

EROKAKKOII: CHANGING IMAGES OF FEMALE IDOLS IN COMTEMPORARY JAPAN

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As television became the primary medium of mass communication in post-war Japan during the 1950s, singer-idols (*aidoru*) enjoyed increasingly mainstream popularity among Japanese pop music consumers largely because of increasing TV exposure. While there have been many successful male and female singing idols, not surprisingly, most fans of male *aidoru* have been females, as in the case of the vocal groups that belong to *Johnny's Jimusho* (Johnny's Office).¹ In contrast, fans of female idols consist of a more widely heterogeneous mix of both genders. Reflecting substantial postwar changes in the Japanese economy and in Japanese culture, including assumptions about gender and its various constructions in popular culture, this paper will explore the cultural significance of evolving images and receptions of Japan's increasingly popular female *aidoru*. In the process, the paper aims to document processes by which traditional gender roles are simultaneously reinforced and challenged.

This paper looks at how the concept of *erokakkoi* (erotic and cool) came to be embodied by mainstream female singing idols, analyzing the social implications of the phenomenon in terms of increasingly ambiguous gender relationships in contemporary Japan. For example, Koda Kumi, one of today's most popular Japanese female idols, is praised for her singing and dancing as well as her (in)famous erotic moves in skimpy costumes. Interestingly, Koda's fans seem to simultaneously appreciate (or at least tolerate) her overt displays of sexuality while also admiring her cool, i.e. *erokakkoi*. However, before analyzing the concept of *erokakkoi* by drawing on some of Koda's song lyrics, music videos, and media coverage, we begin by looking at how the images of mainstream female pop singers have changed since the 1980s, laying out the background that has led to the

¹ Johnny's Office (Johnny & Associates) is one of Japan's largest music agents specializing in representing and managing young male idol groups including SMAP, V6, *Arashi*, News, and KAT-TUN.

construction of a popular contemporary icon such as Koda. Finally, the paper explores the implications of gender constructions of pop performers such as Koda against the general backdrop of contemporary Japanese popular culture.

Aidoru is a somewhat tricky term requiring some elaboration. Many say that the notion of *aidoru* started in the 1960s when a French film *Aidoruo sagase* (French title, *Cherchez l'idole*; *Look for an Idol*) became a smash hit in Japan.² Whatever its origins, *aidoru* (whether male or female) are famous pop singers who enjoy loyal and substantial followings. Their songs are generally up-tempo love songs, usually written by others, although in some instances *aidoru* write their own lyrics. Those who both write and perform their own songs are called *singaa songu raitaa* (singer-songwriters) and so are distinguished from *aidoru*. Pop stars categorized as *aidoru* are young (in their teens, or at most early twenties), tend to be cute and sexually attractive, and display cheerful personalities. In general, though, they are usually less than excellent singers and/or dancers. The “greatest” singers with genuine talent are expected to be cool enough to bypass obviously teen-targeted pop tunes in favor of either slower, more serious ballads, or more edgy and aggressive rock tunes.

Musical shows featuring *aidoru*, as well as other pop stars such as singer-songwriters and sometimes bands, have been among the most popular forms of prime time television programming since the 1970s. While images of the male *aidoru* have been somewhat static since the 1980s, the number and variety of female *aidoru* representations has increased greatly. During the 1990s, female *aidoru* also branched out into different areas of the entertainment business in Japan. In contrast to the cute young singers of the 1980s, in the 1990s, *baradoru* (variety idols, young female celebs who mainly appeared on talk shows) and *guradoru* (gravure idols, young female models who had posed for magazines) became quite popular. A group of porn stars, *fudoru* (*fuzoku* idols), who worked in the sex industry and became pseudo-celebs due to adult magazine coverage, also enjoyed substantial notoriety. These popular young females added new dimensions to the concept of female *aidoru*, especially the *guradoru* (and even *fudoru*) whose presumably sexier bodies with ample breasts (*kyonyu*) stood in contrast to their predecessors' merely cute and boyishly lean body types. Although noting some of the elements of these alternative *aidoru*, this paper

² *Cherchez l'idole*, dir. Michael Boisrond (1964).

focuses on female singers who populated the pop music hit lists during the 1980s and 1990s.

The most popular *aidoru* of the 1980s included Matsuda Seiko, Kawai Naoko, Koizumi Kyoko, Kikuchi Momoko, Nakayama Miho, and Minamino Yoko.³ These performers were all in their teens⁴ and wore brightly colored dresses with numerous frills and bows, sometimes even including petticoats to emphasize wholesome teen-cuteness. While many were attractive, they were not considered beautiful to the extent of being inaccessible, but rather just cute enough to keep people interested. In fact, it seemed that none of them had model-like figures, but rather “friendly” body types, and even some imperfections (e.g., legs not perfectly straight or perhaps a little mole on the cheek). Their behavior also emphasized cuteness and youth, even to the extent of looking child-like. Most of them sang up-tempo love songs in high-pitched voices, usually while smiling and often casting an upward glance as a child does when pleading for adult attention.

Usually these songs were presented with some dancing, although the moves were simple, requiring little training or practice. Many of their lyrics were about *anata* (a polite second-person pronoun originally meaning “you,” but in love songs, usually referring to the male object of the *aidoru*’s affections).⁵ Many lyrics went on about how desperately a young woman needed to be loved by *anata*, e.g., “since *anata* was there, I was able to live on.”⁶ These lyrics seemed to suggest that what women want (and, indeed,

³ The names listed were ranked in the top 10 lists of most popular songs by the *orikon* chart cited in Nifty (accessed February 2, 2008, <http://homepage1.nifty.com/shislabo/nenkan/nenkan.htm>).

⁴ Until the early 1980s, child labor regulation prohibited 15 years-and-under performers from appearing on live TV after 9 p.m. Because of this rule, idols of the 1970s tended to be slightly older than those who succeeded them.

⁵ *Kimi* is used in male singers’ songs to address the women they love. *Kimi* is also a pronoun indicating the second person, “you,” traditionally used, interestingly, to address people of lower social status (e.g. bosses to subordinates, teachers to students).

⁶ Matsuda Seiko, *Ruriirono chikyuu* [Purple Earth], 1986 (accessed February 15, 2008, <http://www.utamap.com>). All the song lyrics in this paper were retrieved from free online collections.

need) are men, reinforcing cultural stereotypes of women's dependency on men. Interestingly, as a consequence of being constructed mainly for the Japanese male youth market, the *aidoru*'s persona highlighted cuteness and a muted physical sexuality; in turn, this suppression of overt female sexuality further reinforced the tradition of Japanese society's patriarchal structure.⁷ The *aidoru*'s naiveté is perhaps best summarized in their designation as *seijunha*, or pure and innocent youth.⁸ The aura of youthful naiveté is further underscored in media interviews with *aidoru*, which seldom reveal or touch on adult subjects. In fact, *aidoru*'s public interviews repeatedly iterate the single phrase “*ganbarimasu*” (“I will do my best”), demonstrating their desire to please their fans.

Images of female idols in the 1980s seemed to go along with the notion of traditional femininity in Japan – women were expected (at least by men) to be subservient or at least non-threatening to men. This traditional cultural construction of femininity manifested itself in many of the *aidoru*'s characteristics described above. According to Murase, *kawaii* (meaning “cute”), the most implicit qualification of *aidoru*, is “a hierarchical adjective” since it is used by older (i.e., superior) people to express affection for younger (i.e., inferior) people.⁹ Their youth and cuteness insured that *aidoru* were in no way intending to challenge existing authority in society. Furthermore, they seemed to possess a single-minded eagerness to work hard to please their fans. Their competent yet average and slightly less than perfect performances were calculated to be just that, entertaining in a non-threatening way. Many male viewers appreciated these intentions, joined “fan clubs” of these idols, and loudly cheered them during their performances.

On the other hand, feminist critics regarded this type of female

⁷ There were some *aidoru* with more mature, full-figured bodies with larger than average breasts such as Kawai Naoko who, nonetheless, were also young, cute, and perky rather than overtly sexual.

⁸ Female idols categorized as *seijunha* shunned romantic relationships with men in order to maintain their purity and innocence. If they get caught dating a man, the coverage usually criticized the idol for spoiling their *seijunha* image.

⁹ Murase Hiromi, *Feminizumu-sabukaruchā: hihyō sengen* [Feminism-Subculture: Declaration of Criticism] (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 2000), pp. 216-217.

representation as an example of the objectification of woman. For example, Akita observes, “The obvious trend was that younger women were presented as sexual objects behaving in a cute, infantile, ignorant, and stupid manner.”¹⁰ *Aidoru* were, in other words, constructed to be naïve and childlike sex objects, largely unaware of their latent sexual powers and capacities for sexual pleasure, and therefore subject to the control of men. Indeed, it could be said that female *aidoru* in the 1980s were commodities in that they were used by men, whatever their age, to ease men’s anxieties in a society where patriarchal authority was increasingly being challenged both at home and in the workplace.¹¹

Although many popular 1980s *aidoru* were influential among girls – for instance, they often functioned as role models by setting trends in fashion and hair styles¹² – they were criticized by many women and even men too, for being *burikko*, a term used negatively to describe women who display false innocence.¹³ For these critics, the constructed images of the *aidoru* reinforced the negative stereotype of women being docile, innocent and even intellectually inferior to men. Not surprisingly, the un-self-determined image of the *aidoru*, shaped largely to appeal to the demands of the patriarchy, became increasingly problematic for a younger generation of women who gained substantial disposable income and became more powerful consumers during the bubble economy of the 1980s. In fact, in the 1980s, more women attained higher education and landed professional jobs

¹⁰ Kimiko Akita, “Cuteness: The Sexual Commodification of Women in the Japanese Media,” in Theresa Carilli and Jane Campbell, eds., *Women and the Media: Diverse Perspectives* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005), p. 50.

¹¹ For example, the Equal Opportunity Law, enacted in 1985, stated the goal of achieving equality of opportunity and treatment for men and women in the workplace.

¹² The source for one of the most popular hair styles in the 1980s, the “Seiko-chan” cut, a medium bob with both sides blow-dried to flow toward the back, was Matsuda Seiko.

¹³ Laura Miller, “You are Doing Burikko! Censoring/Scrutinizing Artificer of Cute Femininity in Japanese,” in Shigeko Okamoto and Janet S. Shibamoto, eds., *Japanese Language, Gender and Ideology: Cultural Models and Real People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 149.

than ever before.¹⁴ Under these circumstances, it seemed that the images of female *aidoru* of the 1980s started to disconnect with the reality of typical Japanese teens and began to migrate to different forms of popular media. For example, we see many of the familiar elements of the *aidoru*'s cuteness featured in manga and anime heroines that are designed to nurture the mind of insecure men represented by *otaku*.¹⁵

The transformation of the image of mainstream female singers that started in the 1980s paved the way for the construction of a new female pop culture figure. These new figures, while carrying over elements of the *aidoru*'s cuteness and naiveté, incorporated more mature female characteristics designed to appeal to Japan's new generation of ever more empowered and self-determined women. For example Nakamori Akina's song about the frustration of being treated as an innocent girl became a smash hit in 1982.¹⁶ Unlike other *aidoru*, Nakamori's popular singing style was more provocative. Significantly, she did not have the customary girlish, ear-to-ear smile as she performed. She also cultivated a bad girl image that could be interpreted as a sign of resistance against the stereotypical attributes of female immaturity, innocence, and submissiveness. Her aggression toward the timid male – who was still supposed to dominate – was widely “read” as an anthem to an emerging female empowerment. Nakamori had a few more hit songs along this line and then began to gravitate to songs focused more on the sadness of love, which led to her transformation from bad girl to mature woman. Her popularity continued throughout the 1980s. This trend was followed by Kudo Shizuka into the late 1980s as well.

The 1990s saw the rise in popularity of so-called “pop queens.”

¹⁴ See the government whitepaper on female employees in Japan, *Joseino Genjoo to Shisaku* (accessed March 3, 2008, <http://www8.cao.go.jp/whitepaper/danjyo/woman/06.html>).

¹⁵ Hiroyuki Azuma, *Doubutsuka suru posutomodan* (Tokyo: Kodansha Gendaishinsho, 2001). Azuma points out that frills and short skirts with big volume are common elements of cuteness in anime and manga characters that are popular among male fans. These were some of the common features of female idols' costume in the 1980s.

¹⁶ In *Shojo A*, she sang “*jirettai, jirettai, ikutsunimietemo watashi daredemo jirettai jirettai watashiha watashiyo kankeinaiwa*” (“it is irritating. I do not care how old I look or who I am. I am myself”).

Among this new breed of singers were Amuro Namie and Hamasaki Ayumi. Both of these performers were young and cute. However, their constructed images also included stronger, more self-assertive performative elements. In Amuro's case, her songs were more edgy, with a Western beat, sometimes even veering toward hip hop, and incorporating English lyrics with sharp dynamic dance moves. Hamasaki, who wrote her own lyrics for the most part, performed with her own band, a clear sign of her artistic dominance over the musical creative process and, consequently, her leadership of her male musician colleagues. Both Amuro and Hamasaki displayed few of the *burikko* traits common among the 1980 *aidoru*, such as high-pitched singing, or displays of overt cuteness or timidity. In all, their performances were quite sophisticated with strong singing and dancing. These pop queens' assertiveness and confidence led many of their fans to admire them as *kakkoi* (cool) rather than *kawaii* (cute). This was a significant shift in the constructed images of *aidoru* since *kawaii*, as stated earlier, signified the dominance of the viewer, while *kakkoi* signified admiration of the viewer.¹⁷

While the popular media fetishized and commodified female sexuality by associating it closely with the cute young faces and bodies of the mainstream *aidoru* in the 1980s, the pop queen *aidoru* of the 1990s seemed to define their sexuality in somewhat more complex and ambiguous ways. Although they wore tight revealing costumes and had attractive bodies, singers like Amuro and Hamasaki intended their music (lyrics and music) to be at the core of their performances. Unlike the 1980s mainstream *aidoru*, who were "happily exploited by men" by emphasizing their cuteness and youth,¹⁸ Amuro and Hamasaki were principally concerned with presenting themselves as female performers with something to say (rather than as sex objects clearly designed for gratuitous male sexual pleasure). They expressed their femininity in more profound ways compared to the idols of the 1980s who explicitly solicited male protection. The pronouns used in their lyrics provide further evidence of this transition.

¹⁷ *Kakkoi* is literally translated as "good style" or "good looking." It was originally used to express admiration for heroes in action/adventure genres, sports, and so on. That people started to use *kakkoi* to show admiration for women (not heroes) seems to indicate a blurring of gender expectation in contemporary Japan.

¹⁸ Hiromi, *Feminizumu-sabukaruchā*, p. 218.

In Hamasaki's case, her songs frequently take a male perspective using *boku* (a pronoun used by men) for first person and *kimi* for female second person.¹⁹ This discrepancy between the singer's gender and the song's gender-perspective seems to function to make Hamasaki's gender position more ambiguous for her audiences, thus empowering her as an artist with a voice worthy of consideration in and of itself (regardless of gender). Gender hierarchy in Hamasaki's songs often transgresses *aidoru* conventions. For example, she only occasionally sings *anata* (which reinforces male dominance) to address a second person male, while her frequent use of *kimi* (to address both male and female second persons) implies the first person's dominance over the second person.²⁰ Amuro's case is somewhat simpler since it is "you" (the English pronoun) that many of her songs use to refer to the man she loves. Since "you" does not have any specific gender hierarchical implications to Japanese ears, it functions as a gender-leveling strategy.

In sum, although they were young and cute, the pop queen *aidoru* of the 1990s seemed to refuse to be "happily exploited" by men. Although still commodified in the male-dominated pop music industry of Japan, their gender position and image construction, as often suggested in their lyrics, seem to be symbolically representative and symptomatic of the rise of female empowerment that was becoming more evident in Japanese society at that time. Nevertheless, their strong gender positions were attenuated by presenting their sexualized bodies as performers with consequently more ambiguous gender coding depending on the subject positions of individual audience members. The traditional cultural belief that only "bad girls" enjoyed their sexuality was still a common assumption,²¹ although it was

¹⁹ For example, in the song "Close to You" (2002), Hamasaki says "*boku wa kimi ni deautame aruite kitandaroo*," ("I guess I have been walking to meet you"). The first person is designated as male, and the second person, female. These lyrics demonstrate an interesting contrast to Matsuda's lyrics quoted earlier, which state that "Since you were around, I was able to live on." In Hamasaki's case, the man finds a woman as one goal of his life, while in Matsuda's case, a woman finds a man as her reason for survival.

²⁰ *Kimi* can be used by both female and male superiors to address their subordinate.

²¹ In Japan it is still commonly assumed that a "decent" woman is not to actively pursue and/or enjoy sex. Although *fudoru* are becoming

starting to be challenged by graphic teen and youth culture as well as the women's movement. It seems as if the name says it all, the "pop queens" were queens who were supposed to behave somewhat "decently" in regard to their sexuality.

Following in the pop queen style of Amuro and Hamasaki, Koda Kumi did not have a very promising start. Although "Take Back," her first U.S. single, reached #18 on *Billboard* magazine's dance chart in November 2000, its Japanese release in December 2000 received little recognition. In 2005, her seventh single, "real Emotion/1000 *no kotoba*" ("Real Emotion/1000 Words") and the theme song from the film "*Kyuutii Hanii*" ("Cutie Honey")²² became smash hits. Following these successes, Koda released 12 CD singles in 12 consecutive weeks, making her a frequently featured guest of prime time music shows. At the end of 2005, she received the Japan Record Award, which recognized "Butterfly" as best song of the year. Since then, her songs and CD albums have constantly ranked in the top ten.²³

Koda's musical approach can be summarized as contemporary pop. Employing a variety of styles such as hip hop, R&B, dance tunes and slow ballads, she sings with a supple rhythmic flow delivered in a slightly husky voice. In this sense, her song format and singing style are somewhat similar to those of the 1990s pop queen *aidoru*. But what distinguishes her from her predecessors is her presentation. Most of her costumes are quite tight and very revealing, often featuring a calculated display of undergarments. Her typical costume in the early years consisted of a pair of extremely short shorts revealing every inch of her thighs, and a tight T-shirt

increasingly popular, women who work in the sex industry tend to be regarded as "second-class" and therefore have difficulty in transitioning to the mainstream to become *aidoru*.

²² This film was based on the popular comic book heroine, Cutie Honey, created by Nagai Go and Dynamic Production. It was released initially as manga and anime from fall 1973 to spring 1974. The manga version was published in *Shonen Champion* and later reprinted in a two-volume comic book set from Akita Shoten. The live action film featuring Koda's song was directed by Anno Hideaki.

²³ Her first widely acclaimed album, "BEST~first session," ranked sixth in sales in 2005; "BEST~second session" ranked second in 2006, and her following album, "Black Cherry," was second in 2007.

with wide neck designed to show her cleavage. In some performances, her dancing features the same kind of erotic moves typically performed in strip bars. In the “Cutie Honey” theme, the lyrics are “*konogoro hayarino onnanoko, fukufuku boin no onnanoko*” (“Girls that are trendy these days are the ones with soft big boobs”). As she sings these lines, Koda holds up her breasts with her hands to make the point emphatic. At the Japan Record Award ceremony, she wore a gold dress covering barely half of her F-sized breasts,²⁴ and shook her hips and breasts in a sexually provocative way as she performed her song “Butterfly.”²⁵

Among her fans and even among general audiences, the common term to describe her is *erokakkoi* (erotic and cool). This term is quite interesting in that it combines two distinctively different concepts. *Ero* in Japanese is not usually used to praise anybody. Rather it is often used in a negative sense. For example, *ero hon* refers to obscene or dirty books which feature excessively pornographic material. One can denounce a lecherous middle-aged man by calling him *ero oyaji* (dirty guy).²⁶ Yet, in Koda’s case, the negative concept is coupled with *kakkoi*, usually a term that expresses admiration for someone considered cool. Therefore, *erokakkoi* is quite a paradoxical term, implying that Koda is both dirty yet cool. *Erokakkoi* also embodies contrasting perspectives – “*ero*” implying the perspective of the male gaze upon the female body as sexual object, with “*kakkoi*” coming from young women admiring her coolness. Koda’s constructed image, *erokakkoi*, presents a greatly revised reflection of a new Japanese woman whose empowerment derives in large part from a positive

²⁴ “F size” means the difference between the measurement of bust top and under bust is about 22.5 cm (about nine inches), which is the second largest size usually available.

²⁵ “The record of Koda! ‘Cool erotic’ vertex,” Nikkansports, January 1, 2006 (accessed December 15, 2007, <http://www.nikkansports.com/ns/entertainment/p-et-tp0-060101-0006.html>).

²⁶ *Ero* was used in the 1920s and 1930s as part of the set phrase “*ero, guro, nansensu*” (erotic, grotesque, nonsense). The term describes a pre-WWII literary and artistic movement emphasizing eroticism, sexual corruption, and decadence. While the noun *ero* might have artistic implications involving the erotic, *eroi* (*ero*’s adjectival form) tends to have negative nuances signifying “dirty” and indecent. *Ero*, in *ero hon* and *ero oyaji*, is an abbreviation of the adjective form, *eroi*.

affirmation and control of female sexuality consciously deployed as a self-empowering means to achieve equality and even dominance over men and other women. The fact that Koda openly displays her sexuality to attract male (and female) audience members, without becoming too much of a dirty “bad” girl, would appear to be a sign of liberation.

In her interviews, Koda speaks to this, justifying the exposure of her body as a strategy for female empowerment. According to Koda, *erokakkoi* is not just about exposing female skin. She claims that she exposes her body to send a message to women that “if you find a part of your body charming and work hard to improve it, you can change yourself as I have done.”²⁷ One aspect of the “hard work,” she publicizes is her special eating scheme known as “Koda-style diet,” which requires that she eat nothing after 6:00 p.m. As we can see in this case, she does not hesitate to share her private life as a young woman, which in Japan is not usually communicated so openly to the public, especially to men. Also, on many occasions, she has expressed appreciation for the support of her female fans for the opportunity to be a role model.²⁸ In one interview, Koda emphasized her gratitude for her female fans supporting her as “*kakkoyokute ecchi*” (cool and dirty), while assuring them that she would continue to “expose her female symbols.”²⁹ According to Koda, it was her female fans’ support that enabled her to be so openly “ero” without negative perceptions of being dirty. Quite simply, she has displayed her body in order to demonstrate the results of her hard work (i.e., careful diet and diligent workout) and her pride in herself. She consciously uses her body to attract attention – whether a male gaze objectifying her body or a female gaze admiring her achievement and confidence. In any event, using her body in such a precisely controlled and intentional way is for many, but not all, women a dramatic and effective means of representing one important aspect of contemporary female empowerment.

The construction of Koda’s image might also be interpreted as

²⁷ Interview posted on Koda Kumi’s official website, “Profile,” 2006 (accessed December 13, 2007, <http://rhythmzone.net/koda/profile/>).

²⁸ For example, see “Koda Kumi,” Yahoo Music: Japan, 2007 (http://magazine.music.yahoo.co.jp/pow/20060302_001/interview_001).

²⁹ Interview about Koda Kumi’s new album, “BEST~first things~,” Yahoo Music: Japan, September 14, 2005 (accessed December 13, 2007, http://magazine.music.yahoo.co.jp/spt/20050914_001/interview_003).

another significant indicator of the decline of traditional Japanese patriarchal views (i.e., positioning women as refined and submissive and bound by duty to the home), and thus a reflection of more Westernized views of female aspirations as well as commodification. Unlike the *aidoru* of the 1980s, who presented images of female coquettishness preferred by most male viewers, Koda's performances do not emphasize innocence or timidity. Indeed, she pushes the envelope to the extent that her dancing could be considered uncomfortably taboo for many Japanese viewers. At the same time, given the global dimensions of transnational popular culture, many Japanese clearly find Koda's performance style "familiar" in its similarities to the performance styles of pop superstars Madonna and Britney Spears.

Indeed, Koda seems to be transgressing traditional Japanese mainstream cultural practices in a manner comparable to Madonna's transgressions of supposed "mainstream" U.S. and Euro cultural assumptions. In terms of sexual agency, Madonna is regarded by many as a pioneer in taking control over the representation of sexual fantasies including the extreme nudity of works such as *Sex*. Although Koda has not yet published nude photos, she seems to have crossed a new boundary in Japan's ever evolving pop music scene. In fact, Koda herself admits that she is proud that many think that she has "conquered" the sexy singing style in the Japanese pop music scene.³⁰ However, while Madonna is praised for breaking down boundaries between taboo and non-taboo, the self-commodifying quality way in which she packages her sexuality must be acknowledged and perhaps best understood as a crucial aspect of her performance of female self-empowerment.³¹ Likewise, Koda's constructed image can be understood as a self-commodifying as well as self-actualizing of her female body, a position based not on traditional Japanese notions of femininity but on a new norm largely modeled by American pop music megastars.

Koda's song lyrics, however, seem to represent more traditional Japanese ideas of femininity. In writing lyrics for her love songs, Koda's

³⁰ "Koda Kumi Interview! 3rd," HMV Online, January 21, 2008 (accessed on February 23, 2008, <http://www.hmv.co.jp/news/article/801210157>).

³¹ Myra MacDonald, *Representing Women: Myths of Femininity in the Popular Media* (Oxford: A Hodder Arnold Publication, 1995), pp. 115 and 130.

use of second person pronouns for the object of her love (basically a man) is somewhat inconsistent. While she often uses *kimi* (as stated above, a pronoun for the second person implying a slight dominance of the first person), she also uses *anata* (a polite second person pronoun) in some of her songs. Moreover, the content of her songs suggests that a woman's happiness is dependent on her man. For example, in "Butterfly," she writes:

You are not everything to me
 But if you are not with me,
 Everything about me will go wrong
 That is why I want you to notice
 there is something about me that has changed.³²

These lyrics imply that the efforts of a woman to improve her appearance are only meaningful if and when she receives the appreciation of a man. As stated above, Koda herself worked hard to become fit, overlapping art with real life. In "Anytime," her newest single, Koda writes about how she cannot stop thinking about *anata*, how she wants *anata* to grant her wishes, and how she awaits a phone call from *anata*, again reinforcing women's dependence on (and appreciation of) men.³³

These seemingly incongruent aspects of Koda's constructed image might be explained in the context of postmodernism. MacDonald (1995) claims that postmodernism manifests itself when a dislocation between image and identity sets in. According to her, the rigorous workout routines proclaimed in many contemporary women's magazines serve as a route to regain a homology of images and identity that would otherwise be lost. Koda's claim is that her external image is based not merely on a revealing costume or erotic moves but, perhaps more importantly, on the hard work she has put into defining her body. Thus, Koda seems to have successfully merged her private identity with her public image in a feministic way. MacDonald also claims that it is in the postmodern era when style has come to be valued over substance and that since women are presumably more fluent than men in the language of style, they are more likely to benefit from the opportunities offered by postmodernism.³⁴ Koda's constructed

³² Released on June 22, 2005 from Avex Trax. This song won the Japan Record Award in the same year.

³³ Released on January 23, 2008 from Avex Trax.

³⁴ MacDonald, *Representing Women*, p. 34.

image explicitly signifies the “postmodern” through her “fluency” as a savvy female cultivating a new style of coolness in the Japanese pop scene, achieving remarkable popularity as *erokakkoi*. However, this liberated female sexuality is now coupled with a more recent and seemingly contradictory reinforcement of female dependency on men, as evidenced in her song lyrics, again suggesting the dominance of style over substance in the postmodern period.

In a recent interview,³⁵ Koda, who recently turned 25, declared she wants to become an elegant lady with good manners. She admitted that elegance must come from the inside and she is therefore going to try to be more knowledgeable and be more conscious of how she behaves.³⁶ Interestingly, this remark bears resemblance to the notion of an ideal woman in traditional Japan and cuts, significantly, against her breakthrough image featuring revealing costumes and sexy dancing. This seems to suggest that, although she has broken taboos, Koda is now willing to conform to more traditional notions of a woman as she settles into adulthood. Maybe she will drop the “ero” part from *erokakkoi* and become *erekakkoi* (elegant and cool) some day.

As discussed above, the images of Japanese female idols have undergone significant transformations in recent decades. These transformations reflect the dynamic nature of the *aidoru*'s fandom, the substantive postwar changes in constructions of gender, and the state of the economy that nurtures the popular culture scene of the postmodern era. Although Koda's signature image seems to have transgressed the norms for mainstream performances of female *aidoru* in Japan, thus opening up new possibilities for the artistic expression of the female body in motion, the questions of who defines and controls the discourse regarding female sexuality and gender roles, as MacDonald suggests, still seem to remain largely unanswered.³⁷

³⁵ “Special Interview,” Oricon Style, January 30, 2008 (accessed on February 3, 2008, http://www.oricon.co.jp/music/interview/080130_02.html).

³⁶ MacDonald, *Representing Women*, p. 164.

³⁷ *Ibid.*