

Cultural Tourism Through Girl Idol Groups: A Case Study of BNK48 and CGM48 in Thailand

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The idol group AKB48 was established in Akihabara, Tokyo, in 2005, introducing a distinctive business model characterized by the recruitment of amateur girl performers, comprehensive training programs, and the transformation of imperfections into perfections, offering fans the opportunity to witness and support the idols' growth. The group's innovative approach, involving close fan interactions through performances and handshake events, has led to an unparalleled cultural phenomenon.¹

When discussing the AKB48 cultural phenomenon, attention often gravitates toward the extensive membership and numerous Japanese and international teams. AKB48 sister groups have flourished across Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, and Malaysia. Overseas sister groups typically perform translated versions of Japanese songs. However, when performed by different Japanese and overseas sister groups, many AKB48 tracks exhibit unique styles and narratives. Moreover, several sister groups have ventured into creating original compositions. Among the sister groups, BNK48 in Bangkok and CGM48 in Chiang Mai have garnered particular acclaim for their performances,² and as prominent

figures in Thailand's idol culture scene, they have become a part of Thai cultural identity. Thai historian Dome Kraipakorn highlights a pivotal factor contributing to BNK48's success: the fusion of Thai cultural elements with Japanese influences that presents BNK48 as a distinctly Thai group with a touch of Japanese aesthetics, thereby offering a fresh perspective within the Thai music landscape.³

Yang Hui and Yu Zhang, who research youth tourism in China, aptly emphasize that idol culture represents a unique cultural phenomenon revolving around idol support. After originating in Japan, idol culture flourished in Korea, where it has exerted a significant influence on tourism development. Hui and Zhang primarily examine how Korean idol culture influences Chinese travelers' choice of Korea as a travel destination. They used a Likert 5-point scale to measure respondents' motivations.⁴ The research found that the motivation to travel and to encounter "idols" influenced by Korean dramas were strong factors, with average values exceeding 3.70, indicating that travel motivation is deeply influenced by idol culture.⁵

1 Galbraith and Karlin, *AKB48*, p. 56.

2 Lin, "Book Review: BNK48," p. 2.

3 Kraipakorn, "BNK 48 a Thai-Japanese Cultural Commodity," p. 140.

4 The Likert 5-point scale is a commonly used psychometric scale in surveys and questionnaires to measure attitudes, opinions, or perceptions.

Cultural tourism has garnered considerable attention in the academic world. In the latter part of the 1970s, recognition by tourism marketers and scholars delineated a discernible cohort of travelers who embarked on voyages with the explicit purpose of delving deep into the culture or legacy of a given destination.⁶ Consequently, cultural tourism is construed as furnishing a distinctive or enriching encounter for both the traveler and the indigenous community accommodating the visitor.⁷

However, a noticeable gap persists in scholarly dialogue regarding the implications of cultural tourism linked to girl groups. Research often overlooks the specific cohort of “fan tourists” and idol pilgrimage tours, as highlighted in one recent study.⁸ Other existing studies have primarily focused on how celebrities influence the experiences of traditional tourists, neglecting fans who embark on journeys to follow their idols. This article endeavors to fill this void by examining how the music videos and cultural products of BNK48 and CGM48 express a robust sense of Thainess, shedding light on the overlooked intersection between cultural tourism and idol groups. Specifically, their works showcase elements of both natural heritage—such as rural landscapes, traditional railway routes, and scenic provinces—and intangible heritage, including local festivals, dialects, crafts, and culinary culture. A notable example is the use of railway travel as a narrative motif in several music videos and promotional content. These depictions evoke nostalgia while simultaneously promoting slow tourism and regional exploration, aligning with national tourism strategies that emphasize sustainability and local identity.

Functioning as cultural ambassadors, these idols serve not only as entertainers but also as mediators of Thai heritage. Through their performances and localized content, they present Thailand’s diverse cultural and natural assets to both domestic and global audiences. In doing so, they actively contribute to Thailand’s soft power, positioning the nation as culturally rich, creative, and globally relevant. Their influence bolsters cultural tourism and elevates Thailand’s image on the

international stage, illustrating how popular media and youth culture can operate as effective tools of cultural diplomacy.

Cultural Tourism: Soft Power, Cool Japan, *Kawaii* Culture, and AKB48

Cultural tourism is widely recognized in academic discourse as a form of special interest tourism. Greg Richards and Julie Wilson describe its evolution toward creative participation, where tourists actively engage in cultural production, whereas Melanie Kay Smith and Anya Diekmann emphasize a holistic approach to cultural tourism, incorporating the arts, different forms of heritage—including tangible, intangible, natural, and built—as well as the cultural expressions of indigenous and local communities, with a strong focus on sustainability and community wellbeing.⁹ Cultural elements serve as the cornerstone for either enticing tourists or incentivizing individuals to embark on journeys.¹⁰ In Japan’s case, the use of culture and media as a form of soft power is not a recent development. Efforts to shape the nation’s international image through cultural and communicative means can be traced back to the 1920s and 1930s, during a period when Japan sought to position itself as an imperial and colonial power on par with its Euro-American counterparts.¹¹ Soft power represents a more subtle approach to influencing individuals through the attractiveness of ideas and culture. It involves political strategies such as foreign policy but primarily relies on sharing diverse cultural forms like movies, literature, and games.¹²

In this context, the Japanese government actively supports animation, comic, and game culture through initiatives like “Cool Japan,” enhancing the global promotion of pop culture to boost economic growth and international appeal. This strategy reinforces Japan’s cultural influence and economic standing.¹³ As part of the Cool Japan cultural policy, the Japanese government introduced the “Cute Ambassadors” in 2009. These

5 Hui and Zhang, “Study on the Influence,” p. 30.

6 Tighe, “The Arts/Tourism Partnership.”

7 McKercher and Du Cros, *Cultural Tourism*, p. 1.

8 Tian et al., “Converting Idol,” p. 258.

9 Richards and Wilson, “Developing Creativity,” p. 1220; Goodrich, “Review of *Cultural Tourism in Europe*,” p. 91; Kay Smith and Diekmann, “Tourism and Wellbeing,” p. 9.

10 McKercher and Du Cros, *Cultural Tourism*, p. 4.

11 Iwabuchi, “Pop-Culture Diplomacy in Japan,” p. 420.

12 Agyeiwaah et al., “Cool Japan,” p. 128.

13 Ibid.

three female models represent distinct styles of Japanese youth fashion—the Lolita, Harajuku, and schoolgirl looks—demonstrating how anime and manga have evolved into global symbols of “cool” through the Cool Japan initiative.¹⁴ The proliferation of Japanese popular culture, encapsulated in Cool Japan, has sparked academic interest in phenomena like the endearing *kawaii* style, the popularity of Japanimation, iconic characters such as Pokemon and Hello Kitty, and the appeal of urban centers like Akihabara.¹⁵

Within Akihabara, the schoolgirl image of the “Cute Ambassadors” is embodied by AKB48, the prominent all-girl pop group that has attracted official attention for its innovative content that showcases Japan.¹⁶ The group has drawn fans from around the world to Japan, contributing to the country’s tourism and economy through a thriving idol culture that captivates visitors worldwide.¹⁷ The group’s influence extends well beyond Japan’s borders. In 2014, the most recent year for which reliable industry-wide estimates are available, the idol market was valued at approximately 118.6 billion yen (over 1 billion USD at current exchange rates),¹⁸ highlighting its considerable economic impact. A striking example of this global impact occurred during the 2014 AKB48 General Election, when Chinese fans of the top-ranking member, Watanabe Mayu, collectively raised over 1.8 million yuan (approximately 270,000 USD) to support her campaign. This level of international fan engagement reflects the group’s capacity to mobilize global audiences not only emotionally but also economically.¹⁹ AKB48’s expansion into East and Southeast Asia further demonstrates how Japan leverages idol culture as a tool of soft power, an initiative actively supported by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to enhance the country’s cultural diplomacy across the region.²⁰

Henrik and Sara Linden posit that fans purposefully undertake pilgrimages to revered sites in an endeavor to approach the fundamental essence of their idol.²¹ This inclination arises from the fervor of idol worship,

propelling fans to journey to locations intertwined with their idols to diminish the psychological distance between them, showcasing their affection and dedication—these elements function as primary motivators. Additionally, fans delve into destinations associated with their idols as a result of the promotion of events centered around idols.²²

AKB48 fans demonstrate unwavering support for their idols with this perspective, a sentiment mirrored by fans of BNK48 and CGM48. Initially, BNK48 fans were made up of those who love Japanese idol culture, but BNK48 has now adapted Japanese popular culture to suit the tastes of Thai people.²³ Fans frequently have a fondness for a specific country or region due to the emotional ties they have with places connected to their idols. This phenomenon plays a crucial role in destination promotion and marketing. The practice of fans visiting sites associated with their idols can be viewed as a form of cultural tourism,²⁴ involving pilgrimage to idol-related destinations. Fan tourists with deep emotional connections to idols are not solely driven to visit idol-related locations. More significantly, they exhibit a stronger desire to engage with items associated with their idols.²⁵

The Integration of Japanese and Thai Cultural Elements in BNK48 and CGM48

BNK48 represents a manifestation of cultural hybridization between Japanese and Thai cultural elements. The group’s success and acceptance within the Thai music industry can be attributed to its strategic integration of Thai cultural elements with the Japanese idol format, including the contextualized translation of lyrics for local audiences.

Given BNK48’s foundation in Japanese idol culture, significant Japanese cultural elements are preserved within the group’s operations. A notable example is the symbolism of cherry blossoms (*sakura* 桜), which traditionally represent graduation in Japanese culture. This motif has been prominent in AKB48’s repertoire, beginning with “Sakura no hanabiratachi” 桜の花びらたち (Cherry Blossom Petals) and continuing through

14 Lee, “Sen Wanlizi yu Riben,” p. 158.

15 Yamada, “Review of *Idols and Celebrity in Japanese Media Culture*,” p. 340.

16 Heng, “Beyond ‘Kawaii,’” p. 170.

17 Lin, “Influences of Japanese Idol Agency,” p. 4.

18 Richardson, “Marketing Affect in Japanese Idol Music,” p. 8.

19 Xie, “Amateur Translation and Pop Music Fandom,” p. 83.

20 Yang and Taguchi, “Higashi Ajia,” p. 21.

21 Linden and Linden, *Fans and Fan Cultures*, p. 106.

22 Yen and Croy, “Film Tourism,” p. 1030.

23 Likhitbanthun, “Kan plianplaeng,” pp. 75–76.

24 Zhou et al., “Sustainable Tourism Cities,” p. 17.

25 Yan et al., “Converting Idol Attachment,” p. 781.

“10-nen sakura” 10年桜 (10-Year Sakura), “Sakura no shiori” 桜の栞 (Cherry Blossom Bookmark), and “Sakura no ki ni narō” 桜の木になろう (I Will Turn Into a Cherry Tree). While musical arrangements varied, the thematic focus on farewells and journeys remain consistent. This cultural significance was maintained in BNK48’s “Dàng sakura talòt-pai” ดั่งซากุระตลอดไป (Like Sakura, Forever), an adaptation of AKB48’s “Sakura no ki ni narō,” which was incorporated into their first-generation graduation releases.²⁶ However, BNK48’s interpretation differs in its performance structure—while traditionally, graduating members exclusively occupy the center position during performances, the BNK48 version of “Sakura no ki ni narō” represented a collective first-generation graduation.²⁷ Consequently, BNK48’s performance deliberately omitted a designated center position, symbolically positioning all graduating members as protagonists in their farewell narrative.²⁸

The linguistic hybridization in BNK48 and CGM48’s musical productions demonstrates sophisticated cultural integration. In CGM48’s “Mali” มะลิ (Jasmine), the strategic placement of multilingual elements serves both aesthetic and narrative purposes. The Japanese “Sakitsuzukeyō” 咲き続けよう (“Don’t stop blooming”), sung collectively by CGM48, is followed by the poignant Mueang-language solo line “Ja ya heu dai yang fan” จะยะหือไต้หยังฝั้น (“One day my dreams will come true”) by center position Vitita Srasreesom (Kaning). This deliberate linguistic usage creates a narrative that resonates with both cultures.

The song’s structure exemplifies how Thai idol groups have adapted the Japanese idol narrative tradition while maintaining cultural authenticity. The juxtaposition of Japanese and Thai lyrics, particularly in the context of Kaning’s documented interest in Japanese culture,²⁹ constructs a meta-narrative about Thai youth pursuing

their dreams through cross-cultural engagement. This thematic approach aligns with AKB48’s established tradition of celebrating youth aspirations and academic life, a central theme in Japanese idol culture that emphasizes the pursuit of dreams and personal growth.³⁰

Moreover, the musical composition of CGM48’s “Mali” exemplifies sophisticated cultural hybridization, as noted by Aeh Syndrome, the music director of both CGM48 and BNK48. The arrangement demonstrates a deliberate fusion of Japanese rock elements with traditional Thai musical instruments and narratives. This integration is particularly evident in the production’s creative direction, coordination, creation, and performance aspects, which involved former CGM48 theater manager Izuta Rina 伊豆田莉奈, the group’s sole Japanese member.³¹

The music video’s finale presents a striking visual representation of this cultural synthesis: while the Thai members wear traditional Thai costumes and play traditional Thai instruments, Rina appears in a kimono playing Japanese drums.³² This intentional juxtaposition creates a distinctive pop music aesthetic that combines Chiang Mai’s regional identity with Japanese idol group elements. The production serves as a compelling example of BNK48 and CGM48’s cultural dynamism and successful implementation of cultural hybridization. I will discuss “Mali” further in subsequent sections.

Analyzing the lyrics reveals multiple instances of Japanese-Thai cultural fusion. A notable example is the adaptation of AKB48’s “365 nichi no kamihikōki” 365 日の紙飛行機 (365 Days of Paper Airplanes) where the symbolic reference to folding a thousand paper cranes—a Japanese cultural metaphor for recovery and well-being—was omitted from BNK48’s version of this song (“365 sam roi hok sip ha wan kap krueang bin kratat” วันกับเครื่องบินกระดาษ) due to its limited cultural resonance with Thai audiences. This illustrates how linguistic translation encompasses cultural translation, with modifications made to accommodate local

26 In AKB48 culture, there are members who join at different times, and the first-generation members are typically the most popular and representative of the group. When they leave the group, it is referred to as “graduation.”

27 With the exception of Cherprang Areekul (Cherprang), Ōkubo Miori 大久保美織 (Miori), and Sawitchaya Kajonrunsil (Hanami Sachiya 花見咲知弥 or Satchan), the entire first generation was graduating. Thai people typically use nicknames, which are added in parentheses here. Coincidentally, Cherprang and Miori use their first name as their nicknames; names like Satchan are true nicknames.

28 48 Groups, “Sakura No Hanabiratachi - ความทรงจำและคำอำลา | BNK48 รุ่น 1 #BNK481stGEN_SpecialStage,” YouTube, 16 March 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UnkX62M3LB8>.

29 kaning.cgm48official, “Unlocking the Secrets of Suzume | การผจญภัยของซุซุมะ,” TikTok, 25 April 2023, <https://www.tiktok.com/@kaning.cgm48official/video/7225966615349726470>.

30 Lin, “Wind Band,” pp. 84–88.

31 CGM48, “The Making of 1st Original Song / CGM48,” YouTube, 9 September 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7NUFBoyutNU>.

32 CGM48, “【MV Full】มะลิ / CGM48,” YouTube, 21 March 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmYwCR7XZSM>.

audience comprehension and cultural context while maintaining the essential Japanese elements.³³

Cultural hybridization is also manifested in the groups' visual presentation, particularly in costume design. BNK48's wardrobe demonstrates a sophisticated fusion of Japanese and Thai aesthetic elements, exemplified in the music video for their version of "Koisuru fortune cookie" ("Koisuru fōchun kukki" 恋するフォーチュンクッキー, "kuk-gii siang taai" กุ๊กก็เลี้ยงทนาย). While maintaining the foundational Japanese school uniform concept characteristic of the 48 Group franchise, the costumes incorporate traditional Thai patterns and design elements. There are modifications including adjustments to skirt length and adding more layers to the skirts, creating a culturally contextualized interpretation of cute aesthetics.³⁴

Consequently, from lyrics to costume design, BNK48 and CGM48 represent a deliberate balance between Japanese cultural elements and Thai market considerations. This adaptation serves as a prime example of successful cultural hybridity, propagating Thai culture through the adaptation of a Japanese song.³⁵

The Relationship between Cultural Tourism and Thainess

Thailand is a popular international tourist destination known for its rich cultural heritage. Visitors are drawn to the country's historical sites where they pay homage to Buddha images and explore ancient monuments that exude elegance, reflecting Thailand's ancient civilization. Thai cuisine and cultural activities also leave a lasting impression on tourists. These factors play a crucial role in shaping policies and strategies to promote Thai tourism to international visitors, thereby boosting foreign currency inflow into Thailand.³⁶

In 2019, the Minister of Tourism and Sports in Thailand unveiled "The Second National Tourism Development Plan (2017–2021)," outlining Thailand's tourism vision to position the country as a premier high-quality destination by 2036. This vision emphasizes balanced development and harnessing Thainess to

foster inclusive and sustainable socioeconomic growth.³⁷

Even before the announcement of this plan, the concept of Thainess had already been deeply integrated into state policies and commercialized for tourism. Initiatives like the "Discover Thainess" campaign in 2015 aimed to showcase Thai culture and identity to a global audience. National campaigns promoting the use of traditional Thai dress (*chut thai* ชุดไทย) in daily life have also been launched by the government.³⁸ The promotion of Thainess in the Thai tourism industry has long been established, encompassing various aspects of Thai culture.

The essence of Thainess goes beyond surface appearances and it involves embodying different facets of Thai culture. The local Thai population embodies this cultural identity naturally, while tourists gradually adopt aspects of it during their visits. This concept implies that activities like sifting rice, working with water buffaloes in the fields, or learning traditional Thai dances contribute to an authentic tourist experience.³⁹ For the development of the tourism industry, Thailand has launched various tourism promotional campaigns for domestic and international markets, such as "Amazing Thailand," "Discover Thainess," "Unseen Thailand," and "Thailand Grand Invitation," continuously showcasing the beauty, hospitality, and culture of Thailand to the world.⁴⁰

The following analysis delves into how BNK48 and CGM48 leverage nature heritage and intangible heritage, as well as railway travel, with idols serving as cultural ambassadors and contributing to Thailand's soft power to effectively showcase Thainess. Their cultural initiatives seamlessly support the advancement of cultural tourism in Thailand, embodying the essence of promoting the country's distinctiveness, culture, and heritage to visitors. This aligns perfectly with promoting the value of Thainess and nurturing a deeper appreciation for Thai cultural identity among tourists.⁴¹

33 Tantipimolphan, "BNK48 and Its Cultural Translation," p. 15.

34 Ibid., pp. 22–23.

35 Kraipakorn, "BNK 48 wathanatham," p. 96.

36 Rattarasarn et al., "Thatsanakhati," p. 29.

37 Ministry of Tourism and Sports, "The Second National Tourism Development Plan," p. 13.

38 Pookaiyaudom and Tan, "The Buppaesanniwas Phenomenon," p. 508.

39 Jocuns, "Aroi Mai," p. 8.

40 Fakfare et al., "Thailand Tourism: A Systematic Review," p. 189.

41 Ministry of Tourism and Sports, "The Second National Tourism Development Plan," p. 13.

Nature Heritage and Intangible Heritage

CGM48's 10th single, "Dai (Daai) Mai" ได้(ด้าย)ไหม (Can I Get (Yarn)),⁴² marks a thoughtful and mature return to the group's cultural roots. While their earlier original songs, "Mali" and "2565," incorporated symbolic representations of northern Thai culture such as silk weaving, Lanna ล้านนา dance (the traditional dances of the Lanna kingdom of the thirteenth to eighteenth century), and temple rituals, "Dai (Daai) Mai" takes these elements further by embedding them more deeply into the rhythms of daily community life. The music itself also reflects this commitment, featuring traditional northern instruments that enrich its cultural texture. Although "Mali" and "2565" shared similar motifs, "Dai (Daai) Mai" distinguishes itself through authenticity and process.⁴³

Rather than staging culture as visual decoration, the music video presents it as lived experience. The members engaged in hands-on learning with local artisans, most notably under the guidance of Thailand's National Artist in performing arts, Buariao Rattanamaneeponn. Her mentorship ensured that every movement from the precision of hand gestures to the softness of eye contact faithfully captured the spirit of Lanna dance. As a result, the video transcends surface-level beauty, offering cultural depth and standing as a vivid example of Thai soft power in action.⁴⁴

Filmed in authentic northern Thai locations, using natural light and soft green traditional attire, the video radiates calmness, sincerity, and reverence for heritage. In this work, culture is not a backdrop—it is the heart of the story. On the day of its release, a fan wrote on the BNK48 and CGM48 Facebook fan page: "This is CGM48. This is the northern idol group we love." For fans, this is more than just a music video, it is a quiet, graceful act of cultural preservation and continuity.⁴⁵

42 In Thai, *daai* ด้าย means 'yarn' or 'thread,' but in the CGM48 song, it's a playful twist on dai 'ได้' meaning 'can.' The phrase 'Can I Get (Yarn)?' is a creative pun that blends a sweet request ('Can I?') with a cute, humorous tone—as if asking for yarn. It also ties into the group's storyline, where members are involved in weaving and crafts, making the wordplay even more meaningful.

43 CGM48, "[FULL MV] ได้(ด้าย)ไหม / CGM48 / CGM48," YouTube, 22 November 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nWPeawAIMlo>.

44 OTA Story : รันนิ่มมอบบทกวี, "CGM48 returns to their roots in the song 'Dai (Daai) Mai'," Facebook, 22 November 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=1381299636773889&set=a.713212586915934>.

CGM48's debut single is based on a Japanese original titled "Max toki 315-gō" Max と き 315号 (The Max Toki No. 315 Bullet Train) and performed by NGT48 (Niigata 48). In CGM48's version, the image evoked by the Japanese bullet train was reimagined as "Chiang Mai 106" ชียงใหม่ 106 to pay tribute to Highway 106, also known as the "Rubber Tree Road," connecting Chiang Mai and Lamphun in northern Thailand. The music video highlights various historical and cultural tourist attractions in Chiang Mai, such as Tha Phae Gate ประตูท่าแพ, Huay Tueng Thao Reservoir อ่างเก็บน้ำห้วยตึงแต้, and Chiang Mai Chinatown (see figure 1).⁴⁶ The members of the group are dressed in garments crafted from local fabrics with distinctive colors and patterns, complemented by accessories that reflect the ethnic groups residing in Chiang Mai, including the Tai Yai ไท



Figure 1. Tha Phae Gate, the filming location for "Chiang Mai 106." Photo by author, August 2023, Chiang Mai.

45 Ibid.

46 CGM48, "[MV Full] Chiang Mai 106 / CGM48," YouTube, 9 February 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WrwVUUpzkOI>.

ใหญ่, Tai Yuan ไทยวน, Tai Lue ไทลื้อ, and Chinese communities. These outfits are set against the backdrop of renowned tourist sites, communities, or significant commercial areas.⁴⁷

Of CGM48's original works, "Mali" and "2565" are the two most noteworthy songs. Both of these works feature northern Thai culture, showcasing the unique charm of the region. The naming of "Mali," as CGM48's first original piece, reflects meticulous planning. Izuta, the group's Japanese member, explains that the song title "Mali" means jasmine flower, chosen because jasmine is fresh and lovely, qualities that CGM48 members also embody.⁴⁸ She emphasizes that this song represents Chiang Mai and serves as CGM48's flagship piece. Therefore, both the lyrics and the production of the music video were carefully crafted to showcase the essence of Chiang Mai.

In the music video, we see the members dressed in traditional Thai attire, particularly the long skirt (*pha sin teen jok* ผ้าซิ่นตีนจก), performing northern Thai Lanna dance and singing northern Thai lyrics (see table 1).

Notably, some scenes in the "Mali" video were shot outside the Lanna Museum in Chiang Mai,⁴⁹ illustrating the production team's dedication to presenting local Thai culture. The use of these elements is not merely for visual aesthetics but also to emphasize the presence of Thai cultural elements in the work. Through this approach, CGM48 successfully intertwines modern pop music with traditional Thai culture, creating a unique piece that appeals to fans while embodying local

characteristics.⁵⁰ This emphasis on and clever use of local culture not only makes "Mali" CGM48's flagship piece but also injects new vitality into Thai pop music, demonstrating the potential of idol groups in cultural heritage and innovation (figure 2).



Figure 2. One of the filming locations for "Mali" is the Chiang Mai City Arts and Cultural Centre. Photo by author, August 2023, Chiang Mai.

The success of the CGM48 team can be attributed to their adeptness in crafting narratives and the visual representation of their members.⁵¹ This expertise is also evident in their original song, "2565." The number "2565" symbolizes the height of Chiang Mai's highest mountain peak, Doi Inthanon, Thailand's tallest mountain and a renowned tourist spot, which rises to 2,565

Table 1: A list of phrases from the northern Thai Mueang language sung in CGM48's "Mali."

Romanization	Thai	English translation
<i>man yak tae man yak wa ya dai</i>	มันยากแต่ มันยากว่าयेใด	It is so difficult, how difficult it is indeed
<i>aod auao noe haem noi ner</i>	อดเอาเนอ แหมน้อยเนอ	Please be patient, just a little bit more
<i>tong sue ner ya tor</i>	ต้องสู้เนอ อย่าท้อ	You must keep fighting, do not give up
<i>ba jai kae mong do hean hoo lae tang jai</i>	บะใจแคะมองดู เขียนฮู้และตั้งใจ	Not just watching, but learning, understanding, and being determined
<i>ba maen sak tao dai kae roa</i>	บะเมินลักเต้าไต่แคะรอ	Would not ignore it at all, just waiting
<i>ja ya hue dai yang fan</i>	จะเยหือไต่อย่างฝัน	I will make it happen as dreamed

47 Thipa, "Khvam pen Thai," p. 26.

48 Anteros_Penguin, "3rd single Mali," We love CGM48, 1 May 2021, <https://welovecgm48.wordpress.com/>.

49 CGM48. "[MV Full] มะลิ / CGM48."

50 Kraipakorn, "BNK 48 a Thai-Japanese Cultural Commodity," p. 140.

51 Chalayonnavin, "BNK48: Factors Affecting," pp. 16-17.

meters (figure 3). The music video for this song skillfully incorporates various aspects of northern Thai culture. The members are adorned in traditional northern Thai ethnic attire, playing traditional northern Thai musical instruments, and even showcasing traditional northern Thai games. These elements not only enhance the visual appeal but also authentically highlight local cultural characteristics. In addition to featuring the local Mueang language, the music video presents a rich tapestry of northern Thai cultural elements. Furthermore, the video was released in 2022, which aligns with the Thai Buddhist calendar year of 2565.⁵²



Figure 3. The highest point in Thailand, Doi Inthanon, stands at an elevation of 2,565 meters. Photo by author, August 2023, Chiang Mai.

Vicki Ann Ware has pointed out that while not mandatory, the primary element in imbuing fusion music with a sense of Thainess is the integration of melodic Thai instruments, which is evident in the “2565” music video.⁵³ The introduction begins with the melody of the *hulusi* ซลุซึ, the traditional Thai flute, accompanied by members attired in traditional garments. These elements showcase the aesthetics of northern Thai culture to a global audience.⁵⁴

Moreover, the production team intentionally chose Manichar Aimdilokwong (Marmink), known as a “mountain girl,” to lead the production and take the central position. Marmink’s commitment to nature and

her vegetarian lifestyle on “Senpai” programs (a documentary series showing the journey of CGM48’s first-generation members from audition to debut) played a significant role in her selection for a piece highlighting Chiang Mai’s forest, contributing to cultural and tourism promotion.⁵⁵

The promotion of Chiang Mai tourist attractions in CGM48’s music appears to be a response to government policies. By the late 1980s, the Thai government began promoting local tourism in the Chiang Mai region and other northern areas. During this time, both national and international tourism agencies began incorporating tours that include visits to ethnic minority groups in their tour packages.⁵⁶ The incorporation of local elements in this song not only meets the expectations of local and international fans but also plays a vital role in promoting tourism in Chiang Mai. Through this song, international fans gain a deeper insight into Chiang Mai, thereby boosting the region’s global reputation. The song “2565” effectively merges music, culture, and tourism components, highlighting not only CGM48’s musical prowess but also contributing to the promotion of Thai culture and tourism. This diverse creative approach has paved the way for new opportunities for idol groups in the cultural tourism domain.

Similar to CGM48, BNK48 have also introduced another aspect of intangible heritage through two music videos, namely in their version of “Kimi wa melody” (“*thex khux...mee-loo-dii*” เธอคือ...เมโลดี้ [You are a melody]) and in “Jabaja” จาบาจา (Everywhere).⁵⁷ The group members wear traditional attire inspired by the Thai royal family, particularly the “Siam Lolita” costumes reminiscent of the aristocracy during the Rama V รัชกาลที่ห้า era (1853–1910), as well as palace dolls.⁵⁸ The costumes, which blend Thai tradition with idol aesthetics, mark the first Thai-adapted outfits for BNK48 that are tailored to embody the idol aesthetic.⁵⁹ The stylists carefully designed these costumes to incorporate Thai elements, focusing on beauty, cuteness, and comfort for the members. The costumes account for the individual’s

52 Selangor and KL Orchestra and Choir, “Tiup! The Idol 48 Concert.”

53 Ware, “The Maintenance,” p. 91.

54 CGM48, “[MV] 2565 / CGM48,” YouTube, 24 December 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lig4-YucAbo>.

55 CGM48, “CGM48 SENPAI EP8,” YouTube, 2 October 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uA8Zck_4mvl.

56 Husa, “The ‘Souvenirization’ and ‘Touristification,’” p. 283.

57 BNK48, “[MV Full] Jabaja / BNK48,” YouTube, 5 July 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WvRlFGZnu1E>.

58 BNK48, “[MV Full] Kimi wa melody / BNK48,” YouTube, 15 September 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iByxlvVwrrwandlist=RDIByxlvVwrrwandstart_radio=1.

59 Thipa, “Khwan pen Thai,” p. 24.

hairstyle, facial features, skin tone, body proportions, and how well the attire complements the music video set. The main goal is to ensure that the costumes enhance the scene without overshadowing it.⁶⁰ They aim to combine cuteness and brightness akin to palace dolls.⁶¹

Dome Kraipakorn states that in “Kimi wa melody,” the use of “Siam Lolita” is a reflection of the underlying intention of using narratives or artifacts from the past as a marketing strategy to evoke nostalgic images in consumers’ minds.⁶² Therefore, the Thainess depicted in the song and its accompanying video aims to convey the cultural memory associated with Thailand’s prosperity and progress that has been crafted and communicated through various media channels (figure 4).⁶³



Figure 4. In the promotional images for their version of “Kimi wa melody” the BNK48 members wear “Siam Lolita” costumes. 2018. <https://www.sanook.com/music/2401573/>.

Another example of this cultural blend is evident in the music video “Jabaja,” in which BNK48 embarked on a tour across Thailand, garnering positive attention from numerous fans. Consequently, the management

team conceived a plan to reciprocate the nationwide fan support by incorporating elements from all four regions of Thailand in the video. This included showcasing traditional dances, activities, attire, and distinctive characteristics unique to each region.⁶⁴ The group’s sixteen members were split into smaller units, each representing different regions, effectively capturing the essence of every area.⁶⁵

In the north, the *forn* ฟ้อน dances highlight specific dialects, cuisine, attire, and music of the region. The south showcases *nora* โนรา dances, drawing cultural similarities with Malaysia and Indonesia through shadow plays like *nang talung* หนังตะลุง (a type of traditional shadow puppetry; see figure 5) and costumes resembling the Southeast Asian kebaya, a traditional blouse worn with a sarong or batik skirt. The northeast features *serng* เซิ้ง dances, reflecting cultural connections with Laos. Central Thailand presents *ram* รำ and *rabam* ระบำ dances with performers wearing traditional Thai ear decorations and modern adaptations of local traditional clothing.⁶⁶

Throughout the performances, traditional Thai children’s games are incorporated, adding a playful touch to the cultural representation of each region. The music video thus serves as a rich tapestry of Thai culture, embodying the essence of Thainess. One such game featured is “To Be Trapped Between the Arches” (*ree ree khao sarn* รีรีข้าวสาร), in which players try to pass under an archway formed by their opponent’s arms without being trapped. This traditional game adds another layer of cultural authenticity to the visual narrative, connecting viewers to Thailand’s rich heritage of childhood play.⁶⁷ While traditional games like these may not be as prevalent among children today, watching the video evokes a nostalgic journey through time. The group has masterfully integrated Thai cultural elements into their music, offering both Thai and international audiences an authentic appreciation of Thai culture without exaggeration, a rare gem in today’s global landscape.⁶⁸

60 Sam Ponsan, “Exclusive: เผยเบื้องหลังชุด ‘Siam Lolita’ ในเพลง Kimi wa melody ของ BNK48 ทำไมต้องชุดไทยประยุกต์ในยุค ร.5 [Exclusive: Revealing the Behind-the-scenes of the “Siam Lolita” Costume in BNK48’s Song “Kimi wa melody”], Mango Zore, 4 October 2018, https://www.mangozero.com/behind-the-scene-siam-lolita-bnk48/#google_vignette.

61 Sripoonphan, “Kan sue san khwam,” p. 54.

62 As historian Raphael Samuel points out, nostalgia possesses a dialectical nature, serving as a resource that provides historical continuity and identity for marginalized groups. He calls for the restoration of the rich historical value in past stories, which also gives current social groups the opportunity to revive and repurpose their historical heritage. See Calonge Reillo, “Reseña de ‘Theatres of Memory.’”

63 Kraipakorn, “BNK 48 wathanatham,” p. 89.

64 Sripoonphan, “Kan sue san khwam,” p. 62.

65 TrueID, “สาระมาทางนี้ ! รู้จักวัฒนธรรมไทย 4 ภาค ใน MV Jabaja ของ BNK48” [Getting to Know the 4 Regions of Thai Culture in the MV “Jabaja” by BNK48], 13 July 2019, <https://travel.trueid.net/detail/RWLPD1owXevW>.

66 BNK48, “[MV Full] Kimi wa melody / BNK48.”

67 Siriyakorn, “Thai Children’s Games,” 18 January 2017, <https://siriyakorn605.wordpress.com/2017/01/18/thai-childrens-games/>.

68 TrueID, “Getting to Know.”



Figure 5. In snapshots from the music video “Jabaja,” Jiradapa Intajak (Pupe) and Natticha Chantaravareelekha (Fond) perform a shadow play (*nang talung*). 2019. TruelD, “Getting to Know.”

The theme song “Dode di dong”⁶⁹ โดดดิตัง from the 2020 comedy “Thibaan × BNK48” directed by Surasak Pongson and Thiti Srinual, exemplifies a fusion of northeastern Thai elements with Japanese idol melodies that deeply resonates with local audiences. BNK48’s tracks “Dode ding dong” and “Jak jai poo sao khon nee” จากใจผู้สาวคนนี้ (From This Girl’s Heart) blend the Isan อีสาน language of northeastern Thailand, Japanese pop music, and *mor lam* หมอลำ rhythms (a traditional music genre of the local Isan and Lao populations), appealing to fans through cultural fusion. The music videos, and in particular “Jak jai poo sao khon nee” that was filmed in Bangkok, effectively combine cultural elements from both regions to captivate urban viewers (figure 6).⁷⁰



Figure 6. Photos from the music video “Dode di dong.” 2021. <https://overseasidol.com/bnk48-dode-di-dong-masuk-daftar-lagu-paling-populer-di-youtube-thailand-tahun-2020/>.

69 The title “Dode di dong” does not have a specific literal meaning in Thai but is an onomatopoeic phrase representing a playful, catchy sound.

70 Nakon, “Kan phasom phasan,” p. 152.

The success of “Dode di dong” is evident through its YouTube viewership data. Despite BNK48’s official channel having only two million subscribers, the music video for this song has amassed a staggering two hundred million views, surpassing the channel’s subscriber count by a factor of one hundred.⁷¹ To put this achievement in context, we can compare it with AKB48’s hit video, the original Japanese version of “Koisuru Fortune Cookie.” Over a decade on YouTube, the latter has garnered three hundred million views. Remarkably, “Dode di dong” achieved two hundred million views in just three years, underscoring the significance and popularity of this original piece.⁷²

This phenomenon aligns closely with the understanding of Dome Kraipakorn, an expert on BNK48 culture, who highlights that BNK48’s popularity arises from their approach in integrating local language and content with Japanese music and visual elements, successfully appealing to diverse Thai audiences.⁷³ Piyachai Nakon further uses the song “Dode di dong” as an example, reemphasizing that the story is set in the Isan region of northeastern Thailand and incorporates the Isan language in its music, showcasing BNK48’s efforts to connect with local folk culture and expand their fan base.⁷⁴

Railway Travel: CGM48 and BNK48

BNK48 and CGM48 have sometimes followed some of the Thai government’s tourism policies to create cultural goods. In 2016, the government’s initiative to promote tourism through rail travel in the “Tourism on the Cultural Railway Line, Lampang, Chiang Mai” project has been a collaborative effort. This initiative is in line with governmental strategies to enhance both domestic and international tourism, supporting the development of tourism facilities and attractions. The cultural railway traverses numerous historical and natural tourist sites. Thailand’s tourism agencies have made efforts to broaden the tourism market, focusing on enhancing the quality and variety of products and services within the cultural railway tourism sector.⁷⁵ This

71 BNK48, “[MV Full] โดดดิตัง Ost. ไทบ้าน × BNK48 จากใจผู้สาวคนนี้” / BNK48, YouTube, 15 January 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ek8itihPQgE>.

72 Lin, “Wind Band,” p. 97.

73 Kraipakorn, “BNK 48 a Thai-Japanese Cultural Commodity,” p. 140.

74 Nakon, “Kan phasom phasan,” p. 151.

mirrors the increasing popularity of Thai-style cultural tourism by train.⁷⁶

CGM48's music video "Love Trip" (2024) unfolds the story of a girl from Khon Kaen taking a train journey to Chiang Mai, featuring various locations along the cultural railway recommended by the Thai government. One notable scene showcases the Chomphu Bridge สะพานขาวทาชมภู, also known as the White Bridge, offering a picturesque view as the train traverses the intricate mountain range, signaling its imminent arrival in Chiang Mai.⁷⁷ Additionally, a scene featuring Penpichaya Boonsaner (Nana) at Chiang Mai Station provides a special glimpse into this historical landmark with its over one hundred years of heritage. The music video narrative commences at the train station, explores Chiang Mai, and culminates in falling in love with the city.⁷⁸ This narrative echoes the renewed interest in preserving Lanna heritage sparked by the Bangkok–Chiang Mai railway route, which embodies a fusion of indigenous, Hindu, Buddhist, and Chinese traditions and culture.⁷⁹

BNK48's music video "High Tension" concludes with BNK48 members showcasing their dance moves at Hua Lamphong Railway Station, also recognized as Bangkok's central station (figure 7).⁸⁰ At more than one hundred years old, this station stands as a significant landmark in Bangkok and serves as an excellent starting point for delving into the history of the northern region.⁸¹ This train tourism invites domestic and international tourists to immerse themselves in the enchanting allure of tourism by experiencing a scenic train journey and exploring cultural facets at various stops.⁸² This portrayal resonates with the Thai government's railway tourism directives. Moreover, BNK48's dance performance at the station underscores its pivotal role in championing Thai culture. Hua Lamphong has evolved beyond its original function as a transit hub to become a remarkable architectural gem, a hospitable



Figure 7. BNK48 filmed the music video for "High Tension" inside Hua Lamphong Railway Station. 2020. <https://pantip.com/topic/39570359>.

haven for those pursuing opportunities in the city, a living embodiment of Thai life, and a symbol of aspirations and metamorphosis.⁸³

Idols Serving as Cultural Ambassadors

In the CGM48 program "#CGM48PopUpLiveOnTour," a segment was dedicated to showcasing tourist attractions in Chiang Mai, with each member personally selecting a spot to present to the audience.⁸⁴ The direct accounts of these places from the idols, as well as insights into their visited locations, captured the

75 Jullasikkee, "Thainess Tourism by Cultural Railway Route," p. 88.

76 *Ibid.*, pp. 87–80.

77 *Ibid.*, p. 92.

78 CGM48, "[FULL MV] Love Trip / CGM48," YouTube, 19 May 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6O2ZGJWHQ3w>.

79 Sattayanurak, "Connectivity and Conservation," p. 1273.

80 BNK48, "[MV Full] High Tension / BNK48," YouTube, 23 February 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_jmHOW6X4Vo.

81 Thomas Bird, "Tracks in time." *South China Morning Post*, 17 July 2020, https://scmp_epaper-pressreader-com.lingnan.idm.oclc.org/south-china-morning-post-6150/20220717/page/21.

82 Jullasikkee, "Thainess Tourism by Cultural Railway Route," p. 93.

83 Pattamon Sukprasert, "Happy 100th Birthday Hua Lamphong," *Bangkok Post*, 20 June 2016, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/life/social-and-lifestyle/1014873/happy-100th-birthday-hua-lamphong>.

84 CGM48, "#CGM48PopUpLiveOnTour ให้ทุกคนได้ไปเที่ยวชมสถานที่ต่าง ๆ กับน้อง ๆ CGM48" [#CGM48PopUpLiveOnTour Let everyone go visit various places with the CGM48 kids], YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL8aEdSGJXUml0sF6uCwWVLEh1VtvJbel>.

curiosity of fans. Some segments featuring tourist spots were prerecorded but streamed live on YouTube, offering a sense of real-time engagement. In CGM48's live streams, a chatroom facilitates communication between overseas fans and Thai fans in English. On occasion, Thai fans play the role of cultural ambassadors, sharing information about tourist spots visited by CGM48 members or providing translations for Thai conversations on the show. It can be inferred that the fans' perception of Thailand is to a certain extent influenced through their interactions with the idol group and fellow Thai fans.

This type of travel program showcasing Thailand's attractions was already introduced by BNK48 in 2021 through the live broadcast of "BNK48 ON TOUR." At that time, during the pandemic, BNK48 utilized the program to promote their group and offer a unique idol perspective on introducing tourist spots in Thailand to their fans.⁸⁵

Similarly when, in 2024, CGM48 unveiled the single "Love Trip," the members engaged with international tourists on the streets of Chiang Mai during the promotional campaign of the song, sharing insights about the city's attractions and inquiring about the visitors' reasons for choosing Chiang Mai as their destination. It seemed as though the members had transitioned into ambassadors for Chiang Mai tourism.⁸⁶ Additionally, they hosted a program on TikTok called "cgm48_25districts," which not only served as a promotion for "Love Trip" but also allowed each member to offer their unique perspective on introducing Chiang Mai to fans.⁸⁷

Both BNK48 and CGM48 have many music videos that simply showcase places in Bangkok or Chiang Mai. For example, in CGM48's "Yume wa nigenai" 夢は逃げない ("Ja mai nee jak khwam fan" จะไม่หนีจากความฝัน [We Won't Escape from our Dreams]), locations like Mae Kha Canal คลองแม่ข่า, the artist village Baan Kang Wat, as well as Rubber Tree Road (Highway 106) are featured.⁸⁸ Similarly, BNK48's "Promise" (Sanya na สัญญานะ) includes scenes from Saphan Han สะพาน

หิน Bridge, Bangkok Chinatown, and The Giant Swing.⁸⁹ These videos directly introduce local tourist spots.

In CGM48's music video "Sansei Kawaii!" (Sansei 素敵อะ Kawaii! ["Agree Cute!"]), the essence of Songkran เทศกาลสงกรานต์⁹⁰ in the Lanna style is vividly portrayed, capturing the festive atmosphere, playful water activities, and the charming innocence of the members, all accompanied by upbeat music. The visuals are captivating, dynamic, and refreshing, incorporating memes, clever sitcom references, and engaging performances. A Thai viewer in the YouTube comments to this video suggested a collaboration between the Chiang Mai government and CGM48 to boost tourism by integrating northern Thai culture into CGM48's videos. They highlighted that the music video's Songkran theme could attract international fans to Thailand to experience the festival.⁹¹ This resonates with the recommendation from the Ministry of Tourism and Sports to preserve local identities through public awareness campaigns, foster collaborations between local authorities and community leaders for regional promotion, and leverage media to showcase the uniqueness of each area, instilling pride in local cultures.⁹²

A BNK48 music video that directly focuses on cultural tourism is "77 din daen saen wi-sèht" ดินแดนแสนวิเศษ (77 Wonderful Lands), an adaptation of a Japanese song titled "47 no suteki na machi e" 47の素敵な街へ (To 47 Wonderful Towns, in which 47 refers to the number of prefectures in Japan). It delves into the beauty and culture of Thailand and offers a journey of connection and discovery across its seventy-seven provinces. Embracing Thai hospitality and warmth, it narrates a tale of yearning and togetherness in the heart of Thailand.⁹³ The song's lyrics function as a

85 BNK48, "BNK48 ON TOUR," YouTube, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLPW9lgM1jwdsY21NglyWyg96FJTXT_qw-Z.

86 CGM48, "CGM48 7th Single 'Love Trip'- SPECIAL CAMPAIGN," YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL8aEdSGJXUmk82j2LzSr8vLLa4aEeB1Em>.

87 CGM48, "cgm48_25districts," TikTok, 2024, https://www.tiktok.com/tag/cgm48_25districts%22.

88 CGM48, "[Full MV] Yume wa Nigenai - จะไม่หนีจากความฝัน / CGM48," YouTube, 2 April 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pD9TJLNsv0M>.

89 BNK48, "[MV full] สัญญานะ / BNK48," YouTube, 18 June 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmoUEQ9tQP4>.

90 Songkran is Thailand's traditional New Year festival celebrated in April with water fights and religious ceremonies.

91 CGM48, "[Full MV] Sansei Kawaii! - 素敵อะ Kawaii! / CGM48," YouTube, 1 May 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=roez953rLCl>.

92 Ministry of Tourism and Sports, "The Second National Tourism Development Plan," p. 36.

93 BNK48, "[MV Full] 77 no Suteki na Machi e -77 ดินแดนแสนวิเศษ- / BNK48," YouTube, 30 October 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ks1Sx1YXEK>.

promotional vehicle for tourism, urging listeners to explore the country's seventy-seven unique provinces.⁹⁴ This showcases the progress and potential for idol songs to resonate with audiences beyond their fan base, garnering a significant following and sparking interest not only among fans but also among the general public and tourists.⁹⁵ Thanapiti Thipa also concurs that BNK48 aims to bring joy to the Thai people, especially fans, while concurrently contributing to the dissemination of Thainess through the costumes worn by the group members. It also encourages travel across all seventy-seven provinces of Thailand.⁹⁶ The anthems “BNK48” and “CGM48” vividly showcase Bangkok and Chiang Mai. The core idea behind these songs is that each group within the 48 family should have a national song that epitomizes the essence of that specific group. In the case of BNK48, the lyrics align closely with the group's concept of being the “idols you can meet” the most, while also encapsulating Thainess throughout the song.⁹⁷

These anthems directly highlight the local tourist attractions in Bangkok and Chiang Mai, featuring the local cuisine, culture, and activities. The lyrics encourage everyone to visit these destinations, emphasizing the warm welcome extended by “Bangkok 48” and “Chiang Mai 48.” Notably, CGM48's song incorporates the Lanna language, partially in response to the Thai government's tourism strategy. By offering interactive multilingual information and showcasing regional cultures like Lanna, the song enriches experiences and effectively communicates Thailand's authenticity.⁹⁸ This dual approach—seen in both the self-titled anthems—serves as a means of promoting Thai tourism.⁹⁹ It also introduces the concept of pilgrimage tourism, as fans travel to Bangkok and Chiang Mai for idol-related activities and experiences.

94 Nakon, “Kan phasom phasan,” p. 155.

95 Bangkok Biz News, “Travel Across Thailand,” *เที่ยวทั่วไทยไปกับ BNK48 '77 ดินแดนแสนวิเศษ* [Travel Across Thailand with BNK48 in “77 Special Lands”], 1 November 2019, <https://www.bangkokbiznews.com/social/1312>.

96 Thipa, “Khwan pen Thai,” p. 25.

97 Sripoonphan, “Kan sue san khwan,” p. 69.

98 Ministry of Tourism and Sports, “The Second National Tourism Development Plan,” p. 23.

99 Kitchana Lersakvanitchakul, “A perfect ‘Starto,’” *The Nation*, 6 April 2018, <https://www.nationthailand.com/life/30342633>.

Idols Contributing to Thailand's Soft Power

Thai communications scholar Peerawat Tan-intaraarj cites Steven Leuthold's theories on “a sense of place” and “feeling of belonging.” He noted that art is closely linked to culture, and the core values of a community are shaped by a sense of belonging.¹⁰⁰ This feeling is expressed through various means, such as art and religion, and is reflected in BNK48's original works, many of which are rich in Thai characteristics. One notable song that received considerable attention is “Na yak baeb ni pen khong thoe na” *น่ารักแบบนี้ เป็นของเธอ*, which translates to “Being Cute Like This Belongs to You.” Its production featured a distinctive selection process in which fans participated by voting for their favorite six BNK48 or CGM48 performers in the “Maha Tevi Nang Songkran 48” *มหาเทวีนางสงกรานต์ 48* (The Great Songkran Goddess 48) competition held during BNK48's “Kiss Me! Fun Fair” event. The selected performers were Hoop (Patalee Prasertteerachai), the only BNK48 member, and Champoo (Kodchaporn Leelatheep), Kaning (Vithita Srasreesom), Lookked (Pimlapas Suwanno), Nenie (Phitchayapha Supanya), and Sita (Sita Teeradechsakul) from CGM48. This song is also a collaboration between the renowned Thai traditional folk singer Keng Tachaya and the BNK48 team, forming part of a music project aimed at promoting Thai culture. The project is named “Thai Cultural Ambassadors,” emphasizing its mission of cultural dissemination. The song's debut performance took place at the Thai Festival Tokyo in May 2024 (figure 8). This choice holds profound significance, demonstrating BNK48's commitment to bringing Thai culture to the international stage.¹⁰¹ During the performance, all the members wore traditional Thai costumes, enhancing the visual appeal and highlighting the cultural essence of the piece.

The music video for “Na yak baeb ni pen khong thoe na” premiered on 5 July 2024. The video primarily revolves around the story of the water festival, Songkran. Although reports indicate that the song was completed

100 Tan-intaraarj, “The Diffusion of Japanese,” p. 92.

101 Today, “BNK48 & CGM48 Feat. เก่ง รัชชย์ เปิดตัวซิงเกิ้ลใหม่ ‘น่ารักแบบนี้ เป็นของเธอ’ บนเวที ‘Thai Festival Tokyo 2024’ [BNK48 & CGM48 Feat. Keng Tachaya] debuted their new single ‘Na yak baeb ni pen khong thoe na’ (Being Cute Like This Belongs to You) on the ‘Thai Festival Tokyo 2024’ stage.], 14 May 2024, <https://workpointtoday.com/bnk48-cgm48-feat-keng-tachaya/>.



Figure 8. Promotional poster for BNK48 and CGM48 at the Tokyo Thai Festival, 2024. <https://x.com/fightforkaning/status/1785597133221167140?lang=ar-x-fm>.

before Songkran, the production team aimed for it to represent various aspects of Thai culture, making it suitable for different festivals.¹⁰²

Notably, the music video incorporates numerous Hindu elements, with the character of Ravana, the central antagonist of the ancient Hindu epic *Ramayana*, portrayed by Keng Tachaya, being a prominent example. The lyrics also reference the *Ramayana*, narrating the love story of Rama and Sita. Traditionally, Sita is seen as the embodiment of beauty.¹⁰³ Sita Teeradechsakul (Sita), a member of CGM48, sings lyrics about Sita twice in the song. She feels a special connection to these lyrics due to her name, which led her to insist on performing those parts herself.¹⁰⁴ This arrangement reflects the production team's creativity in merging the members' names with the song's lyrics, adding a personal touch and enhancing the overall appeal. While the heavy use

of Hindu elements in the video may seem unexpected, it actually illustrates the diversity of Thai culture. Thailand's cultural landscape has historically been influenced by Hinduism, so the presence of these elements in contemporary Thai pop culture is understandable and this cultural fusion showcases the richness of Thai heritage.

In the music video for "Na yak baeb ni pen khong thoe na," CGM48 member Kodchaporn Leelatheep (Champoo) plays a significant role as the Songkran goddess Mahadevi, taking the center position. Meanwhile, the other five members represent other Songkran goddesses. A highlight of the video is a scene featuring all six members in traditional *chakkraphat* พระพรต costume, which are typically worn at formal events in Thailand. This choice of attire enhances the cultural atmosphere of the music video and naturally evokes the traditional celebrations of Songkran.

From the entire production of the music video to the overall promotion, there is a strong sense of Thainess. Importantly, except for the pandemic era, BNK48 and CGM48 have been representing Thailand at the Thai Festival Tokyo annually since 2018. This event receives support from the Ministry of Culture of Thailand, the Tourism Authority of Thailand, the Royal Thai Embassy Foreign Consulate Tokyo, Thai Airways, and AirAsia. It serves as a platform for the Thai government to showcase Thai culture to the world, boost tourism, and enhance Thailand's soft power internationally. The participation of BNK48 and CGM48 aligns perfectly with the needs of the Thai government's policies. According to Siwathomchai Sunida et al., Thailand functions as a hub for production, aiming to attract international investments, diversify tourism, and artistically highlight the favorable facets of Thai culture.¹⁰⁵ Through the utilization of artists and entertainment media, Thailand promotes its values and cultural heritage, harnessing soft power to elevate its international reputation.

Selective Authenticity: Constructing Thainess for Global Consumption

While the promotional music videos produced by BNK48 and CGM48 are often celebrated for presenting "authentic" Thai culture and enhancing Thailand's soft

102 BNK48, "[MV full] น่ายักแบบนี้ เป็นของเธอนะ / Na Yak Baeb Ni Pen Khong Thoe Na/ BNK48 and CGM48 feat. Keng Tachaya," YouTube, 4 July 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ozm2GPr6ly8>.

103 Singaravelu, *The Rama Story*, p. 51.

104 PopCycle, "Exclusive Interview: Keng Tachaya," Facebook, 12 May 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/PopCycle2024/posts/pfbid0LytecRYigk42TRuJSDWi2pxVNEdbrEpLRK1MuMQY3VYk-FyfwidEormS72YSYDNA3l>.

105 Siwathomchai et al., "A Study of International News Reports," p. 209.

power, a more critical reading reveals that these representations may in fact reinforce essentialized and stereotypical constructions of “Thainess.” Through the stylized use of traditional costumes, picturesque landscapes, and symbolic motifs, the videos craft a visually compelling yet highly curated and selective portrayal of Thai identity. This portrayal conforms to global expectations of exoticism, harmony, and timeless cultural continuity.

As Edward Bruner insightfully notes, tourism is not that innovative in inventing new narratives but rather seeks new locations in which to tell old stories, possibly because those stories are the ones that the tourist consumer is willing to buy.¹⁰⁶ Within this framework, the music videos do not offer new interpretations of Thai culture; instead, they repackage familiar and marketable narratives to align with the expectations of both domestic and international audiences. Bruner further warns that the problem with such scripted stories lies in the omission and concealment of significant cultural content, which he terms the “touristic untold,” a concept that underscores the political nature of selective representation.¹⁰⁷ In this context, the version of “Thainess” constructed in these videos becomes a carefully crafted narrative commodity: visually appealing, emotionally effective, and strategically designed to inspire national pride while satisfying global appetites for cultural exoticism. Yet this comes at the cost of authenticity, cultural complexity, and representational diversity.

Building upon Haldrup and Bærenholdt’s concept of heritage as performance, these videos can also be understood as staged cultural enactments that favor emotion, spectacle, and commercial appeal over historical depth or critical engagement.¹⁰⁸ Rather than reflecting Thai tradition, they perform it—in ways that are simplified, sanitized, and rarely questioned. This performativity tends to obscure the plurality of Thai cultural expressions, erasing regional, ethnic, and generational differences, and flattening Thai identity into a singular, consumable image.

This tension is further underscored by the fact that such media-driven representations have succeeded precisely where official, state-led efforts to promote “Thainess” have often failed. As Pookaiyaudom and

Tan (2023) argue, nationalist narratives advanced through historical dramas and government initiatives are frequently met with public skepticism or apathy.¹⁰⁹ In contrast, idol groups and music videos have seamlessly woven cultural references into the fabric of pop culture, rendering tradition fashionable, emotionally appealing, and marketable—especially among youth audiences.

Yet this very success raises important questions about the politics of representation: Whose version of Thai culture is being amplified? Which cultural elements are excluded or silenced? And what are the implications of branding culture for global consumption? From this perspective, the performance of “Thainess” in these videos is not merely celebratory—it is ideological, framed through the dual logics of tourism and nation branding, often at the cost of critical reflection, cultural nuance, and representational plurality.

Conclusion

Research on BNK48 and CGM48 often focuses on fan consumption patterns, elements of music videos, cultural hybridity, and other related topics. In contrast, this article discusses Thainess in the cultural products of BNK48 and CGM48 as well as its relationship to cultural tourism. Thus, the focus is on how BNK48 and CGM48, through their cultural products, showcase aspects of Thai culture. This includes highlighting Thailand’s natural and intangible heritage in their music videos and programs. These idols serve as cultural ambassadors for Thailand, promoting the country’s soft power abroad through their performances, thereby boosting cultural tourism and promoting Thailand’s heritage internationally.

Despite travelers potentially having their own understanding and feelings about Thailand, according to the Ministry of Tourism and Sports, the government has a policy to promote Thainess to foreign tourists. The government emphasizes the concept of Thainess, which represents a blend of modern and traditional Thai lifestyles. Currently, tourists mainly encounter modern facets of Thai life, often missing the opportunity to immerse themselves in the local essence of

106 Bruner, “Culture on Tour,” p. 22.

107 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

108 Haldrup and Bærenholdt, “Heritage as Performance,” p. 61.

109 Pookaiyaudom and Tan, “The Buppaesanniwas Phenomenon,” p. 509.

Thailand.¹¹⁰ The promotion of Thainess is precisely what the Thai government aims to advance internationally as a form of soft power, akin to Tunyaluk Roongsangjun's assertion that soft power serves not only as a mechanism for a nation to exhibit its art, culture, traditions, and various exports to the world but also as a way to derive "significant economic value" from ideas, creativity, and a rich heritage.¹¹¹

Likewise, the promotion of Thainess through the cultural products of BNK48 and CGM48 can be seen as a response to government policies. The creation of a Thai identity and image through music and music videos is of great importance. Thainess is integrated as content by music labels or agencies in music production, artist representation, and as a pivotal element in music videos, as well as other mediums.¹¹²

Cultural tourism provides a compelling platform to showcase the unique essence of Thai originality.¹¹³ The cultural goods of BNK48 and CGM48 raise questions about Thainess to a significant extent. They skillfully blend Japanese-style aesthetics with local Thai culture, effectively resonating with Thai audiences and playing a crucial role in promoting Thai culture. Even when covering Japanese songs from AKB48, the management teams consciously emphasize Thai elements in many of their works while retaining the original melodies and dance styles. For instance, in songs such as "BNK48," "CGM48," "77 Wonderful Lands," "Kimi wa melody," and "Chiang Mai 106," Thai characteristics are prominently showcased in the costumes, settings, dances, and language used in the music videos. Therefore, as BNK48 and CGM48 delve into creating original pieces, they focus more on integrating Thai elements, aligning well with Dome Kraipakorn's perspective on cultural hybridity.¹¹⁴ This exemplifies how BNK48 and CGM48 adeptly blend Japanese borrowed cultures with Thai local culture, carving a new path in the creative cultural industry and cultural tourism, while showcasing Thailand's cultural soft power.

However, there is still much to be explored. Much of the data is derived through textual analysis and

observation, leading to conclusions that may only represent one perspective. Therefore, future research could include surveys or interview questions for overseas fandoms of BNK48 and CGM48. By asking them about the idol groups and their Thai characteristics, researchers could gain a better understanding of whether fans are interested in Thailand because of these idol groups, if they learn more about Thailand through them, and if their interest in BNK48 and CGM48 influences their decision to visit Thailand.

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