

*Kanashimi no Wasurekata: Documentary of Nogizaka46.*  
 Directed by Maruyama Takeshi, Toho Co., Ltd., 2015  
 Redefining the “Kawaii Princess” Phenomenon: The Journey of  
 Rina Ikoma

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Since the surge in the popularity of AKB48 and groups alike, Japan’s “*kawaii* princesses” (Kimura 46) have become ubiquitous in various forms of Japanese media, spreading their cute images all over the archipelago. *The Japan Times* once insisted that these multimember female-idol groups “must be pure but sexy, docile yet energetic, reserved but always cheerful for photos” – an “impossible set of ideals” (“Editorial”), which were originally to attract the *otaku* (geeks) of Akihabara. However, the element of a pure and innocent fantasy has become well accepted by the general public once it appeared in the mainstream media because this is a kind of quality that is attractive to a large population. The pop girls eventually became icons, symptomatic of a “national idol,” by which “we, ‘Japanese’ ‘all’ know and love” (Galbraith and Karlin 1).

In Japan, idols are not required to give quality performances, because “fans seek to finish incomplete works and generate derivative works” (Uno 18-19). Beyond Japan, for example, AKB48’s business model is widely successful throughout East and Southeast Asia. It is an iconic symbol of Japan’s soft power policy of cool Japan and a means of achieving economic revitalization by exporting culture. Having followed extensively AKB48’s international diffusions, I have reached the conclusion that Japan’s *kawaii* princesses are only influential within Asia (Kimura). As of 2017, there have been sister groups in Jakarta, Shanghai, Bangkok, Manila and Taipei.

As much as AKB48 have spread beyond Japanese borders in Asia, they have also created sister groups within Japan. The opening of Tokyo’s AKB48 Theatre in Akihabara in 2005 was quickly followed by the opening of Nagaya’s SKE48 Theatre in 2008, Osaka’s NMB48

in 2010 and Fukuoka's HKT48 in 2011. By the mid-2010s, this expansion also took place in smaller urban areas. The city of Niigata, which holds little economic or political significance outside of its prefecture, was selected as the fourth Japanese city to host AKB48 sisters: NGT48. This was a rather surprising choice since the larger, cosmopolitan Sapporo was predicted to carry the next franchise. As AKB48 have expanded into regional Japan, the urban product of *kawaii* princess is no longer necessarily linked to major cities. This correlation between pop idols and urban culture has, therefore, become much more unrestricted and broad. One sees evidence of this in the 2016 establishment of the latest group, STU48, which was announced in the greater Setouchi area, consisting of Hiroshima, Okayama, Hyogo, Tokushima, Kagawa and Ehime prefectures. The district offers scenic beauty and nostalgia rather than anything resembling a cosmopolitan setting. Through the expansion of the *kawaii* princess phenomenon from Tokyo to smaller cities, the performers have indeed become a Japanese national icon. This is partly reflected in their lyrics. For example, STU48's debut song, *Setouchi no Koe* (The Voice of Setouchi), is not cheesy or energetic as pop groups' songs tend to be; rather, it is a choir song delivering images of small-town Japanese girls.

While AKB48 expanded into sister groups outside of Tokyo, the official rival Nogizaka46 was established in Tokyo in 2011, followed in 2015 by another associated group, Keyakizaka46. Nogizaka is a district of central Tokyo that is well-known as the home of the Japanese advertisement industry. It appeared at first that Nogizaka46 reflected sophisticated cosmopolitan Tokyo more than AKB48 ever did. However, in Nogizaka46's debut single, Rina Ikoma was selected as lead singer, who described herself as an ordinary country girl. This perhaps marks the beginning of an alternative *kawaii* princess figure, one reflecting images of country Japan rather than of the big cities.

The 2015 documentary on Nogizaka46 begins with the view of Rina's mother, who finds it very strange that her daughter is an idolized figure. Rina is from the quiet country town of Yurihonjo, in Akita Prefecture, approximately one hour south of the prefectural

capital, Akita City. The Prefecture is known for its aging population, long winters, and high suicide rate, and its capital is arguably one of Japan's quietest prefectural capitals. Rina's personal history is as drab as her home town. Before joining Nogizaka46 at the age of 15, Rina had never been kissed, nor had she ever been on a date. She had been subject to bullying, and considered that being *kawaii* would attract unnecessary attention. She was at the bottom of the "school caste" (Suzuki and Honda; Hori). Rina was lucky to have met her only friend in middle school, though her academic ranking was not good enough to allow the two girls to go to the same high school. It was Rina's father who felt pity for his daughter – he submitted the Nogizaka46 application on her behalf, so she could have a short break from home during the audition. If Rina had any motivation behind her application, it involved hopes to move away from her school. She had no ambitions to be a pop star. Having gone through the final audition in Tokyo's Nogizaka, all of a sudden, Rina found herself the lead singer in a multibillion yen project that would make her the next J-pop star.

The documentary picks up on the emotional journeys of key Nogizaka46 members. Most seem to have had dark personal experiences, especially at school. They are happy to be popstars now, but the tight competition within the group, such as who would sing center-stage, proved exhausting. Rina, surrounded by more "talented" and prettier performers, such as Mai Shiraishi and Erika Ikuta, thought she should not be the lead singer. But when she lost that status at the release of the group's sixth single, she dropped down flat on stage. Rina's emotional journey did not end there. Unexpectedly, she was released to AKB48 on an "exchange" deal. Many of her Nogizaka46 co-performers were troubled by the decision; it was as unacceptable as moving from the Boston Red Sox to the New York Yankees, or from FC Barcelona to Real Madrid. But Rina accepted the offer without much hesitation – she did not even ask her mother for advice. At this moment, Rina's mother realized that her daughter had left her. Although featuring half a dozen key performers, the documentary focuses primarily on Rina.

Towards the end of the documentary, we see Rina going back to her old school in Yurihonjo, Akita – the place where she had nothing to hope for. Treated as a pop star, she cries listening to the students' music performance. Back at her family home, she tells her mother over dinner what happened at school. We hear she uses “nda” – “yes” in the local dialect – a manifestation of her being an uncool Akita native. Of course, as a member of Nogizaka46, she *is* now a *kawaii* princess. But she remains a country girl. Rina is a living example of a new combination of cool and uncool in the J-pop industry. She is clearly making herself comfortable in the image-driven world because it lets her be who she is.

Note: Rina Ikoma's “graduation” from Nogizaka46 was exclusively reported in *Nikkan Sports* tabloid newspaper on 30 January 2018, and she immediately confirmed it on her blog. Her farewell concert was held on 22 April 2018 at Tokyo's Nippon Budokan, where The Beatles had their performance in 1966. Rina's last idol show was lively broadcast at over 120 theatres nation-wide. She is now pursuing a career in acting.

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