2 A STORM HITS JAPAN: THE NATIONAL IN THE BANAL THRONE

The establishment of normalcy (i.e. what is accepted as ‘normal’) through social– and stereo– types is one aspect of the habit of ruling groups to attempt to fashion the whole of society according to their own world view, value system, sensibility and ideology. So right is this world view for the ruling groups that they make it appear (as it does appear to them) as ‘natural’ and ‘inevitable’ – and for everyone – and, in so far as they succeed, they establish their hegemony. - Richard Dyer (quoted in Hall, 1997a, p. 259)

In the previous chapter I presented the context in which a discourse about the traditional and unique qualities of Japanese society – echoing the nihonjinron – became part of official policies for the promotion of Japanese culture, inside and outside the country, directed to reinforce the national imagery for economic and soft power aims and which, after the earthquake of 2011, has become ubiquitous in media. Among the cultural phenomena that began receiving intense media coverage and became ambassadors – officially or unofficially - of this campaign, I have already mentioned the idol group Arashi.

The objective of this chapter is to locate this sample phenomena in Japanese media to find how its media power evolved during the last years in the context of the policies of cultural promotion and, then, since the national crisis of 2011; also, to elucidate how media, corporations, organizations and government began to make use of their images and popularity to promote a discourse of national representation and what are the main lines of this discourse. Building on the theoretical frame presented in the introductory section to study celebrities as potential sources of social representation and relying on notions used in cultural and media studies, I propose a preferred reading of the media representations – particularly with respect to the flagging of the Japaneseness - of the idol group Arashi that has been receiving the title of national representative and whose intensive media coverage corresponds to the strengthening of the policies for the promotion of national culture, particularly after 2011. However, before entering to the analysis of the Arashi text, I find relevant to provide a contextualization of the Japanese tarento system, which is the birth place of Japanese powerful media personalities found in the banal contents of interest.

2.1 JAPANESE TARENTO SYSTEM

Although outside Japan products such as anime (Japanese animation), manga (Japanese comic books) and video games are indeed popular and they are seen as representatives of the
popular culture of the country, they can hardly be considered a hegemonic ideological influence inside Japanese society, as they represent subcultures that stand against the idea of a homogenized, unified and communal Japanese culture (Iida, 2002; Morely & Robins, 2002). Also, granting that they are an economically important sector of Japanese media industry, the market is extremely differentiated according to genres and topics; there are thousands of titles that are distributed among a variety of categories – for girls, for boys, for adults, for teenagers, about sports, about food, about drinking, about robots, about History, etc. - which means that each title is consumed by very delimited sectors of people – some of which are undoubtedly subcultures – so just a few stories or characters become extensively known among society, and these are usually children-oriented (Nakamura, 2004; Brenner, 2007).

I am not trying to say subcultures are not relevant in the negotiation of ideologies, but to call the attention on wider reaching phenomena that may be more useful for elites to try to propagate their preferred ones among society. Japanese leading media corporations seem to prefer producing contents that appeal to more comprehensive sectors of consumers and rely on a high intertextuality created by the mobility of celebrities among different productions and activities; these personalities constitute the tarento system. The tarento are the everyday faces filling all media in Japan and communicating with Japanese people through the daily television shows, the posters on the trains, the billboards on the streets, the music listened on the way, the labels on the products of the supermarket, and so on. This overexposure in the daily life of Japanese is what makes tarento so potentially influential and crucial for the propagation of an ideological discourse.

In Japan, the celebrity system has developed some particularities in the production of the domestic media personas that impact their symbolic and ideological constructions and the potential ways in which audience make sense of them, as well as the grade of intensity in which people relate to them. After the end of the World War II, Japanese media established itself without much difference from its North American counterpart, even importing many of the contents produced in the United States. However, as the country placed itself as an international leader in the economic and technological arenas, its media acquired a clear independence, creating and producing more of its own contents and, eventually, foreign products were relegated (Atkins, 2000; Gossmann, 2000; Iwabuchi, 2002; Marx, 2012). In
the 1980s, when Japanese society was in the middle of the bubble economy, a native system of celebrities - the *tarento* – raised in prominence in television, gradually expanding its dominance to all media and absorbing personalities from very diverse fields (Galbraith & Karlin, 2012; Lukács, 2010).

*Tarento* derives from the English word ‘talent’ and it is one of the most used terms in Japanese media, but it is also one of the most difficult to delimit. Lukács (2010) says that the *tarento* are multifunctional *image commodities* and *all-powerful currencies* that are particular to the Japanese televisual culture; Galbraith and Karlin (2012) define them as *celebrity performers* who, by means of their ability to attract and maintain the attention of audiences, are the core of television discourse. Indeed, *tarento* acts as an umbrella category that includes individuals continuously active on television, but not limited to it precisely because of their *multi-functionality*. A *tarento* can potentially fill any need for any media production; in fact, they and their management agencies must try to diversify their activities as much as possible because “[t]arento are produced and produce value in the process of their circulation” (Lukács, 2010, p. 47) and the multi-field performers are preferred than the specialized ones in the whole entertainment system (Marx, 2012).

Although in the Japanese media argot there is a tendency to use other terms - actor, comedian, idol, and so on - as if they were parallel to the *tarento*, I find that the specificity to call a person in one way or another at a particular moment is more related to the recognition of status or the activity that the person is performing in a specific context. Also, every time is more common for general *tarento* – those who are just, rephrasing Boorstin (1992), famous for being famous - to make their ‘debut’ as actors, singers or any other genre inside the media. Because of this, it is not uncommon to hear the name of the same celebrity referred at times as actor, then as singer, and other times just as *tarento*. However, for the daily audiences the difference in the labels used helps them to focus the attention on particular elements of the whole symbolism that involves a celebrity in the highly intertextual Japanese media context.

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67 Although the term was taken from the English, in Japanese it does not have the original connotation; on the contrary, many critics and scholars coincide that tarento are characterized by their lack of talent. Also, as it has been naturalized in the Japanese language through the katakana writing system, the term is used without changes for feminine, masculine, singular and plural - although a specifically pluralized *tarentotachi* can be heard from time to time.
Therefore, even if in the media discourse there is a relaxation on the use of *tarento* as a genre at the same level as others, I consider that, from an analytical point of view, it is the most general category that embraces many genres that constitute the Japanese media landscape: *aidoru* (idol), *joyū/haiyū* (actress/actor), *owarai geinin* (comedian), *kashu* (singer), *anaunsā* (announcer), *kyasutā* (anchor), *moderu* (model), *hyōronka* (critic or ‘expert’), *seiyū* (voice actor or actress) and *senshu* (athlete). Although most celebrities have a core activity, those who are able to win some popularity, easily cross genres; also, every time more fields can be included because the system appropriates them in order to exploit the popular images to the extreme. This is facilitated by the *self-referentiality* that characterizes Japanese media and by the practice of presenting *tarento* news – entertainment/tabloid – as hard, socially relevant news (Galbraith & Karlin, 2012).

Thus, the multifaceted and mobile characteristic of the *tarento* - the high circulation of their images and texts - creates “an intertextual web of meanings that link forms and contents together to produce new meanings. […] To understand Japanese television,⁶⁸ the audience must draw on a vast cultural knowledge about celebrity” (Galbraith & Karlin, 2012, p. 10). In her study about the Japanese television of the 1990s, Lukács (2010) found that this intertextuality is highly regarded by audiences because allows them to join a meta-reality that makes them feel part of a community. People are compelled to have an intensive and regular exposure to the media to acquire the required knowledge about the celebrities to understand the different contents and also to feel included in that meta-reality.

This intensive and extensive exposure to media and *tarento* promotes in audience a sense of familiarity and intimacy with them. In this way, *tarento* are presented as if their private and public personas concur (Aoyagi, 2005; Lukács, 2010). This does not mean, however, that they cannot show gaps in their personality, but that those different features are supposed to be present both in their public and private lives. It does not mean either that in Japan there is no interest in knowing all the minor details of the private life of the *tarento*, but contrary to the *paparazzi* culture of other countries in which the celebrities are followed to catch the private moments that they try so hard to protect – genuinely or as a publicity

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⁶⁸ I would say media in general, but many scholars put the stress on television for its relevance as core of the media in Japan.
game - the *tarento* and their agencies try to be themselves the ones that disclose fragments of their ‘privacy’ (Galbraith & Karlin, 2012).

Building on these ideas, two main objectives for this self-disclosure can be ventured: image control and image construction. The first seems evident given the customary press conferences or press statements releases that *tarento* or their agencies summon or provide when they are having any ‘relevant’ change in their private lives - marriage, divorce, pregnancies, graduations, sickness - or when some risky information has been leaked about them. This seems to be a crucial marketing tool to keep the control of their non-controversial and non-disruptive images as much as possible – as a socially proper image is vital to keep a successful career in the Japanese entertainment.

The second can be thought as inherent to the *tarento* production: in the symbolic construction of the *tarento* as an image commodity, in order to feed the imagination of the audience, there is a constant teasing through a ‘*honne*’-giving’ practice. Among the many activities of the *tarento*, the interviews in the media are based on a ‘*honne-ni-semaru*’ (approaching to the truthful thoughts) discourse, in which the topics are mostly about *urabanashi* (inside stories), the *tarento*’s opinions on life issues – family, friends, work struggles, love ideals - and his/her personal life. Much of the information that media present as *honne* may appear irrelevant to the casual viewer, but for the regular audience, particularly for fans, those details are arguably high-quality supplies to build their fantasies, to put together the pieces of the puzzle to complete the whole picture of the *tarento*’s life and personality, and even to keep audience satisfied enough as to respect the small part of the *tarento*’s private life that the media do not cover. In terms of symbolic construction, this

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69 There are tabloids and paparazzi in Japan, and there are many *tarento* who have their ‘secrets’ continuously exposed, but there is also a high collaboration among the media corporations and the most powerful *tarento* agencies to keep information controlled, which allows the popular *tarento* to stay relatively better protected from scandal than their equivalents in countries as the United States. See West (2006) for a complete analysis on the media coverage and management of the private spheres of the celebrities in Japan and the United States.

70 If a *tarento*, particularly a popular one, has made a transgression and wants to keep his career, it is customary that he publicly apologizes to the audiences and to the directly affected by his offense, and then remains outside the media for some time - even years - as a punishment. See Marx (2012) and West (2006).

71 A notion used to refer to the real or truthful opinions and/or intentions of someone.

72 I call it this way because is the repetitive line that these type of interviews use in their narrative when presenting such content.

73 Except for some obsessive fans, most *tarento* do not have to struggle with ordinary people stalking them. In the case of the male idols that I have been researching, I have found that waiting outside locations or studios is a common and accepted fan practice, as it is considered part of the *tarento*’s public activities and a chance for
honné-giving seems to allow the tarento to appear as very ordinary people, with the same type of struggles, dreams and values that any other Japanese, at the same time that builds around them a sugao/sunao (honest) aura, which is extremely appreciated by the audience.

Therefore, it is evident that the tarento agencies put a lot of effort in choosing the type of productions that their tarento appear in, the type of information that it is published about them, and the activities and people they relate to in their private lives, all to guarantee the congruence of their images and texts while trying to keep the intimate bond and the affect that people feel towards them, which facilitates the acceptance of the discourses they represent.

In this way, the tarento as category have led Japanese media since the 1990s, when they became the key in the producers’ response to the stratification of the market: by endorsing lifestyles and attitudes that were identified through particular commodities, the tarento helped in the creation of communities of individuals, contrasting with the idea of a mass consumer society prevailing until then (Lukács, 2010). Thus, if before it has been argued that, in contemporary developed societies, celebrities are part of the ideological safe escapes that leaders in a state use to negotiate with people, the tarento, through their created sense of intimacy and affective connection with audience, are also essential to mediate between the ideas and objectives of elites and society.

The media power and the dominant discourses implanted in popular celebrities during specific periods may denote hegemonic stages in which an extensive consensus has been achieved regarding the values and ideologies that they represent. Nevertheless, within such symbolism, certain myths can be detected; the undeniable active role of the audiences in the building of the popular texts does not deny the possibility of some discourses being naturalized through them by means of that actively produced popularity.

Yet, it is obvious that not all tarento have the same level of presence in media nor the ability to get the interest of the audiences or generate in people a positive affective bond; not all tarento constitute a major influence in society because not all have the same media power.

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fans to show their support and commitment. However, most fans would not venture to invade the idol’s private life – for example, following them to their houses - as this is considered a break of the ‘fan code’. There are okakke fans – stalkers – but they are usually not accepted by the rest of the fan community as ‘truthful’ supporters.
Since the role of *tarento* in the economic system is so important, the *tarento power* is relevant and acknowledged by companies, media and audiences and has been operationalized into a quarterly ranking that identifies who - among more than a thousand active *tarento* - has the highest level of influence in Japanese society around the year, as well as the core audience of each of them. The *tarento* power reflects the power of attraction – desire of the audiences to see, hear, and know more about a *tarento* – and the grade of popularity – how well a *tarento’s* face and name is identified among different age and gender sectors of society.\(^{74}\)

Considering the ideas already debated about the celebrities’ role in a society, the dominant characteristics of the *tarento* system and the composition of the *tarento* power index, it is possible to suggest that the higher the power of a *tarento*, the greater his/her social influence beyond the mere propagation of the ideology of consumerism: the discourses constructed around a *tarento* who has a high power in media can be regarded also as a highly accurate sample of the social and cultural processes that are becoming relevant at a particular moment in Japanese society. And, in the contemporary context, some idols have become the *tarento par excellence*. Although the category has existed since the late 1960s, their symbolic qualities and place in Japanese media have evolved from representing mainly the tastes of teenagers (Aoyagi, 2005) to be the center of the *tarento* system altogether, mainly because of their appeal to large audiences regardless of sex and age (Galbraith & Karlin, 2012; Mandujano Salazar, 2009).

2.2 JAPANESE MALE IDOLS AND THE DUAL MASCULINITY POWER

The origins of the idol industry in Japan can be traced back to the late 1960s, but it was in the 1970s when the phenomenon took force in the national entertainment by means of television shows that were specifically designed to create idols – i.e. *Star Tanjō* (NTV).\(^{75}\) In this first phase that lasted until the early 1980s, idols were young singers; however, by the end of the decade of 1980, when the *tarento* became the central category of Japanese media,

\(^{74}\) The *Talent Power Ranking* is produced since 2008 by Architect Co. Ltd., a marketing company, and it is sold in detail to the entities that need to decide on the best *tarento* to relate to their products. However, the general top ranking is published in entertainment magazines, in web sites, or referred in television to let know the audiences who are the most powerful tarento and, potentially, reinforce their status. This ranking is other of the elements in the intertextual construction of the tarento. See the official site: [http://www.talentsearch.jp/](http://www.talentsearch.jp/)

\(^{75}\) When presenting titles of television shows, the broadcaster shorten name will appear inside parenthesis. The full name can be found at the beginning of the document in the section of Abbreviations.
idols began to cross genres in the entertainment, installing themselves as an important group in the national celebrity system.\textsuperscript{76} Although the activities of the idols expanded, their basic symbolism remained and became distinguishable from that of other \textit{tarento}: the idols have, since their birth, represented the qualities of youth or, as Galbraith and Karlin (2012) put it, “[t]hey are popular, and project themselves as clean, healthy, and energetic” (p. 5). While most idols are actually young and can hardly survive as such after they age, some of the most successful of past times are still active in media and are still considered idols, so - more than the age - the relevant issue is that they keep expressing the youthful characteristics of the genre.

Another essential symbolic quality related to the idols is their approachability; they represent familiarity and images that are attainable; they are not extremely outstanding in any regard – beauty, talent, wealth. On the contrary, they are chosen by producer agencies to be average looking and average talented, and, then, they are prepared to appear just above ordinary in media (Aoyagi, 2005; Darling-Wolf, 2004b; Sakai, 2003). This is reflected by the word \textit{kawaii} (roughly translated as ‘cute’ or ‘charming’) that is ever-present in the narratives about idols – male or female. Referring to people,\textsuperscript{77} the term implies someone who displays a physical appearance and a social behavior that is “sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak, and inexperienced” (Kinsella, 1995, p. 220) and, by consequence, inspires the protective or loving feelings of people (Aoyagi, 2000, pp. 312-313). Also, \textit{kawaii} is seen as a somewhat feminine quality, not meaning that is only reserved for female; the issue has to do more with the sense of weakness and amae related to the term. These symbolic elements are embedded in all Japanese idols so they can “attract people and perform as lifestyle role models (...) [informing] their viewers about appearances and personal qualities that are considered socially appropriate and trendy” (Aoyagi, 2005, p. 3).

In the same sense, their permanent availability towards fans is crucial. The availability has to do with the idols not getting involved romantically with anyone – not openly, at least – so the imaginary that fans build can be kept intact. For female idols and

\textsuperscript{76} For studies presenting detailed analysis of this first idol eras, see Aoyagi (2005), Sakai (2003).

\textsuperscript{77} \textit{Kawaii} is an adjective reserved not only to humans or living things, it can be applied to anything, but some of the connotation changes accordingly.
actresses, many agencies have a ‘love ban’ rule, which prohibits their tarento to have romantic relationships. In the case of male idols from Johnny’s Jimusho, which will be presented below, there is not an openly established rule, but it is implicit; the agency only allows its tarento to publicly acknowledge a legal relationship – marriage – and even after releasing the statement about this, the details of their relationships are kept hidden as much as possible.\textsuperscript{78}

Talking about the female idols of the 1980s, Aoyagi (2005, p. 218) noted that they offered their male fans what real-life women could not: “forever accepting, obedient female personalities.” I find that this is one of the functions of male idols as well: they represent romantic partners for many fans – female and fans with same sex tendencies; but, evidently, this is not the only type of interest that audiences have in them, although it is a common element found in devoted fans.

The symbolic similarities among the hundreds of idols in Japan through the five decades of their existence stop here. The most important distinction in the industry has to do with gender. As an initial market strategy, the female idols are designed to attract male audiences and the male idols to appeal to female fans; progressively and depending on the ability of the producer agency, the media, and the idols themselves, their symbolic construction can be amplified to target both female and male markets of diverse characteristics. The inclusion of these elements in the images of the idols is a direct responsibility of the jimusho (lit. office) or talent agencies that produce them. In Japan, the jimusho are the entities that scout potential tarento, prepare them for the activities that are expected to perform in media, promote them, control their image and coordinate all their activities; in general, the idols are employees of these agencies and depend on them to maintain their careers (Aoyagi, 2005; Marx, 2012).\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{78} It is relatively easier to hear these married male idols sharing some anecdotes related to their children than saying something about their wives.

\textsuperscript{79} Although a few tarento have been able to make a career on their own, the structure of the media and the entertainment industry makes it very difficult. Idols, particularly, are more dependent on their agencies than singers, for example, who are the most commonly freelance tarento in Japan. For an analysis on the jimusho and their role in the Japanese entertainment industry, see Marx (2012).
Among the multiple Jimusho existent, one of the most influential in the entertainment industry has been Johnny & Associates - better known as Johnny’s Jimusho – which has specialized in producing male idols. Its history goes back to the beginning of the idol phenomenon in Japan in the 1960s and, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the category of the tarento took over the media, it established as one of the main providers of top male personalities, turning the name of the agency into a brand (Darling-Wolf, 2004b; Mandujano Salazar, 2009; Marx, 2012). Nowadays, the Johnny’s - label to refer to all the tarento of this agency – appear every day in Japanese media and their presence and power is linked to the production process that the agency has achieved through the decades.

The production of new idols by Johnny’s Jimusho are usually linked to the already existent ones and women are, undeniably, the initial greater consumers of Johnny’s media and also the main promoters of the expansion of their impact to other social segments. Most of the idols of the agency have enrolled because their mothers, sisters, or other female acquaintances have influenced them into do it. Idols promoted by Johnny’s and Associates usually originate from written applications provided by children, teenagers or some other contacts. After a first revision of these, the agents of Johnny’s Jimusho select some prospects to see in person; in this interview, the young men are asked to dance and present themselves to a camera. Eventually, some are accepted into the trainee group and, gradually, they are introduced in media as support for the already established idols. At this stage, the agency begins to mold their image and evaluate their abilities, effort and popularity with audience. Then, the regular pattern is for the agency to form groups from five to ten members and debut them officially as idols, something that is marked by the release of a music single or album. From then on, Johnny’s idols continue to expand their activities as much as the agency can negotiate with media and sponsors, according to their existing tarento power and their potential to increase it – that is, depending on how well they are being received by audience.\textsuperscript{80}

Analyzing this production process, the Johnny’s media representations of the 2000’s onwards, and the audience’s responses to them, it becomes evident that a Johnny’s style manhood has been established in Japan in the form of a model of masculinity that these idols

\textsuperscript{80} I analyzed this process of production of Johnny’s idols in a Master thesis. See Mandujano Salazar (2009) – source in Spanish.
embody consistently and that can be linked to the term *janiizukei* used lately by media and audience to refer to men who show similar features with them.\(^{81}\) In this, the typical youthfulness of the idols as an innovative model of masculinity at a shallow level can be identified; but, in the whole narratives of their media presence, traditional elements of behavior and sociability regarded as characteristic of the traditional model of the *salaryman* are also present.

The youthful and innovative elements are obvious even to random audience. The Johnny’s image follows regular patterns not only of fashion, but also of hair-styling, body types and face features. These idols – regardless of them being twelve or forty years-old – are identified by their stylish haircuts, slender bodies, pale and almost hairless skin, and clean and juvenile faces;\(^{82}\) they are also widely known for their colorful attires in concerts and musical shows and their acrobatic and athletic ability displayed in typical Johnny’s dance routines. These elements can be considered as part of the representation of a contemporary and progressive Japanese male model.

Darling-Wolf (2004b) discussed the masculinity construction regarding the most popular Johnny’s band of the 1990s – SMAP - and found that the gender symbolism of the members of that group was hybrid in many senses: they represented male beauty, but they were also androgynous and were commonly portrayed in cross-gender imageries; they seemed to represent a more sensitive, less sexist type of man, challenging the stereotypes of the Japanese men in the West represented by the *salaryman*, but they were also showed in situations that perpetuated the dominant model of masculinity in Japan; and they continuously mixed racial representations, creating a cultural environment that surpassed the Japanese boundaries.

In the representations of Johnny’s idols debuted and developed since the change of century, I also find some mixed characteristics, but I do not consider that they stand as

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\(^{81}\) It could be fashion wise (*janiizukei fashion*), regarding to face features (*janiizukei no kao*), or in general (*janiizukei*).

\(^{82}\) Sometimes, they cut or dye in an extreme shade their hair, tan their skin or let their beards grow, mostly for some role in a drama or movie. This type of exceptional situations regularly gets the attention of media and fans, who discuss in blogs and other social media about it, as it is considered out of normal.
androgynous characters for their society, as it is the first thought of Western casual observers. They are portrayed as attractive, but this quality is clearly defined in the context of manhood, as it is expressed by the words bidan/bidanshi/bishounen, kakko-ii, and ikemen, which are always accompanying the references of them in media and among audiences. These words denote the qualities of being good looking or handsome: the first set is applied only to men who are regarded as having beautiful physical – basically facial – features; kakko-ii is a more general term to indicate someone who is ‘cool’ or stylish, and it is used for looks and for attitudes; and ikemen designates men who are attractive regarding the total impression that derives from their presence, and not necessarily - or not only - stressing their physical attributes.

In media productions that are specific for Johnny’s idols – i.e. variety shows - they are frequently requested to talk or represent ideal situations with a fictional female partner – dates, anniversaries, proposals, and so on – clearly trying to please their fans. It is evident that their answers may not be concurrent with their actual thoughts and attitudes, but this is not a problem as long as it gives the fans material to build their fantasies. In this type of media content, the idols embody what Darling-Wolf (2004b, p. 361) describes as “a new generation of men conscious of the significant changes gender roles underwent in the latter part of the twentieth century.”

On the other hand, their attitudes and social interactions displayed outside that specific context of those ideal talks are reminiscent of the traditional salaryman model – which also is considered as characteristic of the vertical and group-oriented Japanese society depicted by the nihonjinron. This model implies that, in order to be a respectable Japanese man, he has to be loyal and devoted to his group – i.e. the company or organization for which

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83 Handsome man/handsome young man/handsome boy.
84 This word is a general adjective used the same for men, women, animals or things. However, when used to refer to a person, kakko ii is related to a somehow masculine quality; in contrast, kawaii, as it has been said is considered more a feminine one. So, even if both words are gender-neutral, the connotation is to highlight a masculine or feminine trait in a person.
85 In Japanese media, the physical attractiveness of men is generally depicted as a feature for idols, leading actors, models and only a few other tarento. Being acknowledged as possessing such quality gives them a higher status in the media narratives, particularly in a context in which other tarento with an image constructed on the basis of their lack of physical attractiveness are involved. By large, comedians are this type of tarento who have images built as the antithesis of beauty – with some exceptions. In the context of interacting with idols – or any ‘attractive’ man - the dynamic is usually for these comedians to be praising the other men and treating them with a kind of ‘reverence’. 
they work - and participate in it willingly and enthusiastically, placing the group’s interests over his own; he has to be competent – something considered as involving talent and hard work – and show this aptitude since the moment he requests acceptance into the group – normally by approving exams and winning a place against other candidates – and thereafter during his daily activities by displaying continuous effort for the sake of it; finally, his hard-work, abilities and loyalty should always have as major goal the wellness of the nation (Vogel, 1971).

As it has been said, Johnny’s idols have to show their competence to be accepted by the agency and they should never let decline their effort and commitment to this and their group; once they are part of an official idol group, the members are expected to be fully committed to it, assuming all the personal costs of hard schedules, lack of privacy, lack of interpersonal relationships outside the working group, all for the promotion and good image of the group and the agency. When someone shows to be more interested in his own interests than the group’s by breaking the strict rules of the agency, he is usually punished, relegated for some time and, commonly, he loses popularity, being unable to regain his place.86

Finally, they are regularly involved in national projects, element that can be thought as closely related to the multi-field projection that the agency promotes for its idols: in order to develop a broader audience, the agency tries to involve them in events of national interest, such as the annual telethon 24-hours TV (NTV), the coverage of international sports competitions - Olympic games, Football World Cups - and the annual musical shows held by the major media corporations – Best Artist (NTV), Kōhaku Uta Gassen (NHK), FNS Kayōsai (Fuji TV), Music Station Super Live (TV Asahi).

Considering that the business of Johnny’s Jimusho depends on appealing to increasingly broader social sectors – not only female fans or teenagers – it is possible to argue that the agency has tried to build a model of masculinity to be comprehensively pleasing: eye-catching, fresh and amusing targeting women and young men, but that also strengthens the dominant Japanese model by representing men who are diligent, workaholic and group-

86 There have been some cases in which an idol is found smoking or drinking as an under-age, or involved in gossip with women, all actions involving the breaking of Johnny’s rules. These men have been suspended of their media activities for months or even years; they have lost their places in their groups, and have even been degraded to the apprentice status; they also have had to apologize publicly for the shame and difficulties that they caused to their group, the agency and the fans. A few others have taken ‘breaks’ to pursue personal goals.
oriented, making personal sacrifices for their groups, their company – Johnny’s Jimusho – and their fans, something that makes them more acceptable to mature male audiences and traditionalist social sectors.

Thus, Johnny’s idols are multi-field *tarento* who expand their careers according to the acceptance they are able to get from wide-ranging audiences. They are found as top ranking singers, dancers, lyricists and composers, anchors in variety shows, sports and news programs, actors in television, movies and theater, fiction writers and essayists, sculptors and painters, models in fashion magazines, and endorsers of numerous products. Their media potential and their appeal relying on a mixed representation of masculinity – a stylish image rooted in traditional values - have allowed them to have significantly long lasting careers, something unusual for female counterparts who depend more on their childish images to remain in the market. In this way, the most successful Johnny’s idols have been able to place themselves as entertainers for *everyone*, as *national idols*. The matter in question: Arashi.

### 2.3 The rise of the national idols

Between the years 2008 and 2009, in the context of the policies of national cultural promotion and the growing popularity of the Korean Wave in Japan, the Japanese media began to call Arashi - a male idol group that was escalating in the *tarento* power list - national idol. Increasingly, the group and its members were related to national campaigns that involved more than the advertising of products or services: they began to endorse *Japaneseness*.

Arashi – literally ‘storm’ - is a five-member idol group that made its official debut in 1999. The members – Ohno Satoshi, Sakurai Sho, Aiba Masaki, Ninomiya Kazunari and Matsumoto Jun – entered the trainee group between 1994 and 1996 as teenagers, moment in which they began to be exposed in the media. The activities of Arashi expanded the first

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87 Currently, some Johnny’s idols are close to the 50 years of age and their careers have lasted for more than three decades; they are still considered idols and their images continue to be built around their *attractiveness*.
88 For discussions on the characteristics of the female idols regarding their childish image, see Aoyagi (2005) and Galbraith & Karlin (2012).
89 *Kokuminteki aidoru*.
90 They were all born between 1980 and 1983, and began their careers in Johnny’s Jimusho at 12 and 13 years-old. Their profile can be reviewed in the web page of the agency: [http://www.johnnys-net.jp/page?id=profile&artist=10](http://www.johnnys-net.jp/page?id=profile&artist=10)
five years since its debut through numerous musical releases, concert tours, presentations in music and variety television shows, participation of the members as actors in television dramas, movies and stages, regular appearance in idol magazines, endorsement of different products, and the hosting of their own television and radio shows. This considerable media presence established it as a successful, but still standard Johnny’s idol group with an audience limited to certain social sectors; however, between 2004 and 2008, expectations started to change. Performers needed to be able to reach beyond a usually limited and predictable life span as a popular group, they had to evolve, moving out of perceived social sectors, appealing to a greater share of the population and the market.

In 2004, Arashi was designated as the main personality of the charity program 24-hour TV, a popular annual event of the media corporation NTV that is regarded as having a national impact and that relies on tarento to act as ambassadors of the cause and get the attention of audience during the 24-hours live broadcast.91 As the show is directed to all public, Arashi was able to show a socially conscious and more mature image not only to regular followers, but also to people who did not know them. The same year, Aiba Masaki entered as host in a variety show of the family-slot of NTV targeted mainly to children – Tensai! Shimura Dōbutsu-en.92 Between 2005 and 2007, Arashi was given a regular corner in a family-oriented variety program of another broadcasting corporation – mago mago Arashi (Fuji TV) - where the members visited regular families and spent a whole day with them taking the role of grandchildren to older couples,93 or of child-minders and cooks to couples with children.

In 2006, Sakurai Sho became regular anchor in a weekday night news program – News Zero (NTV) – breaking completely with the stereotype of idol and presenting himself to mature social sectors. Then, Ninomiya Kazunari won one of the main roles of the Hollywood production Letters from Iwo Jima,94 making national media acclaim his performance for embodying the feelings of Japanese people and touch the world in a movie that represented the Japanese perspective of one of the last battles the nation fought during

91 See http://www.ntv.co.jp/24h/contents/english.html
92 The show is still on air at the time of this analysis.
93 From here comes the name of the show: mago means grandchild.
the Pacific War. Also, Arashi made its first tour outside Japan, visiting South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand, and participating in the Asia Song Festival, circumstances that Japanese media covered enthusiastically, stressing the popularity of Arashi in the continent.

Likewise, the participation of the members as leading actors in successful fictional productions - such as *Hana yori dango* (TBS) and *Yamada Taro Monogatari* (TBS) – that were even seen by East-Asian fans, and the debut of Ohno Satoshi as *geijutsuka* (artist) in 2008, when he opened an exhibition in Tokyo of his sculptures and illustrations, also expanded the scope of the group among population.

Analyzing the narratives of the vast media contents of this period related to Arashi, it can be advanced a reading on the representations that tried to associate with the group and its members. Arashi, as all Johnny’s idols, represented epitomes of male attractiveness and young masculinity, while also promoting the dominant model of Japanese manhood: a *salaryman* model in an *ikemen* disguise; or, a *kakko-ii salaryman* model. But there were also distinguishable discourses around each of the members that can be interpreted as attempts to gain the support of people besides the regular fan base composed by young/adult women and teenager men.

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95 An event organized by the Korea Foundation for International Culture Exchange and supported by the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism as part of the South Korean government efforts to locate this country as the cultural leader in Asia. See http://www.asf.or.kr/english/

96 Contrary to the strategies of Korean artists in the Japanese market, the members of Arashi only learned how to introduce themselves in the local languages and sang a couple of representative songs of the group in Korean, Chinese and Thai, but most of the interaction with fans and the material performed in the concerts were in Japanese. This was also remarked by them and the Japanese media continuously: their happy surprise when they noticed that many Asian fans were learning Japanese because of them.

97 Lukács (2010, p. 214) says that since the second half of the 1990s, a rating of 15 points, which represents the 15 percent of the population, defines a hit program and more than 20 points means “mega-hit status.” In Matsumoto Jun’s *Hana Yori Dango* series (TBS, 2005; 2007) the average ratings were of 19.80 and 21.70, while Ninomiya Kazunari and Sakurai Sho’s *Yamada Taro Monogatari* (TBS, 2007) had an average rating of 15.20 (http://www.videor.co.jp). Thus, they can easily being considered hit shows. Also, Matsumoto Jun’s film sequel of *Hana yori Dango* (Toho, 2008) was the second place in that year’s box office (http://boxofficemojo.com/intl/japan/yearly/?yr=2008&p=). 

98 The term *geijutsuka* refers to people who produce some artistic piece (painters, illustrators, sculptors, photographers). This term is different from *geinōjin* – performer - which is used as a general reference for actors, singers, etc., very close to *tarento*; sometimes the English word *artist* – *ātisuto* - is used in a similar way than *geinōjin*. Ohno Satoshi had been already known for his hobby as illustrator, sculptor and painter.

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Aiba was portrayed as kind, always optimistic and funny—close to a boke kyarā.99 Ohno represented the artist with multiple talents, the ‘free spirit’ or maipēsu (my pace)100—someone who followed his own rhythm. Because of the contents they were involved in their media representations, these two seem to have been targeting children and older people. Ninomiya became identified for his sharp mind, his musical talent, his somehow otaku character and his preference to make friends with older people. He, Aiba and Ohno were represented as the most ‘ordinary’ among the five, arguably making people feel comfortable and very familiar to them. Sakurai—a graduate from one of the most prestigious private universities in the country102—was portrayed as well-raised, intellectual, leader, and multidimensional.103 When Sakurai became newscaster, he began to be portrayed as ambassador of his generation in serious national interest topics and a link between different interests and social sectors: he declared in multiple occasions his aim of reaching the segments not usually involved in the political, economic and social debates—women and youths; on the other hand, he also took the popular culture to adult men, the core audience of news programs. Finally, Matsumoto was represented as the most committed, hard-working and social of all, which contrasted with his very ‘exotic’ and fashionable appearance.

These different representations seem to have actually expanded the audience for Arashi, as can be observed in the statistics shown by the annual TV concert Best Artist (NTV) that presents the most popular singers selected by the audience through an open voting system.

99 It is common to hear some tarento—comedians and sometimes others too—being characterized according to two roles: the boke-funny/silly one and the tsukkomi—the smart one that picks on the boke. These roles are taken from the Japanese comedy culture of the manzai. See Stocker (2002).
100 This term refers to a type of personality that is normally seen as exposing more amae and, as long as these people are loyal and hard-working when they need to, it does not contradict the virtues of Japaneseness. It should not be seen as the individualistic attitude that is so condemned by Japanese tradition.
101 Otaku in Japan, in this context, refers to people obsessed with videogames, anime, manga, and mostly antisocial attitudes.
102 In Japan, getting a degree from a prominent university is regarded as one of the main indicators of potential success and social status; Sakurai was the first idol to get a university degree—in Economics—from Keio University, something that made him suitable to become newscaster—the intellectual elite in Japanese media.103 In this period, he developed a mixed image: when he was in the role of anchor, he was very serious and put together, but when he was in the role of idol, he softened his image acting sometimes as boke.
Image 3. *Ichi oku sansenmannin ga erabu Best Artist 2003*. Distribution of the votes for Arashi. The graphic on the left shows the distribution by age and gender red for women and blue for men - of the voters, and the graphic on the right shows the general age scattering. As it can be seen, the popularity of Arashi among the different age groups of women is high, though a little less among women older than 50 years old. Source: NTV. Images extracted by the author from the open broadcasting in Japanese television.

Image 4. *Ichi oku sansenmannin ga erabu Best Artist 2008*. In this graphic it is noticeable the increasing support of male groups towards Arashi – particularly the younger and older ones - and the high support sustained among the female sectors. Source: NTV. Images extracted by the author from the open broadcasting in Japanese television.
By the second half of 2008, Arashi was again named the main personality of the 24-hour TV event. The popularity of the group was so intense at the moment that they finished their annual national tour and began a second Asian tour with a concert held at the largest venue of Japan – the Kasumigaoka National Stadium – in front of 70 thousand fans.\(^{104}\)

All this media presence added new layers of symbolism to the representation of Arashi and the five members and made them accessible to audiences not regularly interested in Johnny’s idols; these commonly reluctant sectors of the society not only began to recognize their faces and names, but also, caught in the intertextuality game of Japanese media, could potentially become interested in their whole body of work, as they were presented as family-oriented tarento, with harmonizing personalities for all tastes: some intellectual, some artistic, some affectionate, some stoic, but all hard-working, approachable and very Japanese.

At the end of the year 2008, Arashi was at the top of the music sales rankings (Recording Industry Association of Japan, 2009), the group’s supporters were apparently more evenly distributed among men and women of different age clusters – as shown by the previous images - and the media had begun to call Arashi the national idol group. During 2009, this label was increasingly used in media when referring to Arashi and the five members. Their activities that year, in the context of the celebration of the 10\(^{th}\) anniversary of their debut, were even more notable than the previous, helping them mark different records in the national music industry (Recording Industry Association of Japan, 2010). Then, in 2010, their national representativeness became formally acknowledged, when they became the ‘Ambassadors of Tourism Promotion’ designated by the MLIT and their regular advertising campaigns were linked to that official title as face of Japan. It is undeniable that Arashi became a national media phenomenon backed by the government with such designation and, at the same time, this increased even more the presence of the group or the members in the whole Japanese cultural arena, pushing even more their media power.\(^{105}\)

Analyzing the specific context in which Arashi acquired its national label, one thing is evident: this development came at a moment when Japanese elites were coping with the

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\(^{104}\) The use of this stadium for concerts had been restricted in different ways and it was continuously said in media that only the top Japanese singers could get permission for using it. Before Arashi, only two other groups had held concerts there: a duet called Dreams come true and SMAP, a senior group of Johnny’s Jimusho.

\(^{105}\) Fact easily perceptible by the evolution of the rankings of Architect Co. Ltd. (2008-2013).
menace of Korean counterparts actively seeking to strengthen their soft power and advance in the Asian markets by means of the Korean Wave and, more importantly, dangerously challenging the Japanese cultural productions in the national market. By 2008, the Korean idol quintet Tohoshinki’s popularity among Japanese female audience was steadily growing. Around the same period, the music market in Japan was changing and the selling of albums and singles in general contracted. Although the names of Johnny’s idols were gradually gaining terrain in the musical arena against ‘full-time’ singers and musicians, Tohoshinki was positioning itself as a true threat in the Japanese market and was enjoying high popularity in other East Asian countries. It was at this moment when Arashi did the second Asia tour and media name it the national idol group.106

Nonetheless, this cannot be seen just as a result of the recent popularity of the group and the foreign competition. The five members of Arashi were embodying something else than typical idols by expanding their activities into other fields and also by becoming representatives of their society in different platforms, but mostly towards the same Japanese, something that obviously Korean idols could not do. No longer teenagers, but then in their late 20s, they were presenting a mixed image to appeal broader audiences: they were still the idols and the entertainers, but they were also young adults interested in the same issues than the rest of the society. In their media representations, they began getting involved in serious productions and expressing their opinions about serious topics, while also working their usual idol-like symbolism aimed at the building of fan’s fantasies.

After being named national idols, Arashi achieved more popularity and perhaps more respect among the entire society because “the more recognition the performers attain, the more seriously they are viewed by the audience” (Aoyagi, 2005, p. 163). Since that moment, the representations of Arashi and its members inside Japan were stimulated on the mix of discourses of them as idols and as national representatives. In their serious or official assignments - those related to issues of evident social impact - their qualities as Japanese representatives were the ones highlighted, while having as basis Arashi’s attractiveness and ability to get a wide attention from inside and outside Japan. On the other hand, in their daily

106 The effects of the growing power of Korean competition in Japanese music industry regarding Johnny’s strategy, particularly Arashi, is analyzed in another study. See Mandujano Salazar (2009).
tasks as idols, the media emphasized their idol symbolism - their approachability and ordinariness, the friendship among the members, their physical attractiveness, and their mixed masculinity personification – implicitly suggesting that such features were national ideals given the status of the group as national idol.

Arashi members were represented as admirable young men because, despite their fame and popularity, they were still approachable, kept their ordinary personalities, were still close friends, and, of course, they were still the epitome of Japanese masculinity. For example, in the cover story of men-oriented magazine *GQ Japan* of June of 2010, the heading recites: “The day the national idols become real good men. Today, the five-member group Arashi has become the representative of the era” (Tatsuta, 2010). In fact, the same magazine designated three of the five members ‘Man of the year’ in the period 2008-2011, and has featured all of them in different numbers. This is just one of many examples on how Japanese media has been linking the discourses of masculinity and national representation in the same text when referring to Arashi.

Bringing back the ideas of Billig (1995), it can be argued that Japanese media began flagging in the representations of Arashi the qualities considered part of the national identity by a dominant ideology that stressed the role of men in society and some personality features as the stoicism, loyalty, devotion to the work and the group, and the like; sometimes waving the flags of nationhood – i.e. in the serious and official activities that the group performs in its role as *face of Japan* – and others just showing unwaved ones – i.e. the case of *GQ Japan* - which, nonetheless, have relevance for the naturalization of these ideas.

A new level of this flagging of a discourse on the nationhood in Arashi’s media representations is discernible after March 11th of 2011. The natural disaster that had devastated the northeast part of Japan signified also the threat of a major general crisis, as expressed by the Cool Japan Advisory Council when called to all ministries and Japanese people to work together to achieve a quick rebuild of the country in terms of infrastructure and national spirit (Cool Japan Advisory Council, 2011).

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The members of Arashi, in their roles as national idols and ambassadors of Japan, rapidly took a leading part in domestic media efforts to lessen the survivors’ tragedies and focus the society on keeping optimism and working through the strengthening of the country. From that moment, media has been covering the multiple activities they have been carrying on to help the affected zone, cleaning, talking to victims, cheering Japanese in general and committing themselves to keep working to support Japan by giving free concerts in the affected areas and performing in other parts of the country specifically as fundraisers and crusades to maintain people aware of the needs and challenges of the victims. The many advertising campaigns that they have endorsed since that time have also been filled with such messages and it seems that many companies have turned to Arashi to promote their products and services in order to be able to use that national discourse.

For instance, less than a month after the earthquake, Arashi performed in a special concert called Let’s connect thru the songs (Uta de tsunagō) (NHK, April 8, 2011), where the members’ message was that they believed in the strength of Japan. Also in April, the national broadcasting of a special commercial spot from a company of mobile phones showed the members praising the qualities of Japanese people as “gentle, hardworking and a bit shy,” and then followed by the same discourse of the book The Arashi of Japan about them wanting to know more about the country and connect with their people (AU KDDI, April 2011). In June 30, The Arashi of Japan, previously given by the JTA to schools, was published for its selling around the country to raise funds for the victims of the earthquake (Oricon Style, 2011). Then, in July, the special video Message from Japan produced by the JTA was broadcasted in the Japan National Tourism Organization website108 and in big screens on 133 countries; the video presented the five members of Arashi expressing their gratitude for the support that Japan was receiving from around the world, but it was also aimed at showing that the country was ready to continue receiving people and offering its culture (Kankōchō, 2011).

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108 http://www.jnto.go.jp/ (video no longer available)
Also since 2011, Arashi’s inedited song *furusato* (homeland),\(^{109}\) which was presented by the group as part of its participation as Master of Ceremony of the *Kōhaku Uta Gassen* (NHK) 2010,\(^{110}\) has been promoted by media as a kind of anthem of national bonding and national pride. Analyzing the lyrics, it is evident that it expresses the discourse aimed at strengthening of national identity through the flagging of Japanese allegedly traditional personality qualities, aesthetic sense and imagery:

> In the sky that approaches the twilight, I found the clouds of the train;  
> I feel like going back to the town of those dear scents.

> The times of earnest pile up, the people that spin in my memories,  
> the smiles of everyone are now besides me.

> The people that I want to meet are there, they are waiting with open kindness;  
> the colors of the mountains, the wind and the sea, the one place where I can be myself.

> There is a song I cannot forget, that I sing to myself while tying hands;  
> the colors of the mountains, the wind and the sea, this is my homeland.

> In the sky with sunrise colors one star twinkles,  
> a small light shines, the valor boosts.

> If I searched the seeds of tomorrow in the middle of nonchalant days,  
> the mirror of the beginning resounds now for your sake.

> Because there are rainy days, the rainbow appears;  
> because we overtake the pain, we become stronger;  
> the continuing road, the map of the dream, everything is in my hearth.

> I want to keep forever the memories of the friend that helped me and I helped;  
> the continuing road, the map of the dream, that is my homeland;  
> it is my motherland; this is our homeland.

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\(^{109}\) Translation based on the lyrics from the performance of Arashi during the *Kōhaku Uta Gassen* (NHK, December 31, 2013).

\(^{110}\) This concert has been held annually since 1951 by the public broadcaster NHK, as part of the special shows of the celebrations of New Year. Currently, it is a live transmission of four and a half hours that goes through the last hours of the year. It is regarded as one of the most important media events and shows, normally having the highest annual ratings (see Video Research website: http://www.videor.co.jp). Artists to perform are chosen by a committee of NHK and are announced in a ceremony some weeks before. The selection is supposed to reflect the most popular artists in a national sense; for such reason, all media – including the private corporations – report on the event. The format of the show is a musical competition between the red team and the white team – the red is formed by female artists or groups with female leading singers and the white is of male artists or groups. Another important selection is the one of masters of ceremonies, who act also as captains of each team, and are awarded to *tarento* who were relevant that year – also one female and one male. After all artists have performed, the public and a committee of other invited *tarento* or public personalities vote to select the winning team. Then, the flag of victory is presented to the master of ceremonies representing the winning team. See http://www1.nhk.or.jp/kouhaku/history/
In 2013, Arashi was once again main personality of the 24-hour TV, this time expressly having as topic: “Japan…? The shape of this country.” During the public designation of the group, the members explained they intended to think and make people think about their nation and themselves as Japanese. The CM of the event showed the idols in different situations arguably depicting typical Japanese behavior.

Along with the images, a voice described the behavior, reinforcing the national spirit with the words “Japanese people, give your best. For the sake of Japanese.” Scenario 1: “Japanese cannot say no and always help others; even if they are not grateful, we help them. That is our true self.” Scenario 2: “Japanese are thoughtful. We think that consideration to others is the energy that moves the world.” Scenario 3: “Japanese apologize a lot, but what is wrong with that? Good people are good people, let’s be proud!” Scenario 4: “Japanese compromise; before oneself, we think about the other. Life is not about gains and setbacks,
nor about winners and losers.” Scenario 5: “Japanese are softhearted; we look for balance here and there; because we are a little weak of will, our spirits get tired.”

In this way, after March 11 of 2011, the image or name of Arashi has become easily found in media productions that clearly state as objective to show the beauty, uniqueness or importance of Japanese environment, culture and society, openly flagging a discourse on Japaneseness; some are directly related to the support of the affected area and aiming to the rebuild of the national sentiment – waved flags - and others are just promoted as regular variety shows or special documentaries that are supposed to be mere entertainment – unwaved flags. Also, the media productions that require them to go overseas have diminished, increasing considerably their travels inside the country to promote all the ‘unknown national treasures’. The few productions that have taken them to foreign countries seem to have a two-fold aim: to promote Japan in those places, but also to show the national audience that their country is well-regarded in the world.

Aoyagi (2005, p. 35) says that:

In contemporary Japanese popular culture and mass society, successful idols […] are considered charismatic because they demonstrate the transformation from an ordinary young person to an extraordinary figure that influences the public. In Japan, charisma encompasses a person’s abilities to face challenges, overcome struggles, and accomplish dreams against all odds. It also includes the person’s ability to surpass the limits of tradition and attain a new meaning in life that can inspire other members of the society.

Then, after exploring the case of Arashi, it is possible to argue that these tarento have achieved a charismatic stance in Japan after a long process of maturation in media that

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transformed them in front of audience from regular teenage idols to accomplished men that showed their commitment with their society, not only by performing their jobs with all the effort and dedication that any other non-entertainment job would require, but also by using their talents to put the name of Japan in a good place and by influencing their own people to get more involved with their culture. Their media representations have been flagging the Japanese identity through a focus on the pride they express when presenting something that puts their country as unique or as part of the world’s elite. At the same time, their own symbolism as national ambassadors and faces of Japan towards the exterior, but mostly inside their own society, is reinforced the more they involve in such type of discourse.

In 2012, the magazine Nikkei Entertainment published an article (Kimura, 2012) on the significance of Arashi’s transformation from national idols into Japanese ambassadors; it remarked their strategy of ‘becoming global by staying in Japan’. In the interview, the members expressed they considered more important to get to know more about their own country to strengthen it than going outside.

The media promotion of Japan through Arashi is evident also for Japanese, but it is not necessarily perceived as nationalistic. According to the opinions of Japanese people I talked to during my field work, they noticed the fact that the group was being constantly called ‘national’ or ‘face of Japan’. However, as they developed more on the topic, they exteriorized the same reasoning that was promoted implicitly in the media discourse: Arashi was called national because it was popular inside and outside Japan and because the members had an image that represented the ‘Japanese traditional values’; at the same time, since they were the national idols, they were associated to Japan in many media contents.

The general opinion of people regarding those ‘national values’ represented by Arashi, turned out to be the same that I found to be the preferred reading media promotes: peaceful, respectful, creative, hardworking, friendly, good at team work and involved with their society. They also talked about emotional responses produced in them while seeing Arashi, which were considered virtues of Japanese, in words of a thirty seven years old office lady: “I think that Arashi gives Japanese people energy. We notice how much effort and courage they put
in their activities and we also feel like persevering and giving our best. Japanese like people who persevere.\textsuperscript{114}

It appears as if audience notice the constant national flags in Arashi’s representations, but they assume them as natural because the group is the national idol, because it is the face of Japan; or, in another way, they consider that Arashi has become national idol because it represents some of the national values. This perception could be considered as a myth functioning to establish the national ideology of the Japanese elites as common sense through a strategy of banal nationalism; but, arguably, this process only works because Japanese audience deliberately decide to support the group.

Examining this under the theoretical background that was presented regarding celebrities’ social role, it is possible to state that Japanese audience – not all, but a relevant part of it, considering that the media power of Arashi has been at the top since their designation as national idols - support the group for one of two reasons: because they agree with the discourses attached to it or because they have a positive affect towards the group that is stronger than any disagreement with their messages and, then, it can be expected that such divergence tends to disappear facilitated by such emotional connection.

In any case, this suggests that an important portion of Japanese people approve to a good extent the ideologies regarding the national and the gender constructions represented by Arashi. If several sectors of people did not agree with what Arashi represents, then they would not consume the many contents and products related to the group and soon the media and corporations would stop using the image and messages related to it, because, at the end of the day, the first and most important aim of these elites is the economic profit they get from the use of certain representations. In this sense, the government just follows the market tendencies to use the most influential media images and names for ideological purposes.

The case of Arashi allows to follow the subtle and well-coordinated cooperation among Japanese government, business, media and cultural producers to generate a wide-ranging flagging of certain elements related to the national identity, a trend particularly

\textsuperscript{114} The verb used is \textit{ganbaru}, which implies be tenacious, be persistent, giving the best, refusing to give up.
evident since 2010 and increasingly ideological after the earthquake crisis. Many other *tarento* have also been used in this campaign, but with different discursive focuses.

For instance, the female counterpart of Arashi - the group AKB48 – has been enjoying a wide success in the Japanese entertainment industry since around 2010 - and done fairly well in some parts of East Asia; these facts also gained the group the label of ‘national’ in media. After the disaster of 2011, the members of AKB48 were also very active in charity activities for the victims of the earthquake and media reported on all of them. On December 14th, 2013, the group was presented as ‘representative of the Japanese *pop* culture’ and performed in the banquet offered by Prime Minister Abe to the leaders of the Southeast Asian countries attending the ASEAN-Japan Summit (Sankei Digital, 2013). Since then, the images of the group and its members have been related to the Cool Japan phenomena mostly to the exterior, representing the economic possibilities of promotion of Japanese media culture.

Although I find that this group has particular characteristics that make it less relevant for the national identity discourse inside the country, there are still some Japanese female features that media endorse through them and, indirectly, reinforce Japanese traditional masculinity.

As the name of the group indicates, the members of AKB48 were 48 at the beginning; as it became successful, the number has skyrocketed. However, just some of the hundreds of girls that belong to the project are fairly known. The members’ age range goes from teenagers to women in their twenties. The producer agency has established a rotation scheme to choose the girls who would appear in promotional activities during a period; this is done according to a voting system among fans – mostly male. Also, as the members get older, regardless of their popularity, they leave the group. In media, they announce these decisions as their own; nevertheless, when they leave, they hardly enjoy the media power they had as members of it, making it very difficult for them to compete with women who have developed their *tarento* career mainly as actresses or singers. In Japanese *tarento* system, those who are considered mainly actors and actresses have a very high status, as their personalities are very carefully shaped by their promotion agencies – similar to the kind of management done by Johnny’s Jimusho. In the case of female idols, however, the concepts of the groups are the ones
carefully constructed, but the exchangeability of the individual members, makes it difficult for most of them to succeed after they leave the group.\footnote{115 Individual female idols of the 1980s were indeed able to achieve success after their idol career, but in the contemporary cases, the rule is for them to eventually disappear among the thousands of stock \textit{tarento}, only a few exceptions – those who were the top stars of their groups - are achieving a fairly good place in the \textit{tarento} system.}

Even though AKB48 as a concept is very successful and popular, certainly representative of Japanese media culture, the continuous change of the girls makes it difficult for Japanese audience to grasp the essence of their individual personalities and retrieve elements of their own identity as Japanese. Nonetheless, there are still some very relevant discourses that – through the whole concept of the group – flag ideas about what elites propose as Japanese women ideals and flaws.

The media narratives regarding AKB48 stimulate the idealization of a sexualized childish female image, while also implying that the public worth of a woman is lost as she matures, thus implying she should retrieve herself to the private role of wife and mother. In his analysis of the group as image commodities, Galbraith (2012, p. 199) identifies that the members of AKB48 are turned into images of production and consumption, symbolically oscillating “between an unreachable ideal (the pure) and infinitely available material (the sexual).” Indeed, they are represented as an ideal woman archetype of doll-like, petite, childish girls whose lives are on the hands of the male producer and the thousands of male fans. Lacking individuality and being exchangeable, the value of these women, as media portray them, is on their youthful submissive sexual appeal; they are presented merely as images of desire – as Galbraith says – but the person behind the image barely matters. Albeit they are successful idols, their success - their place as front members in the public activities of the group - is explicitly related to their ability to appeal to male fans and the male producer.

Both, Arashi and AKB48 represent dual gender discourses: Arashi embodies the traditional Japanese male in contemporary fashion, while AKB48 symbolizes sexualized childish femininity. However, the media power of Arashi members has been built over much defined types of personality that have been strengthening through the years in order to appeal to different sectors of the society beyond young female fans, whereas AKB48 members’ media attraction derives from their lack of individuality and, thus, replicability – if one
member goes out, ten more can take her place without any difference. Thus, AKB48, towards Japanese society, reinforces the traditional ideas of a traditional paternalist society by endorsing the notion that ideal women are those who do not rise their individuality and who are at the service of male.

Therefore, the dominance of Arashi and AKB48 in contemporary Japanese media - resultant from the active support of people - and their containing of a ubiquitous flagging of a national discourse along with that of a dual masculinity and dual femininity could be indicative of a moment of consensus between elites and society to focus on the reinforcement of the national identity that is closely related to issues regarding the social/national roles of men and women.

In the next chapter, another sample of media phenomena, from another banal type of contents, will be analyzed. It is important to keep in mind the case presented here in order to support the reading. The intertextuality found among Japanese media is the key to grasp the dominant discourses promoted by elites to society.