



Transtext(e)s Transcultures

Journal of Global Cultural Studies

19 | 2024

**Naming Sexual Violence: Epistemic Power, Narratives
and Representations**

Idols Up Close: Intensification and Subversion of the AKB48 System – A Conversation with Keiko Takeda

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avec Keiko Takeda*

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/transtexts/2719>

DOI: 10.4000/15bag

ISSN: 2105-2549

Publisher

Gregory B. Lee

Electronic reference

Keiko Takeda and Chiharu Chujo, "Idols Up Close: Intensification and Subversion of the AKB48 System – A Conversation with Keiko Takeda", *Transtext(e)s Transcultures* 跨文本跨文化 [Online], 19 | 2024, Online since 30 December 2024, connection on 10 December 2025. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/transtexts/2719> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/15bag>

This text was automatically generated on December 10, 2025.



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Note: “Fan A” and “Rino Oishi” refer to anonymized interviewees cited by the Keiko Takeda.

Context

This interview is part of the 'Representation and Sexual Violence' dossier. It focuses on Japanese idol culture, from the mass-market system of AKB48 to so-called *chika* (underground or live) idols who perform in small venues and cultivate direct, repeated contact with fans. Drawing on long-term fieldwork since 2012 in *chika* idol scenes – including regular on-site observation and interviews with performers, producers, and fans – Keiko Takeda analyses these worlds within the framework of a continuum of violence and the media grammar of desire. Through an examination of the mechanics of proximity (theatres, elections, fan services) and its visual representation (school uniforms, framing, costumes), Keiko Takeda demonstrates the construction of fantasies of unilateral selectivity and sexual accessibility. The discussion also highlights the specific tactics (e.g. *cheki*) through which performers negotiate interaction and re-authorise the image, without obscuring the structural constraints of the sector. She thus proposes to establish a linkage between economics, representation and lived experiences – ranging from ordinary micro-coercion to visible violence – and to

identify concrete levers (management standards, venue protocols, legal rights). Interview based on long-term fieldwork and representational analysis; quotes from anonymized interlocutors are reproduced with permission.

The interview was conducted by Chiharu Chujo, and the comments collected were edited for clarity and length.

Opening

Chiharu Chujo: To begin, what prompted you to examine AKB48 and so-called *chika* (underground/live) idols together, and how does this speak to sexual violence and its representation?

Keiko Takeda: AKB48 and *chika* idols sit within comparable frameworks of intimacy with fans. My core claim is that AKB48's system manufactures and amplifies two fan fantasies – (1) one-sided selectivity and (2) sexual accessibility – through organizational mechanisms and visual representation. Those fantasies normalize proximity and objectification, creating conditions where gender-based violence (GBV) can emerge. *Chika* idols intensify aspects of the AKB model (frequency of encounters, monetized access) yet also develop negotiation strategies that foreground idols' agency, notably around *cheki* (instant photo) practices.

Methods and Context

Chiharu Chujo: Before we dive deeper, can you clarify the key terms you use – *idol*, *chika idol*, *otaku*, *cheki* – and why you keep some in Japanese?

Keiko Takeda: I adopt folk terminology as it circulates in Japan. *Idol* refers to young performers who sing, dance, and inhabit multi-platform media ecologies. *Chika idol* (literally “underground/nearby”) marks groups operating outside major agencies' prime-time circuits – small venues, dense live schedules, direct fan contact. *Otaku/ota* (オタク/オタ) is an emic label some fans (and performers) use for themselves; I keep it when interlocutors do, because translations such as “nerd” or “geek” misfire socially. *Cheki* names the instax instant photo, but in practice it signifies a ritualized micro-encounter – 30-60 seconds to pose, chat, sign. Retaining these words preserves situated meaning and the politics of how people name their own practices.

Chiharu Chujo: And what about your access to AKB48 and *chika* idols?

Keiko Takeda: Direct access to AKB48 members was not feasible for me; my deepest access is within *chika* scenes where interviews, repeated observation, and artifact collection were possible. For AKB48 I rely on publicly available materials – MVs, election broadcasts, producer statements – triangulated with scholarship and fan/industry commentary. Rather than pretending symmetrical access, I make that asymmetry explicit and analyze how representation and format themselves structure what can be seen and known.

Chiharu Chujo: What materials and methods ground your analysis?

Keiko Takeda: Since 2012, I've conducted fieldwork in *chika* idol scenes: repeated venue observation; semi-structured interviews with idols, a producer-idol (Rino Oishi), and a male fan (“Fan A”); and discussions in academic settings. For AKB48 I draw on producer Akimoto Yasushi's writings and critical commentary, and I analyze official

music videos (MVs), the “general election” broadcasts, and fan-idol interaction formats (handshakes/Cheki). I use representational analysis (e.g., distance, gaze, costuming) to connect form to the political economy of fandom.

From Distance to Proximity: Redefining Access

Chiharu Chujo: Can you sketch the historical arc from “idols at a distance” to “idols you can meet,” and why this shift matters for violence as a continuum?

Keiko Takeda: From the 1970s through the 1990s, mainstream idols largely performed at a mediated distance – television, magazines, controlled meet-and-greet formats. The mid-2000s recoded the category around proximity: small theatres, lotteries, handshake lines, daily rotations. Proximity reorganizes desire: the ordinary-girl persona becomes a resource, and the body is made legible as approachable and purchasable in time-sliced units. Reading through Liz Kelly’s continuum lens, we see how routinized friendliness, mandatory self-surveillance, and scripted gratitude operate as micro-coercions that can escalate or condense into more acute harms.¹ What changes is not only *how much* we see an idol, but the grammar by which access is promised and negotiated.

Chiharu Chujo: Where do Senbatsu elections (選抜総選挙 *senbatsu sousenkyo*) – AKB48’s public “General Elections,” in which fans vote to decide which members will be selected for the next single – enter into this transformation?

Keiko Takeda: Elections quantify affect. By coupling votes to purchases and televising rankings and reactions, the format teaches that feelings have a price and that price confers sovereignty over visibility. Adoration becomes countable; the camera’s cuts – rows of identical outfits, tight shots on tears – turn the *effect* of selection into spectacle, reinforcing the fantasy that fans unilaterally author an idol’s future.

Chiharu Chujo: Your analysis revisits the historical shift from idols at a distance to idols one can “meet.” How does that shift matter for GBV and representation?

Keiko Takeda: The 1970s-1990s consolidated a model of distance (media-mediated admiration, professionalized talent), while the mid-2000s onward normalized proximity (rotating theatre shows, lotteries, handshake events). Proximity reframes “ordinary girl” familiarity as a feature – not a bug – of idolhood. This routinized nearness is not neutral: it recodes intimacy as purchasable access, shaping expectations about bodies, availability, and entitlement.

AKB48’s Political Economy of Desire

Chiharu Chujo: What, concretely, makes the selectivity “one-sided” rather than reciprocal?

Keiko Takeda: Three layers. Economic: the pathway to ranking runs through repeat purchases, bundling votes with CDs or codes; those without disposable income have less say. Organizational: idols cannot “vote back”; career mobility is tethered to fans’ aggregated spend and management’s gatekeeping. Representational: staging renders members interchangeable at a glance – matched costumes, symmetrical blocking – inviting a sorting gaze. When reactions to ranks are broadcast – joy, shock, apology – the format performs reciprocity while preserving unilateral power. The idol’s labor is

to inhabit gratitude under any outcome; the fan's labor is to keep buying to turn affection into leverage.

Chiharu Chujo: You call the election system a machine for “one-sided selectivity.” Why?

Keiko Takeda: Fans buy CDs to acquire votes; the rankings are televised; idols perform unscripted reactions. The formal message is: you (the fan) select which bodies and voices matter. Visual staging reinforces this: rows of similarly dressed members at medium/distant shot scale make idols legible as a sortable, exchangeable set. The affective labor (tears, gratitude, regret) is then offered back as proof that selection has real power. This is unilateral choice masquerading as reciprocity.

Chiharu Chujo: You connect costuming and camera grammar to sexual accessibility. Can you unpack that without moral panic?

Keiko Takeda: The point is not to police costumes but to read codes. Recurrent school-uniform iconography, swimsuits/underwear shoots, and choreographies emphasizing exposure are paired with lenses that linger and fragment. In combination with meetability (handshakes, frequent theatre shows), these cues naturalize a script: youthful femininity is near, available, grateful. This does not predetermine assault, but it narrows the plausibility of refusal. In contrast, other idol ecologies (e.g., those foregrounding adult stylings or collective charisma) show that desirability can be staged without infantilizing availability. The question, then, is not “sexy or not” but what kind of sexual legibility a format repeatedly demands of its performers.

Chiharu Chujo: Where does “sexual accessibility” come from in your account?

Keiko Takeda: Producer discourse frames “familiarity” as desire's catalyst – the girl-next-door you can approach. Organizationally, dedicated theatres and routine fan services (handshakes) operationalize that narrative. Criticism around such events names the slippage from “meetability” to sexual approachability: paying to get closer implies that proximity – and by extension intimacy – can be bought. In representational terms, MV motifs (e.g., school uniforms; underwear/swimsuits) and camera grammar sexualize youth and frame the body as commodity.

Chiharu Chujo: You compare girl group Morning Musume and AKB48 MVs. What differences matter here?

Keiko Takeda: Both groups charted highly, but AKB48's MVs disproportionately mobilize schoolgirl iconography and underwear/swimsuit costuming. Morning Musume's imagery skews more adult and avoids those motifs. In semiotic terms, AKB48's recurrent youthful uniforms and skin exposure align with a male-gaze economy: they foreground sexual legibility and infantilized availability, which dovetails with the two fantasies above. Importantly, the “success” of these MVs on charts is entangled with non-musical incentives (election votes embedded in CDs), so sales partly index *access* rather than strictly musical preference.

The Continuum of Sexual Violence

Chiharu Chujo: Our issue frames sexual violence along a continuum rather than as isolated acts. How does your case map onto that?

Keiko Takeda: The idol system's routinized proximity and codified availability produce everyday coercions – pressured affect, compulsory friendliness, hyper-monitoring of

looks and conduct, anxiety around fan service – that live on the same spectrum as more visible assaults. Representation matters because it normalizes those pressures: uniforms, costuming, and “meetability” scripts translate structural asymmetries into seductive images. Thinking in terms of a continuum clarifies how “ordinary” fan practices, media framing, and workplace rules connect to more extreme harms.

Negotiation and Agency in Chika Idol Scenes

Chiharu Chujo: Your *chika* fieldwork suggests both higher frequency of contact and greater negotiability. What does that look like on the ground?

Keiko Takeda: After a 40-80minute set in a 200-400 capacity room, lines form for Cheki. Time is short; prices and rules are posted; staff hover. In that micro-contract, idols can re-author the moment – choose a pose, propose a prop, redirect talk, or end a session with a neutral gesture. Regulars are known by name; that recognition can be weaponized but also stabilized by norms fans themselves defend (calling out *meiwaku* – troublesome – behavior). The same monetization that intensifies access provides levers: request another Cheki for longer talk; shift from solo to group poses; decline touch. None of this dissolves risk, and stalking cases do occur, but the site of representation – the photograph – is co-produced rather than purely projective.

Chiharu Chujo: And producers/performer-managers?

Keiko Takeda: Hybrid figures – performers who also produce – often articulate boundary scripts that circulate among fans. They post do’s/don’ts, train newcomers, and coordinate with venues on escalation protocols. These scripts change the default: access is granted under conditions, not presumed as an unlimited right purchased once and for all.

Chiharu Chujo: You argue that *chika* idols both intensify the AKB model and subvert it. Could you unpack that?

Keiko Takeda: Intensification: *chika* groups multiply encounters – small venues, several lives per week, post-show Cheki and signings, relatively affordable tickets, and dense urban circuits. This can magnify risk: parasocial ties are tighter; stalking harms are documented.

Subversion/negotiation: precisely because access is monetized per encounter, idols can set prices, pace, and rules. There’s a culturally legible vocabulary to call out “troublesome behavior,” and a pragmatic lever – “*buy another Cheki*” – to redirect or end an interaction. More crucially, Cheki co-authors representation: fan and idol appear together, negotiate pose, acknowledge each other. The image ceases to be a one-way gaze and becomes a situated, intersubjective artifact where idols’ agency can surface.

Chiharu Chujo: You describe Cheki as a “situated image”. What does that buy analytically? Why is Cheki so central in your analysis of representation and GBV risk mitigation?

Keiko Takeda: It lets us see representation as negotiation rather than a finished product. A Cheki stores a trace of consent – however fragile – in the pose chosen, the distance agreed, the prop suggested. It can also archive refusal (no contact; neutral pose) without shaming the fan. Economically, the Cheki is a unit of value split between management and performer; socially, it’s an occasion to recalibrate the fan’s gaze from fantasy to encounter. By shifting from unilateral spectatorship to co-appearance, Cheki

slightly rebalances agency – not enough to undo structural constraints, but enough to matter in everyday risk reduction.

Cheki is a revenue engine (often split between management and performer), but also a micro-contract: Approximately 30-120 seconds to pose, converse, and enact boundaries. It can diffuse the fantasy of unilateral selection – the fan cannot “rank” a row of bodies; they must face a person who faces back. That modest recalibration neither erases sexualization nor eliminates harm, yet it reframes control at the level of the image and the interaction.

Chiharu Chujo: How do labor rules – appearance mandates, “love-ban” norms – intersect with harm?

Keiko Takeda: Such rules police availability as brand asset: hair length, weight, social-media tone, in some cases romance restrictions. In practice, they may heighten surveillance by fans and management alike and expand the range of behaviors read as betrayal. When a scandal breaks, blame often recenters on the performer’s alleged failure rather than on the system that monetizes intimacy. A continuum lens helps us see how contractual expectations and everyday self-monitoring can enable penalization for ordinary life choices, producing vulnerability without needing a single spectacular incident.

Chiharu Chujo: Do intersectional factors – age, class, migration – shift risk profiles?

Keiko Takeda: Yes. Younger performers, newcomers to urban circuits, or those without stable management often rely more on high-frequency lives and Cheki revenue, increasing exposure. Classed and regional differences shape who can absorb lost shifts or refuse a pushy regular. Intersectionality matters not as an add-on but as the texture through which access economies are lived.

Chiharu Chujo: You also document escalations – stalking, violence. How do you reconcile agency with vulnerability?

Keiko Takeda: Agency matters, but structure dominates. The business model rewards intimacy; careers hinge on pleasing high-spend regulars; anti-romance rules can be circumvented but also weaponized. So while idols can choose customers, set prices, or mobilize peer/fan community buffers, these are situated tactics. Reducing violence demands institutional responsibility (management norms, venue protocols, staff training) and legal frameworks (harassment/stalking enforcement) alongside media literacy that challenges the representational grammar of availability.

Structural Constraints and Possible Levers

Chiharu Chujo: You emphasize that AKB48’s success rests on a political economy of access. How does that economy shape risk and representation in practice?

Keiko Takeda: Access is not simply symbolic; it is priced and paced. Vote bundling and event tickets tie revenue to the density of encounters. Idols and management are incentivized to multiply contact points – more theatre shifts, more release events, more seconds per handshake converted into monetizable attention. That metric has representational effects: the body becomes a site of transaction whose value is legible through charts, queue length, and on-camera reactions. At the same time, this economy externalizes costs – affective labor (smiling, soothing, remembering names), temporal strain (tight rotations, few days off), and self-surveillance of looks and demeanor. Rules

around romantic life or appearance can be framed as brand protection, yet they also stabilize the promise of availability. None of this mechanically produces assault, but it thickens entitlement and narrows room for refusal. Thinking with the continuum of GBV helps connect these routinized pressures to more acute harms, without collapsing their differences.

Chiharu Chujo: High-profile incidents periodically make headlines. What do these moments reveal about representation and accountability?

Keiko Takeda: Media coverage often individualizes harm – casting “bad fans,” “irresponsible girls,” or one negligent manager – while leaving the systemic incentives intact. The visual grammar of innocence/sexualization that sells access also structures public legibility of victimhood: who is believed, and under what pose or costume, after an incident? Headlines tend to seek catharsis in expulsions or apologies; these may be necessary, but they are rarely sufficient. When policies shift – venue bans, clearer signage, stricter backstage protocols – incidents decline locally, which suggests that institutional design matters. My concern is to resist moral panics that re-stigmatize performers or fans, and instead ask how the format itself distributes risk and how images can be reauthored without blaming those most exposed.

Chiharu Chujo: If you had to name practical steps that align with your analysis, what would they be?

Keiko Takeda: Three layers: management, venue, and representation. Management can set non-negotiables – minimum staff-to-audience ratios at fan events; a visible escalation protocol; rotating staff designated for boundary support; confidential reporting that does not jeopardize contracts; and de-incentivizing extreme spending by a few regulars (e.g., caps per session). Venues can standardize front-of-house rules with clear signage, timed interactions, panic buttons within view, and staff trained to read parasocial overreach. Representation can shift without puritanism: diversify costumes and camera grammar, avoid iconography that infantilizes availability, and invite performers to co-design imagery. Finally, sector bodies and civil groups can offer legal clinics and counseling, because negotiation on the ground is shaped by what performers know they can enforce.

Chiharu Chujo: A last word on method – how did you navigate access, consent, and your own positionality?

Keiko Takeda: I combined long-horizon observation with semi-structured interviews and artifact analysis (MV's, election broadcasts, fan media). I treat field notes as co-produced documents – what I can see and what interlocutors choose to show me. Consent was ongoing; I anonymized participants who requested it and reviewed quotations with them where feasible. Positionality matters: as a researcher, I benefit from the very openness I critique. That is why I foreground reflexive limits – moments I could not witness, off-stage tensions I could only infer – and why I triangulate accounts across performers, producers, and fans. The goal is not a totalizing verdict but a situated map that links formats, images, and feelings to the conditions that make harm more or less likely.

Chiharu Chujo: Our special issue also examines “bystanders.” Do fan communities in idol scenes meaningfully police boundaries?

Keiko Takeda: Yes, but unevenly. In *chika* circuits, regulars often act as soft stewards – explaining rules to newcomers, discouraging intrusive talk, signaling staff when

someone oversteps. Because access is priced per unit, regulars have a stake in keeping the line moving and protecting the atmosphere that sustains everyone's enjoyment. Yet bystanderism is not a panacea: peer censure can slip into gatekeeping; some fans defend norms that prioritize access over comfort; and in large-scale formats, diffusion of responsibility is common. The lesson is to infrastruct bystander capacity – clear signage, visible escalation paths, staff who validate interventions – rather than romanticize fan self-regulation. That aligns with the continuum approach: it's in the everyday micro-interventions that climates shift.

Chiharu Chujo: Some argue that these formats simply democratize pop – fans get voice; performers get platforms. How do you respond?

Keiko Takeda: There *is* real empowerment in low-barrier stages and in communities that nurture out-of-mainstream voices. My claim is not that proximity is inherently harmful, but that certain formats couple access with infantilizing representation and unilateral selection, which, taken together, thicken entitlement and constrain refusal. A better question than “for or against idols” is: *what architectures of access, staging, and image-making produce dignity and safety?* That shifts debate from morality tales to design problems.

Conclusion

Chiharu Chujo: What should readers of this special issue take from your case?

Keiko Takeda: That sexual violence is mediated – by cameras, costumes, formats, and scripts that make proximity feel natural and purchasable. That idols are not mere victims: they negotiate, resist, and re-author images and encounters – especially in *chika* circuits. And that meaningful change lies in reworking structures and representations together: dismantling the fantasies that fuel demand, while resourcing the situated tactics idols already use to claim space, time, and say.

NOTES

1. Liz Kelly, *Surviving Sexual Violence*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1988.

AUTHORS

KEIKO TAKEDA

Keiko Takeda is a sociologist and tenured lecturer at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. Her areas of specialisation are gender and sexuality studies, with a particular emphasis on sociological and cultural perspectives. She conducts social surveys and analyses contemporary arts in their social context. After obtaining a Ph.D. at Ochanomizu University, she broadened the scope of her research to include Japanese popular culture, focusing particularly on idols, cinema and comic books from a third-wave feminist perspective. She recently introduced a new media analysis methodology in Japan: multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA). Her research also focuses on exploring the structural foundations of harassment and violence in the Japanese art world.

Keiko Takeda est sociologue et maître de conférences à l'université des Études étrangères de Tokyo. Ses travaux de recherche portent sur les études de genre et de sexualité, avec un accent particulier mis sur les perspectives sociologiques et culturelles. Elle mène des enquêtes sociales et analyse les arts contemporains dans leur contexte social. Après avoir obtenu son doctorat à l'université d'Ochanomizu, elle a élargi le champ de ses recherches à la culture populaire japonaise, s'intéressant plus particulièrement aux idoles, au cinéma et aux bandes dessinées, dans une perspective féministe de troisième vague. Elle a récemment introduit au Japon une nouvelle méthodologie d'analyse des médias : l'analyse critique multimodale du discours (MCDA). Ses recherches se concentrent également sur l'exploration des fondements structurels du harcèlement et de la violence dans le monde artistique japonais.

CHIHARU CHUJO

Après avoir effectué ses années post-doctorales à l'Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales (Inalco) et à l'Université de Tokyo des Études Étrangères au Japon, Chiharu Chujo occupe actuellement le poste de maîtresse de conférences à l'Université Jean Moulin Lyon 3. Sa thèse, soutenue en 2018, se concentre sur les musiciennes japonaises engagées des années 1970 à aujourd'hui. Actuellement, ses travaux de recherche se concentrent sur les enjeux de genre dans le contexte de l'industrie musicale japonaise, avec un focus particulier sur les genres du hip-hop et de la musique électronique. Traductrice d'une multitude d'ouvrages spécialisés, dont *Femmes du jazz* de Marie Buscatto et *Be Creative* d'Angela McRobbie, elle est également l'auteur de plusieurs articles scientifiques notables, tels que « Chanter l'écologisme dans le Japon de l'après-Fukushima : l'ambivalence de la musique écoféministe chez UA » (*Itinéraires*, 2021), et « Représentations de l'amour chez les rappeuses : transgression, braconnage et dialogue » (en japonais, *Eureka*, 2023).

After finishing her postdoctoral studies at the Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales (Inalco) and the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies in Japan, Chiharu Chujo now works as a lecturer at Jean Moulin Lyon 3 University. Her thesis, which she defended in 2018, focuses on Japanese female musicians active from the 1970s to the present day who are committed to social issues. She is currently researching gender issues in the Japanese music industry, with a particular focus on hip-hop and electronic music. She has translated several

books, including *Femmes du jazz* by Marie Buscatto and *Be Creative* by Angela McRobbie. She has also written several academic articles, such as “Singing environmentalism in post-Fukushima Japan: the ambivalence of ecofeminist music in UA” (*Itinéraires*, 2021), and “Representations of love among female rappers: transgression, poaching and dialogue” (in Japanese, *Eureka*, 2023).