longer untouchable display figures; they become co-present, deconstructable "companions". This auditory disruption, paradoxically, produces a closer emotional bond than mere adulation—a sense of relational intimacy.

4. Embodied spatial politics: bodily collision and the remaking of community

If the auditory dimension reconstructs the text through sonic poaching, the spatial dimension enacts a physical remapping of power relations between performers and audiences. Unlike mainstream concerts, where audience members consume performances atomistically—waving identical glow sticks while maintaining safe distances—underground idol performances rely on "incompleteness", requiring high-intensity bodily engagement to complete the performance.

4.1. From "obstructed gaze" to "forced visibility"

The renowned "two pillars" *(Nihon-bashira)* in the AKB48 theater have been described as a device of "necessary poetics" [5]. Physically, these massive pillars obstruct the audience's line of sight, preventing an omniscient perspective and limiting the fan's ability to capture the idol's gaze, which occurs only incidentally (Resu/Response). Objectively, this design preserves the idol's aura of mystery and scarcity, situating the audience's body in a constrained, static state of waiting.

By contrast, Livehouse spaces across China present an entirely different spatial dynamic. The absence of fixed seating, low stages, and narrow confines dissolves the previously clear "fourth wall". In such high-density physical spaces, visual obstruction disappears, replaced by unavoidable bodily collisions.

In this context, the bodily presence of Chinese audiences is no longer passive observation but intense intervention. High-intensity physical performance compels idols to respond in real time. Whereas AKB48 theater audiences await accidental visual contact or indulgent acknowledgment from idols, Chinese Livehouse audiences "force" the idols to see them through their restless bodily engagement. This interaction transforms unidirectional "spectating" into a bidirectional "negotiation", where performers continuously adjust their state to match the potential energy of the crowd.

4.2. The "de-atomized" ensemble: connection through vulnerability

Proximity in these spaces prevents idols from maintaining the mystique afforded by arena concerts. The embodied immediacy of the audience supplants the mediated, virtual experience typical of mass performances. In this environment, eye contact is no longer a gift granted by chance; it is an interaction that must be continuously produced and distributed within the performance structure. Such gaze-based interaction is central to the charm of underground idol theater, rendering each performance unique and unrepeatable for every individual audience member [12].

Within these compressed, high-intensity sensory environments, a temporary "de-atomized" community emerges. In modern society, consumption is typically atomized, yet underground idol performances demand collective participation to achieve completion. When idols confront technical failures, memory lapses, or physical exhaustion, the audience's collective singing, chanting, or verbal encouragement becomes essential for sustaining the performance.

At these moments, the audience's ontological status undergoes a radical transformation: they are no longer mere consumers but "co-performers". This cooperative relationship is built on shared vulnerability—the idols expose their imperfections, and fans, by accepting and repairing these flaws, gain a deeper sense of existential affirmation than mere consumption could provide. Social bonds established through this dynamic of "deficit and repair" offer urban youth in the atomized modern era a rare and tangible experience of belonging.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the aesthetic variations and mechanisms of reconstruction that emerge as Japanese underground idol culture localizes in China. Previous scholarship has often framed this phenomenon either as a straightforward extension of Japan's "open work" model or as mere cultural imitation. Through a theoretical lens of "creative misreading" and "reterritorialization", combined with empirical observation of Chinese underground idol performances, this study arrives at a markedly different conclusion: the Chinese underground idol scene is not a simple replication of the Japanese model but rather a localized cultural practice driven by audience agency.

At the theoretical level, this research revises Kentarō Ogura's producer-centered perspective on "open works". While the Japanese idol industry indeed designs "incompleteness" to summon fan participation, in the Chinese context, audience intervention goes beyond mere "fill-in" contributions, evolving into active "modification". Chinese audiences exploit technical gaps and structural incompleteness in idol performances, using local dialect soundscapes and other interventions to assert discursive authority over the live event. This interaction transforms passive cultural consumption into active subcultural production, achieving a form of "reterritorialization" in which foreign cultural symbols are anchored within local social realities.

At the practical level, this approach—operating in marginal spaces with scarce capital, exposing vulnerabilities, and yielding creative authority—fosters highly sticky communities. It offers new insights into the survival strategies of contemporary youth subcultures. In an era where mainstream cultural industries

pursue perfection and zero flaws, the "roughness" of underground idol performances paradoxically provides a refuge of authenticity. This study demonstrates that in atomized social structures, the most resilient emotional communities emerge precisely from imperfect, mutually reparative relationships.

Despite illuminating the unique aesthetic politics of the Chinese underground idol scene, the explanatory scope of this study has defined boundaries. The "co-performer" model proposed here primarily applies to idol groups emphasizing interactivity and developmental attributes, especially those surviving as "underground" entities. For groups that prioritize musical professionalism or strictly discourage excessive audience intervention—the Gakkyoku-ha style—or for top-tier Shanghai-based groups adhering closely to Japanese orthodox practices, the theories of "misreading" and "carnivalization" may not fully apply. Additionally, the data relied predominantly on in-person, participatory observation, focusing on offline, embodied presence. As digital media increasingly mediates idol–fan interactions, the forms and significance of this "contact aesthetics" in virtual live streams or metaverse spaces remain underexplored.

Future research could further investigate the dynamic evolution of this subcultural form. Of particular interest is whether grassroots, localized practices will be co-opted by mainstream commercial capital—for example, whether authorities might actively incorporate "dialect-based cheering" as a marketing tool, thereby creating new disciplinary structures. Cross-regional comparative studies—examining differences between cities such as Chengdu, Guangzhou, and Shanghai—would also help to map the contours of Chinese youth subculture more precisely.

In sum, the Chinese underground idol scene, amid its noise and chaos, presents an artistic response to the question of "how humans co-exist with others". Beyond the polished industrial product, it is the rough, incomplete gaps that accommodate the most authentic emotional projections and forms of identity in contemporary life.

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