

# **BNK48** วัฒนธรรมบันเทิงแบบใหม่ในสังคมไทยร่วมสมัย: ประวัติศาสตร์เชิงวิเคราะห์ / **BNK48: Modern Entertainment Culture in Contemporary Thai Society - An Analytical Historical Perspective**

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AKB48 was established in Akihabara, Japan in 2005 with a unique business model. The group recruits non-professional female performers, trains them from the very start to achieve peak performance. This process allows the fans to witness and support the growth of these idols. Through various performances and handshake events, fans get to interact closely with the idols, creating an unprecedented phenomenon (Galbraith & Karlin, 2019). With their slogan “idol that you can meet,” AKB48 dispelled the notion of idols being unapproachable, making them the most successful female idol group in Japan (Galbraith & Karlin, 2019, p. 1). This success encouraged the company to introduce sister groups following the AKB48 business model in different parts of Japan and even overseas, including



BNK48: Modern entertainment culture in contemporary Thai society - An analytical historical perspective (D. Kraipakorn, 2022. Department of History, Srinakharinwirot University)

BNK48 (Bangkok), CGM48 (Chiang Mai), MNL48 (Manila), and JKT48 (Jakarta). Among these sister groups, BNK48, established in 2017, achieved remarkable success abroad, with their CD sales and YouTube views reaching 142 million within a year of their debut, an unprecedented feat in Thailand's music history (Kraipakorn, 2018). One key factor in BNK48's success lies in the incorporation of Thai elements alongside Japanese influences. BNK48 is a distinctly Thai group with a Japanese flair, bringing a fresh perspective to the Thai music scene (Kraipakorn, 2018).

Dome Kraipakorn is a leading scholar in Thailand who has conducted extensive research on idol culture. He has published numerous academic papers and presented at conferences on this topic, and has also supervised many master's students studying Thai idol culture. In 2022, he authored the book, *BNK48: Modern Entertainment Culture in Contemporary Thai Society - An Analytical Historical Perspective*, which is one of the few academic books on AKB48 culture and the first academic monograph on Southeast Asian sister groups. In the book's preface, the author notes that there is limited academic research on BNK48, so he has written four scholarly articles on the topic and presented them in academic conferences. This book compiles and builds upon his previous work, representing the author's comprehensive observations on the BNK48 phenomenon over the past few years. Given the author's background in history, he analyzes the BNK48 phenomenon from a historical development perspective (Kraipakorn, 2022).

The book examines how this new entertainment culture has impacted contemporary Thai society. The first chapter discusses the business model of BNK48 and the historical context of the entertainment industry in Thailand. The second chapter examines the BNK48 phenomenon and its influence on the otaku culture. The third chapter focuses on the relationship between entertainment culture and online fandom. The fourth chapter explores the transformation of Japanese culture in Thailand and northern regions through the globalization of music. The introduction recommends a specific reading order, starting with the first chapter, followed by the fourth, and then the third and second chapters.

Kraipakorn observes that BNK48's business model has transformed the entire Thai entertainment industry. The author's key insight is that BNK48's success can be attributed to their emulating the AKB48 model from Japan, while also retaining their own unique characteristics. This model has driven the growth of the entire idol industry by establishing a strong and dedicated fandom that exhibits the characteristics of a participatory culture: (1) low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, (2) members' perception of social connection, (3) members' belief that their

contributions matter, (4) strong support for creation and sharing, and (5) informal mentorship between veterans and novices (Jenkins et al., 20095).

The author emphasizes that BNK48's operations demonstrate a strong understanding of leveraging the digital world, particularly social media, for promotion. Digital networks have enabled participatory culture to transcend the geographic distances and boundaries that separated different traditional social networks (Jenkins, 2018). BNK48 constructed a public space within a shopping mall where the group's members can conduct Facebook live-streamed in a transparent "aquarium" room. The author argues that this unique idol-fan interaction, which reinforces BNK48's "Idol you can meet!" concept, was a key factor driving the group's rapid development in Thailand (Kraipakorn, 2022). He then cites numerous examples of how the fandom actively participates in official activities.

Kraipakorn also notes that a key factor driving the rapid development of BNK48 is the support from the initial group of otaku fans who were already invested in the Japanese AKB48 culture. This group is traditionally marginalized by society but the emergence of BNK48 provided a new social space for these social outsiders. At BNK48's official events, otaku fans can gather and interact with each other. The book observes that BNK48's rise has increased social awareness and improved public perception of the otaku community (Kraipakorn, 2022).

Readers of the book can gain a broader, international perspective on the BNK48 phenomenon. In earlier chapters, the author situates the rise of BNK48 within the context of Japan's efforts to promote its cultural soft power globally. The launch of "Cool Japan" has driven Japan to aggressively export various aspects of its culture to audiences around the world, including the idol culture that BNK48 emulates. Using the theoretical lens of cultural hybridization, the author discusses how BNK48 and its sister group CGM48 (in Chiang Mai) respond to the phenomenon of cultural globalization. While BNK48 and CGM48's music, fashion, and other elements show influences of Japanese culture, they also incorporate local Thai culture, blending the two to create a new hybrid culture. For example, while BNK48 and CGM48 present themselves in the Japanese girl group style, their music videos prominently feature "Thainess" elements. CGM48's videos, in particular, highlights "Northernness" in their dance and language. The author argues that this hybridization has been beneficial to the localization of BNK48 culture within Thailand (Kraipakorn, 2022).

Indeed, there are several limitations to this book. Firstly, as an academic monograph aimed at understanding the development of BNK48 in Thailand, the research method employed in the book is predominantly textual analysis. Additional research methods, such as interviews and surveys, could have

provided a more diverse perspective on the topic. A significant portion of the book also relies on the participant observation research method, which introduces the potential for subjective bias given the author's dual role as a scholar and a BNK48 fan. Kraipakorn acknowledges this limitation in the preface, emphasizing that the analysis presented in the book represents just one of many perspectives on the BNK48 phenomenon (Kraipakorn, 2022). Furthermore, as one of the few academic works examining the AKB48 cultural phenomenon, and the first monograph specifically focused on BNK48, the book's accessibility and reach within the broader field of idol studies is hindered by the fact that it is written in the Thai language. This obviously poses a significant challenge for non-Thai-speaking researchers.

This book is a significant academic monograph on the study of AKB48 culture, or more broadly, idol culture. The author provides readers with three key perspectives to understand the phenomenon of BNK48's impact on Thai society: the historical development of the BNK48 business; the history, culture, and social development of the BNK48 fandom; and the cultural products of BNK48. Using the example of AKB48 to analyze how Thai culture has seamlessly integrated and hybridized into a new cultural form, the book provides a solid foundation for future researchers, particularly in examining the influence of Japanese soft power on Thailand. For scholars interested in the field of idol studies, this book is a highly recommended work. It is hoped that in the future, the book will be translated into English, allowing more scholars around the world to gain insight into the successful phenomenon of BNK48 in Thailand.

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