

The *Kōhaku* Song Contest: A Community in Performance

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In a concert hall, Tokyo, an elderly couple clutch their prized tickets and watch the exciting, live event unfold before them. In Hawai'i, a group of young expatriates sing along with the lively radio broadcast. In rural Japan, a Tokyo 'Office Lady' sits with her parents under a heated quilt (kotatsu) and glances up at the song lyrics on the television screen between mouthfuls of New Year soba noodles.¹

These situations typify the annual ritual of experiencing *Kōhaku utagassen* (The Red and White Song Contest), the eagerly anticipated popular music concert held on New Year's Eve at NHK Hall in Tokyo.² This long-running evening program unites professional bands and soloists to perform songs of varied subject matter, ranging from culturally specific food to scenic rural landscapes. In many ways, the contest is a light-hearted battle of the sexes: female and male performers are divided into Red and White teams, respectively.³ Seated in a row in the body of the concert hall are celebrity judges and at the end of the program they, and a capacity audience of approximately 3500 people, vote to determine the winning team.

Following the program's first broadcast in 1951,⁴ *Kōhaku* has evolved from a humble one-hour radio show into an extravagant television production exceeding four hours, most notably the result of advancing technologies and broadcast mediums. In recent times, *Kōhaku* has been transmitted throughout Japan and to eighty countries and regions via radio, cable and satellite media.⁵ What is particularly significant about *Kōhaku* is its ability to achieve extremely high television ratings in Japan. Despite a noticeable decline in popularity during the mid 1980s,

¹ These observations draw from information obtained during fieldwork in Japan (Winter 1999–2000 and 2000–2001), which forms the core of research towards my PhD. I gratefully thank Dr Kimi Coaldrake from the University of Adelaide for her helpful comments during the preparation of this article.

² NHK (Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai, or Japan Broadcasting Corporation) is Japan's sole public radio and television broadcaster.

³ When acts include both male and female performers, the sex of the lead singer usually determines to which team the act belongs.

⁴ Although this was the inaugural broadcast, *Kōhaku*'s origins lie in an earlier NHK program, which was first aired in 1945, during the US Occupation. See Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai, *Broadcasting in Japan: The Twentieth Century Journey from Radio to Multimedia* (Tokyo: NHK, 2002) 89–90.

⁵ As of December 2001. Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai Executive-General of Broadcasting 'NHK *Kōhaku utagassen* [Year-End Grand Song Festival],' *Summary of NHK Press Conference*, December 2001, <www.nhk.or.jp/pr/keiei/toptalk/s_e0112.htm> (12 April 2002).

early 1990s and early 2000s, *Kōhaku* is consistently the number one television program each year—an outstanding feat for what is, in essence, a live music contest.⁶ Moreover, unlike any other program (music or otherwise) in Japan, *Kōhaku* is firmly integrated into traditional Japanese customs for the New Year holiday period.

In order to identify reasons for the popularity and prominent cultural status of *Kōhaku*, this article examines the contest's song performers as members of an exclusive community—a cherished and harmonious 'in-group' (*uchi*). Through 'quasi-intimacy'⁷ (a sense of closeness, familiarity and inclusion), those who are marked as being 'outside' (*soto*), such as television audiences, are also cordially invited to experience the *Kōhaku* community. The article begins with a glimpse of the broader context—the Japanese popular music world—to see how relationships between stars and their fans are cultivated and nurtured. The second section examines how the *Kōhaku* community is defined, with specific reference made to the landmark 50th *Kōhaku*, held in 1999, broadcast on the cusp of the so-called 'new millennium.' The final section examines the *Kōhaku* community in performance, identifying key aspects of quasi-intimacy in selected performances from the televised 50th *Kōhaku*.⁸

The Japanese Popular Music World

Like other industrialised nations, Japan boasts an eclectic range of mass-mediated music genres. *Kōhaku*, however, presents only mainstream acts, the majority of which perform either J-pop⁹ or *enka* songs. Contemporary dance, rock and pop music all fit under the broad category of J-pop, a genre most popular amongst young people. J-pop songs generally contain both Japanese and English lyrics and use Western-influenced chord progressions and instruments such as electric guitars, drums and synthesisers.¹⁰ *Enka*, however, is a traditional genre consisting of emotional and sentimental ballads, which primarily appeal to older Japanese people. Although *enka* employs Western instruments, its characteristic features are 'Japanese scales, rhythms [and] vocal techniques,' particularly the slow vocal vibrato *ko-bushi*.¹¹

The Star Image: J-pop

Unlike Western countries, where stars may have exceptional musical talent or physical characteristics, many J-pop stars are not necessarily reliant on musical skill or dancing ability.

⁶ Television ratings are independently calculated by Video Research Ltd. For *Kōhaku* ratings since 1962, in all Japanese regions, see <www.videor.co.jp/data/ratedata/program/01kouhaku.htm>. For a critique of *Kōhaku* and its fluctuating popularity, see Hiroshi Ogawa, 'The Rise and Fall of the Red-and-White Show,' *Pacific Friend* 18.8 (1990): 33.

⁷ This term is adapted from Andrew A. Painter, 'Japanese Daytime Television, Popular Culture and Ideology,' *Contemporary Japan and Popular Culture*, ed. John Whittier Treat (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1996) 197–234.

⁸ Focus, here, is on the television version of *Kōhaku*. In recent years, many different ways of experiencing the televised *Kōhaku* have emerged. Some people record the program onto videotape and mail it to family and friends overseas; others prefer to participate in other New Year activities and watch the tape at their convenience. Digital television broadcasting has also enabled viewing audiences to vote instantaneously.

⁹ 'J-pop' is a contraction of 'Japanese Pop'.

¹⁰ For a more comprehensive discussion of this J-pop, see Linda Fujie, 'Popular Music,' *Handbook of Japanese Popular Culture*, ed. R.G. Powers and H. Kato (London: Greenwood Press, 1996) 197–220. For an examination of the use of traditional musical elements in J-pop, see Hugh De Ferranti, "'Japanese Music' Can be Popular,' *Popular Music* 21.2 (2002): 195–208.

¹¹ For a comprehensive definition and history of the genre, see Christine R. Yano, *Tears of Longing: Nostalgia and the Nation in Japanese Popular Song* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Centre, 2002) 3, 28–44.

Instead, singers are popularised through their congenial, ‘boy/girl next door’ persona (*tonari no onna/otoko no ko*). In this sense, young stars function as both a role model to, and a representative of, their generation. During the 1980s, an extreme incarnation was seen in the ‘cute boy/girl’ image (*kawaiiko-chan*) of sweet tempered, baby-faced idols such as Naoko Kawai and Hiroko Yakushimaru. Judith Herd, in her 1984 discussion of the ‘cute boy/girl’ image, observes that

if the singer is above average in appearance, ability and charm—not too much to alienate or offend the audience, but just enough to give the illusion that ‘you can also be a star if you try hard enough’—he or she can have a secure career simply by being a cute, nice average teenager with no special talent.¹²

Today, many J-pop stars maintain the image of ‘being a cute, nice average teenager with no special talent’ whether they are teenagers or not.¹³ This is primarily achieved by displaying a relaxed demeanour, good-natured personality and playful sense of humour. A star can project this image through frequent appearances in television commercials, dramas, variety shows and music programs.¹⁴ These appearances also effectively act as a tie-in promotion for the star’s current single, thus encouraging CD sales. The well-known, five-member male idol group SMAP¹⁵ is archetypal of this common trend. Amongst a plethora of television credits, the likeable group members host the weekly television variety show SMAP X SMAP,¹⁶ broadcast on Fuji TV, and have separately forged successful careers as actors, comedians and solo vocalists.

Ubiquitous stars, like the members of SMAP, also project the image of being available for companionship. Hiroshi Ogawa calls such stars ‘quasi-companions’ (*gijiteki nakama*): unlike real people (who are unpredictable) and relationships (where there is always the threat of conflict), ‘pop idols smile and appear friendly all the time.’¹⁷ Elaborating on Ogawa’s term, Hiroshi Aoyagi observes that quasi-companions ‘provide their ... followers with a virtual sense of intimacy—the feeling that affirms cultural emphasis on interconnectedness in Japan.’¹⁸ Furthermore,

this form of companionship ... signifies the position of each individual as part of a unified group ... Although the companionship which Japanese pop-idols emphasize is understood as artificial, impervious, and thereby realized only in fantasy, the intimacy it evokes can be as strong as, or even stronger than, that shared among school friends.¹⁹

¹² Judith Ann Herd, ‘Trends and Taste in Japanese Popular Music: A Case-Study of the 1982 Yamaha World Popular Music Festival,’ *Popular Music* 4 (1984): 78.

¹³ Herd, ‘Trends’ 78.

¹⁴ For an examination of celebrity appearances in Japanese television programs, see Carolyn S. Stevens and Shūhei Hosokawa, ‘So Close and Yet so Far: Humanizing Celebrity in Japanese Variety Shows, 1960s–1990s,’ *Asian Media Productions*, ed. Brian Moeran (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001) 223–46.

¹⁵ In 1999, the group SMAP performed in *Kōhaku* for the ninth time in its career. SMAP, an anagram of ‘Sports Music Assemble People,’ is the creation of the infamous talent agency ‘Johnny’s *Jimusho*’ (official English title ‘Johnny and Associates’), which has produced many successful male J-pop groups. For further discussion on SMAP and ‘Johnny’s *Jimusho*’, see Philip Brasor and Masako Tsubuku, ‘Idol Chatter: The Evolution of J-Pop,’ *Japan Quarterly* 44.2 (1997): 55–65.

¹⁶ For further information about the program, see <www.fujitv.co.jp/b_hp/smappmap>.

¹⁷ Hiroshi Ogawa, *Ongaku Suru Shakai* [A Musical Society] (Tokyo: Keisō Shobō, 1988) 122–23. Cited in Hiroshi Aoyagi, *Island of Eight Million Smiles: Pop-Idol Performances and the Field of Symbolic Production*, PhD thesis, University of British Columbia, 1999, 88.

¹⁸ Aoyagi, *Island of Eight Million Smiles* 88.

¹⁹ Ogawa, *Ongaku Suru Shakai* 122–123. Cited in Aoyagi, *Island of Eight Million Smiles* 88.

The Star Image: *Enka*

Enka stars, like their J-pop counterparts, also function as quasi-companions but have somewhat more complex images. Moreover, an *enka* star's image is often based around the representation of an ideal rather than an equal. Some male singers may represent the fantasy image of idealised masculinity, complete with husky deep voice and rugged appearance, like *enka* 'godfather' and *Kōhaku* veteran Saburo Kitajima.²⁰ Other male *enka* stars, like Shin'ichi Mori,²¹ project the image of 'the perfect Japanese son; handsome, well-groomed, serious rather than frivolous, and above all devoted to mother.'²²

Female stars also have highly constructed images, particularly those characterised by the 'enka beauty' (*enka bijin*) and 'kimono beauty' (*kimono bijin*) movement that emerged during the 1990s. Fuyumi Sakamoto²³ is considered especially charming among this group because of her 'sweet but powerful' voice and her desirable body shape, which is 'best suited to *kimono*.'²⁴ Yet an *enka* star's image is often more complex than it initially seems. In a contradictory twist on her feminine appearance, Sakamoto performs 'men's songs.' These songs are usually written in the first-person and use gender-specific Japanese lyrics that mark the singer as being male. Although this intriguing image is a novelty for many, gender-crossing in *enka* performance is not unusual; Aki Yashiro²⁵ is renowned for performing the men's song '*Funa uta*' (Boat Song) whilst dressed in a feminine evening gown. Conversely, male *enka* star Ken'ichi Mikawa²⁶ is famous for singing men's songs whilst wearing feminine make-up and a glamorous, bejewelled costume.

In contrast with J-pop stars, who 'exude a false air of innocence,' Japanese *enka* stars must embody the sentimental and melancholy tales of which they sing, for 'in the world of *enka*, it is taken for granted that [experiencing] hardship of one kind or another is essential if a singer is to effectively sing about the pathos of life.'²⁷ *Enka* stars habitually describe the years of tireless struggle they endured prior to fame and fortune, publicly reliving the hardships of their personal lives via interviews, performances and television appearances. An example is the often-told 'rags-to-riches' tale of *Kōhaku* mainstay Hiroshi Itsuki.²⁸ During the 1960s in rural Fukui prefecture, the teenaged Itsuki was motivated to become a professional singer to help ease his mother's financial troubles after his father abandoned them. Following several failed debuts under various stage names and professional misfortunes (such as the death of his teacher), Itsuki lead a 'hand-to-mouth existence':

in desperation for food he once upturned his *tatami* mats to see if any coins had fallen between them. Finding only one ... meal ticket, he walked across town, downed a bowl of *ramen* [noodles], and walked all the way home, hungry again.²⁹

²⁰ In 1999, the soloist Kitajima Saburō performed in *Kōhaku* for the thirty-sixth time in his career.

²¹ In 1999, the soloist Shin'ichi Mori performed in *Kōhaku* for the thirty-second time in his career.

²² Christine Yano, 'Charisma's Realm: Fandom in Japan,' *Ethnology* 36.4 (1997): 335–349.

²³ In 1999, the soloist Fuyumi Sakamoto performed in *Kōhaku* for the twelfth time in her career.

²⁴ Yano, *Tears of Longing* 61–62.

²⁵ In 1999, the soloist Aki Yashiro performed in *Kōhaku* for the twenty-first time in her career.

²⁶ In 1999, the soloist Ken'ichi Mikawa performed in *Kōhaku* for the sixteenth time in his career.

²⁷ Unknown, 'The World of *Enka*,' *Pacific Friend* 19.8 (1991): 1–9.

²⁸ In 1999, the soloist Hiroshi Itsuki performed in *Kōhaku* for the twenty-ninth time in his career.

²⁹ Jean Wilson, 'Big In Japan: Itsuki Hiroshi,' Tokyo Classified, n.d. <www.metropolis.co.jp/bigin/japanarchive299/258/bigin/japaninc.htm> (1 January 2003) (italics added).

In spite of the tough times, he overcame adversity, adopted the stage name Hiroshi Itsuki, won a recording contract on a television contest (*Zen-nihon kayo senshukan* [All-Japan Song Contest]), and successfully forged a career as a prominent *enka* singer.

Anecdotes such as these confirm that a star is qualified to perform the poignant songs of suffering and sacrifice, characteristic of *enka*. Moreover, they also promote a strong emotional bond between fans and the star: each time the familiar story is re-told, loyal fans sympathise with the star's plight and, perhaps, reflect on similar experiences from their own lives. The resulting sentiment is one of reassurance and camaraderie: the fan knows the star will never forget his humble roots and upbringing.

Fan/Star Interaction

A star's status as quasi-companion is further developed through actual contact with fans, via activities organised by financial support groups (*kōenkai*) and fan clubs (*fuan kurabu*). Events such as gift-giving and handshaking ceremonies at stage concerts, gatherings with fans to play games and star photo shoots with amateur photographers maintain the illusion that stars strive for a 'one on one' personal relationship with fans.³⁰ An extreme example of interaction between fan and star was in 2000, when Hiroshi Itsuki hosted an extravagant party to commemorate his milestone thirty-five years in the Japanese popular music industry. The event, consisting of a six-course meal and a fifteen-song concert, was also an opportunity for the star to express gratitude to his fans for their support. Other *enka* stars, actors and composers were in attendance but, in a dramatic gesture, three hundred of his seven hundred invited guests were fans. Jean Wilson, in her report on the party, observes how the food was carefully chosen in order to reflect Itsuki's career: fans were reminded of Itsuki's home town when a platter of seafood from the prefecture of Fukui was served.³¹ A *matsutake* mushroom soup referenced the first Japanese character in his real name, Matsuyama, and an apple salad from the Chikumagawa River region brought back memories of his famous 1975 song, 'Chikumagawa.'³²

By encouraging fans to physically and personally interact with their beloved star, these activities enable quasi-intimate experiences. Although the intimacy is perhaps as strong as that felt with a real companion, it is best described as 'quasi' because in reality, stars are not close friends with the fan—it is instead a mutually beneficial fantasy.³³ Such quasi-intimate experiences mirror the Japanese relationship of dependency (*amae*), whereby one who seeks indulgence (*amaeru*) symbiotically complements one who provides that indulgence (*amayakasu*).³⁴ The origins of this concept lie in mother/child interdependency and are characterised by intimate contact. Psychiatrist Takeo Doi, in his analysis of Japanese behaviour,

³⁰ Hiroshi Aoyagi, 'Pop Idols and the Asian Identity,' *Japan Pop!: Inside the World of Japanese Popular Culture*, ed. Timothy Craig (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2000) 312. For a case study of the 'Shin'ichi Mori *Kōenkai*' and its star/fan activities, see Yano, *Tears of Longing* 127–41.

³¹ Jean Wilson, 'Theatre Eye: Itsuki Hiroshi's Lavish Anniversary Party,' *Eye-Ai* January (2000): 28–29.

³² Wilson, 'Big In Japan' Internet. Wilson, 'Theatre Eye' 28–29.

³³ Ogawa, as previously quoted, describes this feeling as 'intimate' rather than 'quasi-intimate.' Nevertheless, to avoid confusion with 'the real' but without diminishing the feeling's intensity, it is more appropriately labelled here as 'quasi-intimate.' Ogawa, *Ongaku Suru Shakai* 122–23. Cited in Aoyagi, *Island of Eight Million Smiles* 88.

³⁴ Takie Sugiyama Lebra, *Japanese Patterns of Behaviour* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawai'i, 1976) 54–55.

states that it extends beyond familial relations, arguing that Japanese society itself is deeply permeated by *amae*.³⁵ Furthermore, the concept of *amae* can be used to understand 'not only the psychological makeup of the individual Japanese but of the structure of Japanese society as a whole.'³⁶ Drawing on studies conducted by social anthropologist Chie Nakane, Doi suggests that 'the emphasis on vertical relationships ... stipulated as characteristic of the Japanese-type social structure, could also be seen as an emphasis on *amae*.'³⁷ As such, the relationship between star and fan can be viewed as a vertical relationship of hierarchy that is based on *amae*. I contend that *Kōhaku*—the most popular music program, which showcases the most popular music stars—is the ultimate site for this relationship to flourish. This is primarily achieved through the construction of an in-group (*uchi*) to which the stars belong and the fans are seemingly invited. The following section examines how this in-group—the *Kōhaku* community of song performers—is defined.

Defining the 'Community of Song Performers' in the 50th *Kōhaku*

Customarily, December marks the beginning of the most important holiday period in Japan. Festive activities such as year-end cleaning, pounding rice to make glutinous cakes (*mochi*) and exchanging gifts (*o-seibo*) are undertaken to welcome in the New Year. In 1999, 'new millennium' celebrations and Y2K precautions were also planned. Similarly, preparations for the *Kōhaku* program were underway and anticipation for the landmark fiftieth event escalated dramatically. Across Japan, the media was saturated with heated debate and the usual widespread speculation: which singers will appear this year? What songs will be performed? Who will wear the most lavish costume?

NHK, the broadcasting corporation that produces *Kōhaku*, greatly contributed to the hype through its pre-program publicity. Throughout December, several short television programs were aired: for example, '*Kōhaku*: The Background Story Tracing Half a Century—A Song Contest Born from Fiery Ruin'³⁸ presented an historical overview, whilst 'Song Tells the Story of the Eras: Nurturing Dreams of the 50th *Kōhaku*'³⁹ examined chronologically *Kōhaku* contests in relation to significant moments in world history. Television magazines, newspapers and internet sites not affiliated with NHK also promoted the milestone 50th *Kōhaku*, chiefly by reviewing highlights from the program's history. One magazine,⁴⁰ for example, proclaimed the post-childbirth comeback performance by J-pop star Namie Amuro⁴¹ as the most memorable from the 49th *Kōhaku* (1998). The article relished and re-lived each emotional moment:

... [Amuro] walked forward to the audience and bowed. Some called out 'welcome back!'—she began to weep. Whilst clutching her microphone in her right hand, large

³⁵ Takeo Doi, *The Anatomy of Dependence*, 2nd ed., trans. John Bester (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1981).

³⁶ Doi, *The Anatomy of Dependence* 28.

³⁷ Chie Nakane, *Japanese Society*, 2nd ed. (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1973). Cited in Doi, *The Anatomy of Dependence* 28.

³⁸ Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai, *Kōhaku: hanseiki no butai ura ~ takeato kara umareta utagassen* [*Kōhaku*: The Background Story Tracing Half a Century—A Song Contest Born from Fiery Ruin], television program (broadcast 16 December 1999).

³⁹ Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai, *Uta wa jidai o katatta ~ yume o tsumuida kōhaku 50 kai* [Song Tells the Story of the Eras: Nurturing Dreams of the 50th *Kōhaku*], television program (broadcast 26 and 27 December 1999).

⁴⁰ Tokyo News Tsūchinsha, *TV gaido zōkan ~ uta no hon: bestu hito '99* [TV Guide Additional Issue—Song Book: Best Hits '99] (Tokyo: Tokyo News Tsūchinsha, 1999).

⁴¹ In 1999, Namie Amuro performed in *Kōhaku* as a soloist for the fifth time in her career.

teardrops began to fall. She continued to bow whilst she was tearfully singing and she concluded the last line of the song ... with a smile.⁴²

Conjecture followed reminiscence: will Amuro appear in the 50th Kōhaku? Will her song performance be just as memorable? This media promotion, in effect, evoked nostalgia for the program as well as its song performers.

Unlike singers in amateur song contests, Kōhaku song performers are seasoned professionals who have firmly made their mark in the Japanese popular music world. This does not, however, guarantee membership within the highly elite Kōhaku community of song performers. The selection process is tightly controlled by NHK staff, who examine a song performer's popularity over the year and/or a song's suitability for the program's theme. The general public also contributes, in part, to choosing new members through a national popularity survey conducted by NHK. Nevertheless, the corporation's own guidelines must be strictly adhered to: Kōhaku is a family program and must contain musical variety for young and old. Furthermore, both songs and performers must not be controversial or scandalous.⁴³

The community of song performers is symbolically formed before the program even begins. In the case of the 50th Kōhaku, fifty-four acts were publicly announced by NHK on 1 December 1999. Forty-four of these had performed in previous Kōhaku programs and some, classified here as 'veterans,' had appeared in twenty or more programs. Ten acts were invited to perform in Kōhaku for the very first time. Stars often become anxious for an invitation to perform because, for many, it signifies reaching the pinnacle of their career.⁴⁴ It is an especially great honour to be a 'newcomer': singers are formally acknowledged by NHK, and publicly recognised by fans, as possessing characteristics in common with the most revered Japanese popular music stars. For many newcomers, it is an opportunity to convey respect for their families—a sentiment called *oyakoko*. 'I will be able to make my grandpa and grandma happy' said Kenji, a member of the neo-folk group 19, when he was selected for the first time for the 50th Kōhaku. *Enka* singer Yuri Harada, stated 'at last I am able to achieve *oyakoko*' when she was finally asked to perform, after eighteen years in the music industry.⁴⁵

The performers in the 50th Kōhaku fall under Anthony P. Cohen's definition of 'community': they are 'members of a group of people' that 'have something in common with each other,

⁴² Tokyo News Tsūchinsha, TV *gaido zōkan* 18. English translation by Natsuko Arai.

⁴³ The guidelines are such that performers, even if not involved in a scandal, may be refused an invitation. The legendary *enka* star Hibari Misora was blacklisted from the 1973 Kōhaku (despite appearing sixteen times previously) because of her brother's association with Japanese gangs (*yakuza*). Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai, *Broadcasting in Japan* 164.

⁴⁴ On occasion, some artists do not accept their Kōhaku invitation. In 1999, popular J-pop star Hikaru Utada unexpectedly refused her invitation, claiming a conflict of commitments during the New Year period. She publicly apologised to shocked fans, stating that her album-recording timetable clashed with Kōhaku and she was unwilling to re-schedule. Other performers (more often young J-pop stars) openly declare they would never accept an invitation, claiming that Kōhaku, with its elderly *enka* singers, is too old-fashioned and is an unsuitable platform for their modern style of music. By contrast, in 1978, the female duo Pink Lady declined as part of a controversial publicity stunt to improve record sales: they instead held a charity concert that was broadcast throughout Japan in the same timeslot as Kōhaku. Despite best efforts, Pink Lady's rival concert did not achieve successful ratings and the duo's popularity continued to decline. For further details about this event, see Lora Sharnoff, transl., 'The Glory and Fall of the Pink Lady,' *Japan Quarterly* 26.2 (1979): 161-165.

⁴⁵ Kakumi Kobayashi, 'Eve Song Spectacle Serves up Filial Piety: Move Aside Guy Lombardo, NHK's Boys vs. Girls Extravaganza A-coming,' *The Japan Times* (25 December 1999) 3.

which ... distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other putative groups.⁴⁶ In this sense, these people are popular music stars who have placed in a shared situation (as invited *Kōhaku* song performers) and within an institution (NHK) that binds them together.⁴⁷ Most importantly, they are distinguished from the stars who were not selected—those ‘outside’ (*soto*). Therefore, an inclusive/exclusive boundary exists around the *Kōhaku* community of song performers: a boundary that ‘encapsulates the identity of the community’ as defined and enforced by NHK.⁴⁸

The 50th *Kōhaku*: The Community in Performance

A performance is not merely confined to the physical dimensions of a stage or concert hall. In the case of televised music performance, various mechanisms are used to reach audiences existing beyond the original venue. This section examines the first time that the community of song performers is physically united within a locality. Here, as they sing in NHK Hall, we can observe how camaraderie is expressed between the community’s members and how it is extended to fans, namely the television audience.

Andrew Painter, in his research on Japanese daytime television programs, notes that:

one style or mode of appeal common to some of the most popular TV shows in Japan works to create a sort of quasi-intimate interaction between those on the screen and those who watch at home.⁴⁹

Painter identifies the specific strategies used by directors and producers to create this comfortable atmosphere, observing that ‘quasi-intimate programs, for example, often emphasise themes related to unity (national, local, cultural or racial) and unanimity (consensus, common sense, identity).’⁵⁰

Unlike regularly broadcast daytime programs, *Kōhaku* is a once-a-year show that is televised live in the evening. Nevertheless, it too is styled to draw in the television audience by creating a sense of quasi-intimacy between the viewers and those on screen. By adapting Painter’s theory, this section explores evidence of ‘unity’ (through national, local and cultural themes) and ‘unanimity’ (through themes of consensus and identity) in selected song performances from the 50th *Kōhaku*.

i) Unity: national, local and cultural themes

Although acts are divided into Red and White teams, comradeship within the *Kōhaku* community is clearly demonstrated and upheld. At the start of the program, members of the fifty-four acts stand together on stage, clapping and cheering in anticipation of the upcoming song performances. During the first performance in 1999, ‘LOVE *mashīn* [Love Machine]’ by the young, all-female J-pop octet Mōningu Musume (Morning Daughters),⁵¹ fellow members of the *Kōhaku* community remain onstage, continuing their high level of support by

⁴⁶ Anthony P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1985) 12.

⁴⁷ Adapted from Nakane’s concept of ‘frame’, *Japanese Society* 1.

⁴⁸ Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* 12.

⁴⁹ Painter, ‘Japanese Daytime Television’ 197.

⁵⁰ Painter, ‘Japanese Daytime Television’ 198.

⁵¹ In 1999, the group Mōningu Musume performed in *Kōhaku* for the second time in its career.

enthusiastically clapping, dancing and singing along. Meanwhile, the members of Mōningu Musume create a quasi-intimate interaction by directing their gaze at the camera and personally addressing lyrics, which emphasise national and cultural themes and tell a wider message of unity, to the at-home audience.⁵²

Evidence of unity is prominent in the lyrics of ‘*Dango san kyōdai* [Three Dumpling Brothers],’ performed by *Kōhaku* newcomers Ayumi Shigemori and Kentarō Hayami.⁵³ In the final verse, culturally-specific seasonal activities, such as cherry-blossom viewing in spring and moon-viewing in autumn, are described as well as the Japanese food *dango* (sticky rice paste balls usually dipped in soy sauce).⁵⁴

The staging of *enka* singer Yuri Harada’s song performance also indicates unity amongst the *Kōhaku* community members. Before Harada’s solo performance, several members of the Red Team gather around her and chant an encouraging message of goodwill. During her performance of ‘*Tsugaru no hana* [Flower of *Tsugaru*],’ the title of which refers to a regional flower, ten prominent *Kōhaku* veterans encircle Harada onstage. In an act of inclusiveness, they copy her simple hand motions and a few even sing along with Harada, demonstrating their familiarity with her gestures and vocal style. Here, the newcomer Harada is anointed into the community through performance. The imitative choreography and staging function as welcoming, supportive gestures by more established members, indicating that the horizontal comradeship between members can transcend the vertical rank of the performers.

Finally, unity is confirmed by the final song performance, ‘*Matsuri* [Festival]’ by Saburo Kitajima. This song performance clearly displays national, local and cultural themes through the depiction of a Japanese celebratory festival. Every member of the White Team (as well as additional participants such as dancers and musicians) join Kitajima onstage and contribute to the gala atmosphere by waving flags, beating drums, chanting, singing and carrying an elevated palanquin. Furthermore, additional participants wear festive costumes and Kitajima is dressed in traditional attire. The visual elements of this performance are mirrored in the opening lyrics that describe men holding sacred shrines and giving thanks to gods at a festival.⁵⁵

The song’s instrumentation also reflects cultural connections, through the use of traditional Japanese *taiko* (drum) and *shakuhachi* (bamboo flute), whilst Kitajima’s strong vocals include sporadic shouts and cheers in addition to the sung lyrics. This song performance indicates

⁵² ‘Japan’s future, /Is what the world envies. /Why not fall in love? /Dance! Dance throughout the night!’ Mōningu Musume (Morning Daughters), ‘*LOVE mashīn* [Love Machine],’ *Kōhaku utagassen* (The Red and White Song Contest), television program (Tokyo: NHK, 31 December 1999). English translation by Tomoko Katakura and Shelley D. Brunt.

⁵³ Unlike the other song performers in the 50th *Kōhaku*, Shigemori and Hayami are not popular music stars, but co-hosts of the NHK children’s program ‘*With Mother* [*Okā-san to issho*]’. It is unusual to invite television presenters to perform songs in *Kōhaku*, but ‘*Dango san kyōdai*’ was so popular with all ages across Japan that NHK believed it warranted inclusion.

⁵⁴ ‘In spring there is flower-viewing, / In autumn there is moon-viewing, / All year round, *dango*, /The three brothers *dango*!’ Ayumi Shigemori and Kentarō Hayami, ‘*Dango san kyōdai* [Three Dumpling Brothers]’ *Kōhaku utagassen* (The Red and White Song Contest), television program (Tokyo: NHK, 31 December 1999). English translation by Tomoko Katakura and Shelley D. Brunt.

⁵⁵ ‘Men bearing the festival palanquin /On their shoulders were living life to the fullest /God of the mountains, God of the seas, /We truly thank you for this past year,’ Saburō Kitajima, ‘*Matsuri* [Festival],’ *Kōhaku utagassen* (The Red and White Song Contest), television program (Tokyo: NHK, 31 December 1999). English translation from Yano, *Tears of Longing* 171.

national pride, great enthusiasm for festivals and vast cultural knowledge, all of which is shared amongst other song performers and extended to the television viewers at home.

ii) Unanimity: themes of consensus and identity

Unanimity is most visibly demonstrated through themes of consensus and identity. Most performers visually promote their membership of the *Kōhaku* community by incorporating red and /or white colours into their stage costumes: colours that reference the program's title—'The Red and White Song Contest.' To heighten this identification, red and white lights are frequently used in the performance staging: they flash across the floor, illuminate the performer and form patterns on the rear stage wall. These colours also have wider implications as the 'colours of Japan.' Red and white are the two colours of the Japanese flag, and therefore signify the union of the song performers with those of the greater nation: the at-home audience.⁵⁶

Unanimity is also prominent in song lyrics. The subtitle of the 50th *Kōhaku*, '*Utaou mirai e ~ jidai to sedai o koete* [Looking to the Future Through Song: Spanning Eras and Generations],' reflects on songs from past *Kōhaku* programs and songs to carry into the new century. A song thereby acts as 'symbolic communication,' evoking

a whole time and place, distant feelings and emotions, and memories of where we were, and with whom, the first time we heard the song ... [Songs] can be a badge of identity—a means of showing others (and ourselves) to what cultural group, or groups, we belong or aspire to belong.⁵⁷

The oldest song (composed in 1914) in the program was '*Furusato* [Home],' performed by sisters Saori Yuki and Sachiko Yasuda.⁵⁸ One verse of this well-known children's song wistfully describes a childhood memory of an unspecified location (an unnamed hill and river) in rural Japan.⁵⁹ The ambiguity and universality of these nostalgic lyrics enable the performers and the at-home audience to reflect on their own memories of childhood—thus, a quasi-intimate moment is created. Audience members, particularly those of an older age group, are encouraged to identify with Yuki and Yasuda: perhaps they fondly recall similar experiences or yearn for an idealised and simplified Japan.

Another 'old' song featured in the fiftieth *Kōhaku* was the *enka* classic, '*Kawa no nagare no yō ni* [Like the River's Flow],' performed by Yoshimi Tendō.⁶⁰ In keeping with the general theme

⁵⁶ Tom Gill offers further suggestions as to why these colours have significance in Japan. See 'Transformational Magic: Some Japanese Super-heroes and Monsters,' *The Worlds of Japanese Popular Culture: Gender, Shifting Boundaries and Global Cultures*, ed. D.P. Martinez (Cambridge: CUP, 1998) 33–55.

⁵⁷ George H. Lewis, 'Who do you Love?: The Dimensions of Musical Taste,' *Popular Music and Communication*, 2nd ed., ed. James Lull (London: Sage 1992) 135.

⁵⁸ In 1999, Saori Yuki and Sachiko Yasuda performed in *Kōhaku* as a duo for the eighth time in their careers. '*Furusato*' ('Home') was one of many original songs published by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and taught in primary schools throughout Japan from 1910. Previously, primary school songbooks consisted of modified folk tunes from Scotland, Ireland, Spain and Germany. For further discussion of MOE songs, see Ryuzo Uchida, 'Memory and the Transformation of Social Experience in Modern Japan: Rethinking The Song "Home",' *Media, Culture and Society* 21.2 (1999): 207–211.

⁵⁹ 'That hill side where I chased rabbits, / That river where I fished for tiddlers, / And I'm still dreaming about them. / My home is so difficult to forget.' Saori Yuki and Sachiko Yasuda, '*Furusato* [Home]'. *Kōhaku uta gassen* (The Red and White Song Contest), television program (Tokyo: NHK, 31 December 1999). English translation from K. Horiuchi and T. Inoue, eds, *The Collection of Japanese Educational Songs* (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1958). Cited in Ryuzo Uchida, 'Memory' 214.

⁶⁰ In 1999, the soloist Yoshimi Tendō performed in *Kōhaku* for the fourth time in her career.

of the 50th Kōhaku, this song, and the first chorus in particular, poetically describes the transience of time as being like a gentle current of a river.⁶¹ Themes of identity are also seen in the song performance itself: '*Kawa no nagare no yō ni*' was originally sung by the now deceased 'queen of *enka*,' Hibari Misora, in the late 1980s. Tendō pays tribute to Misora by singing her trademark song and emulating her distinctive vocal and performance style. This song performance is a mark of respect to a departed, fellow Kōhaku community member; the at-home audience, too, is reminded of the great history of Kōhaku and its community of song performers.

A final display of unanimity is clearly seen when members of the Kōhaku community gather together and sing the Japanese folk song '*Hotaru no hikari* [Light of the Fireflies].' The Japanese lyrics, sung to the melody of the British folk song 'Auld Lang Syne,' are based on a Chinese legend in which a man studies by the light of summer fireflies because he is too poor to buy oil to fuel his lamp. Through his resourcefulness, he is able to amass great knowledge by reading and eventually achieves glory in the name of his country. This song, with its stirring lyrics and inspirational message, is often sung at celebratory gatherings and graduations in Japan. Appropriately, it is also performed at Kōhaku's conclusion: the song performers have been anointed into the community, personal goals have been achieved and a bright future lies ahead. This ceremonial song and its accompanying images are brought into the family home via television: a final, spectacular scene of colour, light and song. The Kōhaku community has created a comfortable and familiar atmosphere, facilitating empathy and identification between the TV viewers and those on screen.

In rural Japan, the clock ticks over to 11:45pm and the Kōhaku song performers' joyous cheers are abruptly silenced: the program has ended. The Tokyo 'Office Lady' turns off the television and, with her parents, leaves the warmth of home for the cool winter night. Clusters of people serenely walk down neighbourhood streets, towards the local temple. The 'Office Lady' and her parents join them and when midnight falls, the family exchange hushed New Year greetings. They arrive, pray for happiness and prosperity and quietly listen to the bell tolling 108 times to ring out the old year (joya no kane).

⁶¹ 'Ah, like the river's flow! /Slowly, /By and large, our era is passing on.' Yoshimi Tendō, '*Kawa no nagare no yō ni* [Like the River's Flow]'. *Kōhaku utagassen* (The Red and White Song Contest), television program (Tokyo: NHK, 31 December 1999). English translation from Christine Yano, *Shaping Tears of a Nation: An Ethnography of Emotions in Japanese Popular Song*, PhD thesis, University of Hawai'i, 1995 (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Microform, 1995) 537.