Punks in the Woods: The Punk Undertones of Mori Girls

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Assignment description: Define “punk” (the counterculture movement), then pick something people normally wouldn’t consider “punk” and justify why it’s “punk.” The assignment was completed for Professor Lisa Waite’s Counter-Culture Communication.

When we think of punk, we usually imagine a very aggressive image. Indeed, the punk movement is characterized by its assertive attitudes rooted in anti-conformity, anti-capitalism, and other values. Imagine, if you will, a movement that adopts the anti-mainstream values of punk, but also asserts its right to not be assertive.

Mori (the Japanese word for “forest”) is a style that emerged in Japan during the mid-2000s, but didn’t gain visibility until the early 2010s (Fujita, 2012; Shoji, 2010). Even though men are more than welcome to participate, it’s important to note that women are the most common practitioners of the mori lifestyle; therefore, this paper will primarily focus on female practitioners of the mori aesthetic (henceforth referred to as “mori girls”). Despite being developed on a social media site, the movement encourages members to embrace antiquity and a modest aesthetic that revolves around romanticizing a forest setting. Mori girls dress and act like they live in cottages in the woods, embracing a feminine and submissive image. Yet, by doing so, mori girls passively protest urbanization, nationalism, imperialism, and restrictive gender roles. While some mori girls also act in ways that reject consumerism, other mori girls also harness consumerism to further their transgressive natures. When examining the cultural and political contexts of mori girls, this lifestyle that encourages followers to be wary of aggression is actually pretty “punk.”

The punk counterculture emerged during the 1970s. By this time, the hippie counterculture had pretty much dissipated, as emerging counterculture figures (mainly those belonging to the glam movement) rejected the hippie lifestyle as being shallow and vapid (Goffman, 2005). What punks did was reject the decadence of the co-existing glam movement. Indeed, the punk counterculture was not glamorous or decadent. It was sharp and it was gritty. Punk musicians who weren’t classically trained still picked up their guitars and played in small venues, with members of the culture being largely supportive (Goffman, 2005). Members of the movement also began glorifying authoritarian slogans, whether in irony or in total seriousness (Goffman, 2005). When the once American-centered movement traveled over to the United Kingdom, an anti-consumerist energy emerged from the scene when it mixed with the Situationists (Goffman, 2005). It was then that punk became a global movement, where people all around the world from Pittsburgh to Jakarta could don mohawks and clothes covered in safety pins and rage against the system and against mainstream trends. The punk movement was not well-received, and punk musicians were even censored by radio stations when DJs refused to play their songs (Goffman, 2005). But punks didn’t care. They didn’t want any part of the system, anyways, and they were going to make it known. This is the essential nature of “punk.” Punks don’t distract themselves with the false glamour of mainstream society and capitalism. Punks critique and disengage themselves from
mainstream society and create their own lifestyles and artifacts that reflect their ideals and beliefs, and they make this transgression known. Punk is also a global movement, as globalization has brought about shared issues amongst various global communities. Punk rebels against these shared issues, but punks around the world choose how they rebel.

In 2006, a user by the name of Choco posted a set of rules on a Japanese social networking site, Mixi (Fujita, 2012). This list of 62 rules dictated how mori girls should dress and act. Mori style emphasizes a natural look, especially in regards to hair and cosmetics (Fujita, 2012). In regards to clothing, mori can be characterized by feminine details (like lace and floral patterns), neutral colors (like white, cream, beige, olive, etc.) and warm colors (like bordeaux and dark brown), garments and accessories made from animals (like fur ponchos and leather bags), flat round-toed shoes, loose-fitting garments, and layering items of clothing (Fujita, 2012; “Who are the mori girls?” 2009). The fashion is also versatile, as mori girls dress for the season by adding on more layers during the colder months and lesser, lighter layers during the warmer months (“An introduction to mori girls,” 2012). When it comes to personality, Choco encourages mori girls to be laid-back and uncomplicated (Fujita, 2012). In general, mori girls are quiet and peaceful individuals (“An introduction to mori girls,” 2012). Their personas strive to be discreet and do not adopt a sexualized image; in fact, their aesthetic is very unsexualized (Shoji, 2010). They are wary of appearing aggressive or assertive, and would prefer to “exist... on a metaphysical level” (Shoji, 2010). Yet, mori girls also strive for individuality (“Who are the mori girls?” 2009). They’re not concerned with how others perceive them, nor are they concerned with mainstream trends. They’re attracted to artifacts based on how it makes them feel, rather than how they feel it will appear to others (“Who are the mori girls?” 2009). Mori girls are also encouraged to live a more bohemian and antiquated lifestyle, shunning the fast-paced nature of city life (“Who are the mori girls?” 2009). Mori girls frequent bookstores, cafes, old neighborhoods, and the natural setting of the forest (Fujita, 2012; “An introduction to mori girls,” 2012; “Who are the mori girls?” 2009). While there are brands that sell clothing influenced by the mori aesthetic, mori is largely a DIY culture, as mori girls are attracted to hand-made items and encouraged to create their own things (Fujita, 2012; “Mori-Girl Mondays // a new blog series,” 2014). In addition, mori girls are encouraged to be artistic and creative, and girls are encouraged to take up artistic hobbies such as photography (Fujita, 2012; “Who are the mori girls?” 2009).

When we look at mori girls, this same desire to not be part of mainstream society that punks shared is apparent. Mori girls idealize life outside the confines of the city, which is very much an attitude acting against the urbanization of modern society (Fujita, 2012). Mori girls also eschew modern fashion trends, especially form-fitting clothing and loud colors. The DIY culture amongst mori girls also corresponds with a similar culture amongst punks. The way that mori girls embrace a quirky fashion aesthetic also mirrors punk’s aesthetic that purposefully rejects mainstream fashion. Like punk, mori emphasizes individuality. Yes, the aesthetic was set up by a list of rules, but it’s all very open-ended and allows members to create their own styles that emphasizes individual freedom within the aesthetic.

Yet, unlike punks, mori girls do not adopt an aggressive persona. Mori girls are
very milquetoast and feminine. This might not seem very transgressive, but considering the role of women in Japan after World War II, the submissive nature of mori girls can be contextualized as a protest against the pressures placed on women to behave in a certain manner. After Japan’s defeat in World War II, the United States occupied the country in order to demilitarize and democratize the country (Yoneyama, 2005). When justifying imperialist practices, American media outlets spun a narrative of submissive Japanese women being oppressed by Japanese men, and that the US was liberating these women during the occupation (Yoneyama, 2005). Indeed, Japanese women did gain a lot of rights after the war, although it could be argued that feminist groups in Japan were fighting for these rights before the occupation (Yoneyama, 2005). However, the American media were using Japanese women to justify robbing Japan’s autonomy as a nation, which the Japanese were not happy with. As a result, the Japanese media encouraged women to be more assertive and combat stereotypes of Japanese women presented in American media (Shoji, 2010). Yet, at the same time, Japanese society still oppressed women by enforcing strict gender roles. Japanese society still emphasized the role of women as mothers and used this to justify laws that diminished women’s bodily autonomy and to repress women’s sexuality (Anan, 2014).

In modern times, Japanese women have acted ways to rebel against repressive gender roles. Some women have extramarital affairs to assert agency over their bodies and their sexuality (Lin, 2012). Some women embrace being single and remove the stigma of doing activities alone that are typically thought of as couple’s activities, thereby asserting agency and dismantling the idea that women need men in their lives (Dales, 2014). Other women, who are usually sent to private schools to indoctrinate in them traditional gender roles in order to train them to be good wives and mothers, use the teachings and publications aimed at them to construct their own images and allowed their voices to be heard (Anan, 2014). When the post-war economy empowered these women as consumers, they utilized this new purchasing power to buy artifacts that emphasized their own aesthetics. What these women emphasized were “unproductive” bodies; bodies not intended for reproductive use or for the manifestation of patriarchal notions (Anan, 2014). The mori aesthetic best fits into this framework. By wearing loose-fitting garments and not emphasizing sexual promiscuity, mori girls de-emphasize the traditional role their bodies play in a patriarchal society and allow agency over their bodies. Even though the mori aesthetic is not inherently sexual, it still gives practitioners bodily autonomy. The assertion of passive femininity within the mori community becomes a transgression against the pressures of the Japanese media, which in itself is influenced by the pressures of the American media (Shoji, 2010). Within this context, the mori community not only becomes an anti-nationalist movement by rejecting the idea of how Japanese women should act, but also an anti-imperialist movement by rejecting the Western narrative that Japanese women have no control over their own lives (Yoneyama, 2005). Yes, mori girls adopt Western clothing in their aesthetic; however, the fashion is largely influenced by Scandinavian aesthetics and not the country that occupied their nation decades ago (Fujita, 2012).

The mori community is still very esoteric. Mainstream society regards it as inaccessible (Shoji, 2010). Shoji (2010) also
points out that mori girls do not earn the attention of the opposite sex (yet, mori girls are unlikely to care about what men think of them). Yet, the community has become a global one. Women in Western countries who have invested interest in Japanese street fashion have become enamored with the mori aesthetic. While mori communities embrace the anti-consumerist and anti-urbanization elements of the original community, they do not carry the same historical and cultural contexts the Japanese mori girls incorporate in their lifestyles. However, global mori communities still focus on the subject of women’s bodies in the culture. Rather than discussing the bodily autonomy of mori girls, they focus on the inclusivity of different body types. In other Japanese street fashion cultures, members tend to embrace thin, petite bodies (“Mori-Girl Mondays // a new blog series,” 2014). However, in international mori communities, bloggers like Newman (2011) emphasize body diversity in the community. In fact, modern technology allows plus-size mori girls to show off their aesthetics, thereby encouraging other plus-size girls to adopt the aesthetic. This allows mori communities in other countries to decentralize the image of thin, petite women that is glorified both in mainstream society and in the mori girl community.

Despite the submissive nature of mori girls, their aesthetics and attitudes are transgressive when contextualized within the cultural history of Japan. When examining the mori community, attitudes toward anti-urbanization, anti-capitalism, and individuality emerge. Rejection of traditional gender roles also emerges as mori girls de-emphasize the role of women as baby-makers. The community has also spread amongst Japanophiles, allowing them to transgress against similar trends in their respective countries. Within this context, mori girls are truly “punk.”
Works Cited


