

Becoming-minor through Shinsengumi: A sociology of popular culture as a people's culture*

Rosa Lee, University of Tokyo
rosa.sb.lee@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper re-maps contemporary popular cultures by tracing the rise of a people's culture into a popularly mediated culture through Shinsengumi, a group of young men in history who are feverously romanticised in Japan. Originally, Shinsengumi was marginalised from mainstream history as violent insurgents against the Meiji government only to be transformed into a popular cultural symbol through relentless fantasising by the masses. As a culture originating from the people, it provides a window onto popular culture in its broader sense as the cultural habits shared by a particular group of people in advanced capitalist societies such as Japan. From this basis, this paper presents a sociological inquiry into Shinsengumi as a cultural symbol beginning with a brief history of popular culture to propose a need to examine popularly produced culture. This is followed by an analysis of narratives, the various intervals of communications undertaken to describe and/or explain Shinsengumi since the symbol's debut in popular culture in the Meiji period. From this analysis, this study reveals Shinsengumi has become a popular cultural symbol that could be accessed and appropriated by anyone who wishes to transmit their personal romanticisations about the group. Shinsengumi's symbolic transition is further explored through a monograph of social interactions at the 2012 Hino Shinsengumi Festival. By exploring how actors transcend conventional social and physical boundaries to come together at Hino via the symbol, this paper demonstrates Shinsengumi in contemporary Japan operates as a becoming-minor symbol which capacitates individuals to self-reflexively articulate and communicate their perception of social realities and self-identity.

Keywords

Popular culture, becoming-minor, theories of culture and contemporary Japan

1. Introduction

This paper aims to present a topology of popular cultures in contemporary societies by tracing the rise of a people's culture into a popularly mediated culture. For this purpose it examines Shinsengumi, a household name in contemporary Japan for a group of young men in history feverously romanticised by people of all ages and gender. Originally, Shinsengumi was

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marginalised from mainstream Japanese history as violent resurgents who resisted against the coming of the Meiji state only to be gradually transformed into a popular cultural symbol through relentless fantasising by the masses. As a culture originating from the people, Shinsengumi provides a window to scrutinise popular culture in its broader sense as the cultural habits shared by a particular group of people in advanced capitalist societies. In turn, a study of this symbol could contribute to existing understanding of contemporary social realities and perspectives. With this proposition, this paper begins a sociological inquiry into the cultural Shinsengumi with a brief history of popular culture. This is followed by a genealogy of narratives which describe and/or explain Shinsengumi since its debut in popular culture dating back to the mid-Meiji period. Shinsengumi's symbolic transition is further explored through a monograph of the 2012 Hino Shinsengumi Festival where various stakeholders narrate the symbol through social interaction. By exploring how actors come together and across via the symbolic Shinsengumi, this paper demonstrates the capacity of popularly created cultures to mediate communication in contemporary societies.

2. Popular culture as contests of differences

The present plural spectrum of popular cultures in advanced capitalist societies cannot be comprehended without an appreciation of how cultures attributed to, belonging to, formed by, and/or favoured by the masses have shifted alongside socio-historical transitions.¹ Originally a reference to culture for the lower classes distinct from the high culture of the ruling class, popular culture became familiarised as mass-manufactured cultural commodities with the spread of capitalist mode of economy beginning from the early 20th century. For Benjamin (1968), the rise of mass culture roused concerns for the death of authenticity and the “aura” of high art. Likewise, top-down cultural flows being controlled by the “culture industry” compelled Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) to lament the reduction of individuals into nondenumerable masses as a result of being deprived of their cultural creativity. In spite of the de-individualising currents, counter-cultural resistances to the culture industry and grassroots appropriations of mass culture gradually gained social standing because these sub-cultures attracted commercial value as lucrative niche markets in industrialised societies (Howes, 1996). That is, as sub-cultures are endowed with distinctiveness for its distance from other cultures, their very novelty renders them a target for re-subversion and re-appropriation from the centre of cultural system. Commodified and absorbed back into the masses against their will, peripheral groups struggle for further differentiation in attempts to regain its sub-cultural identity.

¹ These variations of popular culture are noted to address the diversity inherent in the definition of popular (Williams, 1983).

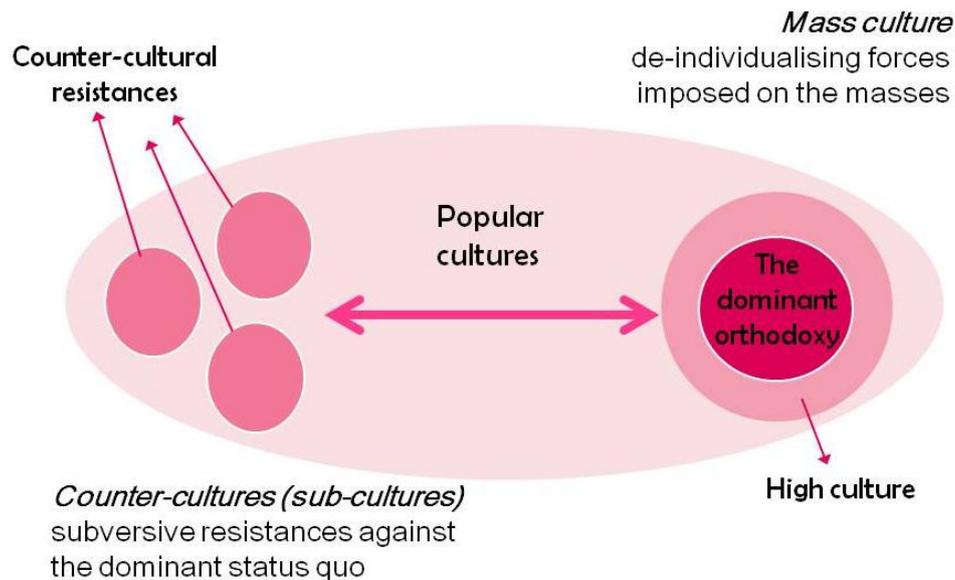


Figure 1. Mass culture vs. counter-cultures (sub-cultures)

However, recent structural and ontological developments have blurred the boundary between centre and periphery as consumers and producers increasingly poach and appropriate from each other. In advanced capitalist societies, many individuals not only have access to information and communication technology, they are also equipped with cultural literacy to produce and circulate their own cultural pastiches. At the same time, the post-modern decline of grand narratives has befuddled traditional divisions between the ‘real and fictional’ and ‘high and low’, which in effect translates into the erosion of an authoritative standard to ascertain a hierarchy of cultures whether grassroots or mainstream. Popular culture in contemporary industrialised societies has become *postmodern* in the sense that various streams of *subcultures* co-exist on the same popular plane. Thus a subculture, i.e. a variation of popular cultures distinct from sub-culture, no longer acquires standing by virtue of its quality for its value is objectively unidentifiable. Instead, a subculture is ascertained by its differentiability from other cultures. In Baudrillard (1993)’s words, this is the fate of popular culture in contemporary consumer societies which has transfigured into “a hell of the same” from the previous “hell of the others” where individuals struggled for self-differentiation. In other words, popular culture has evolved into a plural myriad of subjectivities, each being a reflection of the social realities perceived from a focal point. Surrounded by *similarly unique* others in contrast to sub-cultures which could position itself against fixed points of reference, postmodern subcultures could only be distinguished by the differences between their compositions rather than by their distance from the fading mainstream.

The nature of contemporary popular culture as an aggregate of postmodern subcultures is explicated in Azuma and Otsuka (2008)’s consideration of Japanese sub-cultures and subcultures where they cite *otaku-kei* (otaku-like) culture as an exemplar of postmodern subcultures. *Otaku* culture initially appeared in mass popular culture from the late 1980s as a derogatory reference to introvert fans of trivial, counter-cultural interests.² The sub-culture was gradually incorporated into the mainstream with positive media depictions of *otaku* as socially awkward but nonetheless

² See Otsuka (2007) for the influence of mass media’s frantic coverage of an ‘otaku’ killer, Miyazaki Tsutomu Miyazaki on social perception of otaku.

earnest individuals or enthusiastic consumers who could revive the ailing Japanese economy. As a result of diminishing prejudice, the term is currently used to denote a strong obsession for objects whether of sub-culture or mass culture. In Azuma (2001)'s words, *otaku-kei* cultures are based on a postmodern style of cultural consumption involving a database of “*moe*” (self-referential elements).³ That is, contemporary popular cultural products such as AKB48, a mega-hit Japanese idol group boasting numerous members with a variety of traits, or the popular anime/manga, *One Piece* (1997~) with a repetitive narrative structure and an ever-expanding line-up of characters, are no more than amalgams of various *moe* such as particular character personalities, visual designs and etc. These cultures are continuously reproduced and renewed by fans as well as producers who poach *moe* and configure them into various narratives. These individual narratives are no longer *sub-cultural* since there lacks any authoritative or standard text to assess individual reproductions. Rather, they are *subcultural* since they could be identified by the differences in their constellation of elements. Numerous *One Piece* otaku could be circulating fan-produced materials which reflect their personal interpretation of the franchise whilst anticipating with excitement for a movie spin-off; they may share a same database, but not the same narratives.

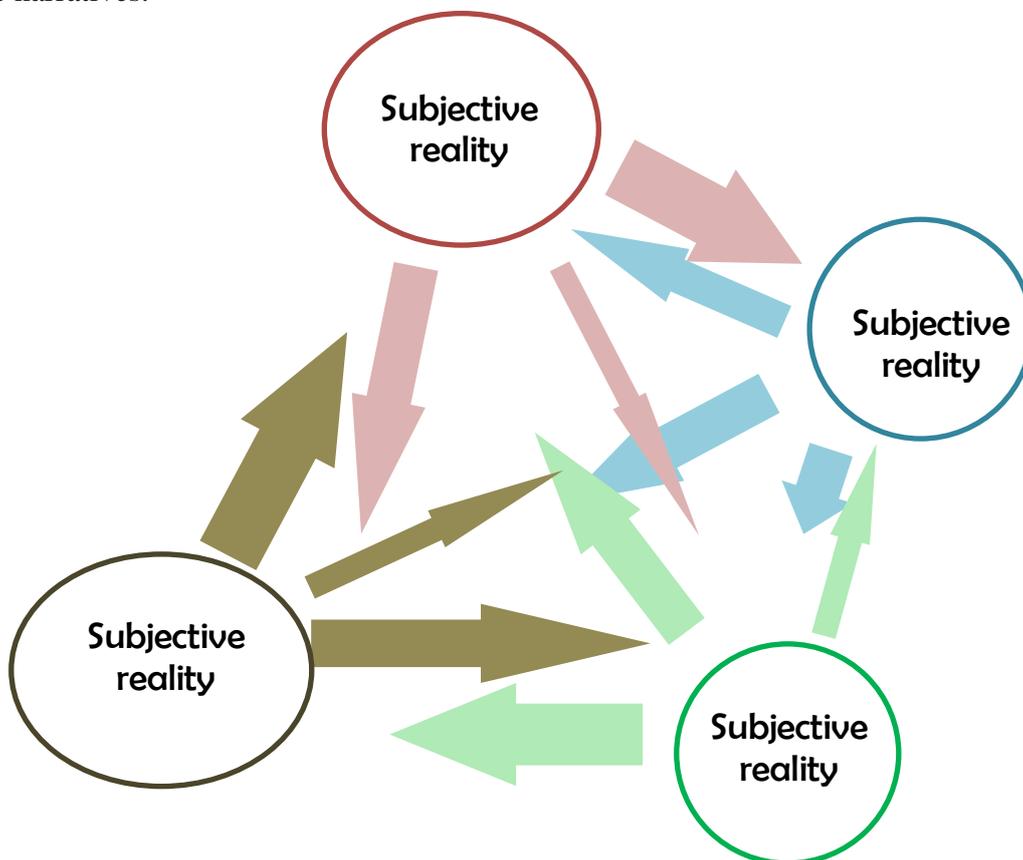


Figure 2. Postmodern subcultures

In this light, *subculture* in advanced capitalist societies refers to variations of cultures being circulated through the joint effort of consumers and producers for consumption by the micro-masses. However, despite the increased sensitivity for changing power dynamics between the

³ Cf., although Azuma's observation is limited to anime, manga and computer game otaku, it nevertheless provides a useful framework to consider popular culture at large.

‘dominant’ culture industry and ‘passive’ consumers, appreciation of popular culture continues to be limited to cultures for the people. That is, whether between the high and low, the mainstream and sub-cultural, or multiple subjective realities, scrutinies of popular culture continue to focus on cultures produced for, or challenged and appropriated by the masses. Culture authored and owned by the people appears to remain beyond the scope of popular culture studies in spite of the fact that popular also means “of or belonging to the people” (Williams, 1983: 236). This tendency is also evident in monographs of subcultures which largely focus on the actions and narratives produced by fans and audience of pre-existing popular cultures. Noting this shortcoming, this study examines the present fate of popularly authored cultures by examining Shinsengumi, a historically marginalised figure that was turned into a popular cultural symbol by the nondenumerable masses.

3. Methodology

To explore the current state of popularly created cultures, this paper traces the transformation of Shinsengumi narratives, the various forms and intervals of communication undertaken to describe and/or explain Shinsengumi and the social realities surrounding these narratives (Holstein & Gubrium, 2009). To outline Shinsengumi’s development into a popular symbol, narratives were selectively sourced from texts of various formats and cultural practices undertaken since 1898, the year of its earliest appearance in popular culture identifiable at present. Texts were selected based on the: a) reception among consumers and other producers deduced from sales and inter-textual references, b) availability of secondary sources to ascertain the narrative realities of the text, and c) accessibility of materials. Shinsengumi was also compared with other popular figures from Japanese history such as Sakamoto Ryōma and Akō gishi of the *Chūshingura* to identify its place within Japanese popular culture.

For triangulation, narratives embedded in social interactions between Shinsengumi narrators were also examined in this study (Stake, 1995). From May 2011 to November 2012, the researcher participated in fan-oriented activities and events including a walking tour of Shinsengumi’s hometown, annual memorial services for two popular Shinsengumi members, fan-club meet-ups and local festivals with full disclosure of her position and intention. In particular, two fan-clubs were monitored: Friends of Shinsengumi (*Shinsengumi tomonokai*) with more than forty years of history and hundreds of members, and the Nagareyama Shinsengumi (*Nagareyama Shinsengumi tai*), a smaller group established in 2003 with around fifty members. Whilst a comparison of these groups with different socio-historical background and scale was useful to confirm changes to Shinsengumi’s symbolic capacity, interactions within the groups were too transient or small-scaled to monograph the symbol’s functions. Thus, this paper introduces the 2012 Hino Shinsengumi Festival, an annual celebration of Shinsengumi co-organised by the Hino city council and various actors every May in the vicinities of Tokyo. The researcher joined the organising committee as a volunteer in January 2012 and observed how individual and collective stakeholders reconstruct Shinsengumi. Recurring themes in textual and performed narratives such as the “difference between factual and fictional Shinsengumi” and “my/your Shinsengumi” were used to develop a hypothesis about the symbolic Shinsengumi as a communicative medium and to formulate semi-structured interviews with key members of the festival organising committee.

4. A genealogy of the cultural Shinsengumi

In 1863, a bunch of nameless young men were organised into a security force named Shinsengumi by the Tokugawa Bakufu to subdue unruly samurai rebels.⁴ In less than six years, the group was disgracefully discharged from history with the Bakufu's surrender to the Meiji government and marginalised from national history due to their subversive political standing and limited, if any, contribution to nation-making (Matsuura, 2001; Miyachi, 2004). Nevertheless, Shinsengumi drew the grassroots' sympathy and interests with their anachronistic fate and became quickly reincarnated as military heroes in the masses' entertainment, in which their tales were circulated in print from as early as 1898.⁵ Yet their history remained a taboo until the late 1920s, when the expansion of pre-war Japanese mass culture reached its peak and the Meiji Restoration became history (Suekuni, 2012).⁶ Facilitated by these structural changes, individuals with historical literacy such as Hirao Michio (1928), a Bakumatsu/Meiji historian, and Shimosawa Kan (1928), a journalist, began publishing their own interpretations of the historical Shinsengumi even though non-fictional narratives attracted little attention.

A comparison with other popular Japanese historical figures, Sakamoto Ryōma and Akō gishi, elucidates Shinsengumi's peculiarities. At present, Ryōma is a nationally respected figure who is credited with building the foundation of the Meiji Restoration. However, he was unknown to the public until various stakeholders ranging from rights activists to military personnel incorporated the figure into collective consciousness by disseminating narratives fused with historical facts, fiction and their political ideologies (Hakoishi, 1994). Although both Ryōma and Shinsengumi currently enjoy immense popularity, the former was initially produced for people's enlightenment rather than entertainment. Similarly, the masses' playful reproductions of Akō gishi (the Forty-Seven Rōnin) were quickly subdued by official re-evaluations of the legend in light of changing political climate (Hyōdō and Smith, 2003). In contrast to these figures for the grassroots, Shinsengumi surfaced as a culture of the grassroots in tune with socio-historical vicissitudes which allowed the masses to retell their historical realities into history and popular culture.

Following the end of the Pacific War and the American Occupation, reinstatement of popular culture as a culture for the masses' appeasement and socialisation allowed Shinsengumi to return as exciting side characters in postwar Japanese popular culture. In 1962, a turning point arrived when the widely acclaimed writer of 'national fiction', Shiba Ryōtarō, began serialising two historical fictions starring Shinsengumi as the main protagonist in *The Bloody Chronicles of Shinsengumi* (1964) and *The Blazing Sword* (1972). In particular, *The Blazing Sword* is credited for elevating Shinsengumi and the group's vice commander, Hijikata Toshizō, into the masses' counter-cultural hero (Tsudukidani, 2008; Miyachi, 2004). In this narrative, Hijikata pursues his masculine aesthetics by shaping a group of ordinary men into a deadly samurai organisation and leads the group until his death at the hands of the Meiji army. Hijikata's anachronistic life was serialised at a time when the Japanese society demanded diligent conformism from individuals as it matured into a mass-consumer society. Confused and frustrated by social restraints and rapid

⁴ See Miyachi (2004) and Matsuura (2001) for the historical Shinsengumi.

⁵ Imamura and Shōrin (1898).

⁶ Cf., a Buddhist priest who had a brief encounter with the real Shinsengumi did publish a first historical account of the group in 1896 to address the masses' ignorance (Nishimura, 1974). However it is likely to be a work of fabrication (Miyachi, 2004).

changes, many consumers were attracted to Shiba's counter-cultural characterisation of Hijikata and Shinsengumi as autonomous, anachronistic heroes (Ozaki, 1966).

Despite its popularity, Shinsengumi's innate anti-heroic qualities prevented them from becoming a national hero like Shiba's Sakamoto Ryōma in *Here Goes Ryōma* (1974), another bestseller serialised simultaneously with *The Blazing Sword*. In 1968, the year of Meiji Centennial, Ryōma was selected as the hero for the NHK *taiga* drama, a genre of national narrative (Lee, 2006). In contrast, Shinsengumi had to wait more than forty years to become a *taiga* drama hero. Ironically, the mainstream's marginalisation allowed the masses to maintain their autonomy over Shinsengumi despite the group's rise as a popular consumer culture. For instance, inspired to uncover truths behind Shiba's fictionalisation, Tsuru Yōichi became an amateur specialist of Shinsengumi's history by researching during the day and working factory night shifts (Tsuru, 1998). In 1972, Tsuru could publish a non-fiction book about his discovery with just one year of research through a publisher specialising in history because the company had been overwhelmed with readers' demand for the historical Shinsengumi following the huge success of Shiba's novels. History-finding is not an unusual interest, but the rapid ascension of a lay person into a commercial historian is rare. As Japanese consumers fragmented along varying interests into micro-masses, Shinsengumi's marginalisation from the mainstream ironically bestowed the symbol with commercial value as its history became a commodity.⁷

Shinsengumi's popularity not only prompted a revision of their history, it also capacitated ordinary fans to commoditise their own fantasies. Ōuchi Miyoko is a housewife-turned novelist who could materialise her romantic fantasies about Shinsengumi's first squad captain, Okita Sōji, into a commercially successful novel. She reveals in the novel's afterword that her initial manuscript of over 1700 pages caught the publisher's attention when it was circulated among Shinsengumi fans via snail-mail and fax (Ōuchi, 1972: 249). Aided by Shinsengumi's advance to the forefront of popular culture, Ōuchi could discover a niche market for her own fantastic reproduction of Okita. Fans were not only enthusiastically devouring ready-made Shinsengumi, many also used their increasing spending power to reformulate the symbol to their tastes by seeking truths and producing their own interpretations and fantasies.⁸ In other words, Shinsengumi as a counter-cultural symbol of various subjectivities dispersed into the mainstream alongside high economic growth which stimulated individuals to indulge in the 'Ideals, Dreams and Fictions' offered by the Japanese consumer society (Mita, 2011).

By the mid-1990s, a multitude of events such as the economic recession, Aum Shinrikyō terror attacks, and the Hanshin earthquake had dismantled many grand narratives of the Japanese consumer society and replaced the illusions with confusion (Ōsawa, 2008; Mita, 2011). Amidst these alleged transitions, Shinsengumi narratives unpredictably multiplied into various configurations of facts/reality and fantasy/fiction. The historical Shinsengumi had turned into a reflection of individuality as many non-professional historians began actively publishing their findings as commodities.⁹ However, not every lay narrator of the group's history were commercially-driven; Shinohara Yumi and Shinbori Yuchiko perceived a need for guidebooks

⁷ See Kelly (1993) for changes in Japanese consumer trends.

⁸ The masses' desire also materialised as fraternities and societies such as the Kyoto Shinsengumi Association in 1976, and Friends of Shinsengumi in 1977. See, Lee (2013).

⁹ A search on the Scholarly and Academic Information Navigator for Japanese academic sources shows popular commercial historians such as Kikuchi Akira and Yamamura Tatsuya have respectively authored/co-authored 28 and 14 texts since 1988 as of November, 2012.

about Shinsengumi-associated sites from their travelling experience and began distributing their works for a small sum through mail-order and in person at selected fan-events and museums (Saigetsudō, unspecified). These narrators pose a striking difference to professional historians who maintained their indifference to Shinsengumi and considered emerging works about the historical Shinsengumi trivial, if not unscientific (Iechika, 2005). With increased economic capacity, lay Shinsengumi historians were discovering an opportunity to share their personal opinions similar to other counter-cultural fans who began sharing their cultural appropriations through enhanced means of communication and transport.

Fictions about Shinsengumi were likewise becoming more diverse and fantastic, but not necessarily factually inaccurate. Many creators of popular cultural products such as Watanabe Taeko, a girl's manga artist, and Asada Jirō, an author of bestseller novels, began profiting from Shinsengumi's newfound notoriety as an anti-hero while also reinvigorating the symbol through their own reproductions. Watanabe illustrates the fictional romance of a Shinsengumi member in *The Shining Wind* (1997~), where the Bakumatsu social realities and historical facts are depicted as accurate as possible to avoid being demoted as just another girl's manga (Watanabe, Vol. 2). On the other hand, Asada published his personal views of history in the guise of a popular novel, *Tales of the Honourable Mibu Samurai* (2000) because he is aware conveying history without evidence is difficult (Bungei shunju, unspecified). Despite the varying reasons, differentiating between facts and fiction are important for these authors to frame Shinsengumi since their configuration of reality and fantasy becomes a mirror for their individuality. As a result of Shiba's establishment of Shinsengumi as a counter-cultural hero, a myriad of authors could experience the 1990s as a time of celebration as they exhibit their interpretations of Shinsengumi to the mainstream.

The twenty-first century marked another turning point, for the symbol was finally embraced by the mainstream at the centre of popular culture; at last Shinsengumi became a hero worthy for the public with the 2004 NHK *taiga* drama, *Shinsengumi!*. As a representative of ordinary individuals who stayed earnest in spite of the difficulties they faced as Bakumatsu commoners, Shinsengumi was selected to comfort Japanese people who were weary with long-standing economic and social problems (NHK, 2002). The drama also absolved the group by recognising the sincerity of their misdirected efforts; the final episode shows commoners calling out at the execution of Shinsengumi's chief commander, "All praise the samurai of loyalty and patriotism! Shinsengumi is immortal!". Inasmuch as the drama is a response to Japan's socio-economic problems, it is also a result of the NHK's attempts to lure new audience in light of social changes such as the declining dominance of television media and increasing consumption of the historical.¹⁰ Through post-industrialisation, Shinsengumi became a 'major theme' (NHK, 2002: 3).

However, two texts produced in response to the *taiga* drama reveal Shinsengumi failed to become a mainstream hero. In 2006, the NHK produced an unprecedented two-episode sequel to the *taiga* drama, *Shinsengumi!! The Last Day of Hijikata Toshizō*, following viewers' adamant demand for the dramatisation of Hijikata's final moment (NHK, unspecified). The scope of Shinsengumi as a symbol of the masses could not be restricted by a single storyteller despite the NHK's proximity to the centre of the culture industry. The symbol's uncontrollability is also evidenced in a best-selling boy's manga, *Gin Tama* by Sorachi Hideaki who openly acknowledges Shiba's influence on his characterisation of Shinsengumi and his hopes of

¹⁰ For commodification and consumption of history, see de Groot (2009).

benefitting from the *taiga* drama boom (*Gin Tama*, Vols. 1 & 6). Yet, Sorachi is also not afraid of destroying conventions as he reincarnates the anachronistic anti-hero of Shiba's best-seller and the *taiga* drama, Hijikata, as the stoic vice leader of Shinsengumi who is also a passionate anime/manga otaku. Sorachi's commercially successful manipulation of existing images, coupled with fans' ability to influence the NHK, indicates Shinsengumi has become a household name for a symbol capable of embodying and transmitting multiple interpretations simultaneously.

In contemporary Japan, what Shinsengumi symbolises or represents is undefinable by any single storyteller because the scarcity of facts and the group's long absence in mainstream history virtually renders the symbol into an empty vessel. Accordingly, individual interpreters of the symbol could gain equal standing without competition as there is no standard to judge their interpretations. That is, the symbolic Shinsengumi could convey any comprehension or reconstruction as a valid representation of the symbol.



Figure 3. Hijikata in a movie version of *The Blazing Sword*



Figure 4. Hijikata in the NHK *taiga* drama, *Shinsengumi!!*

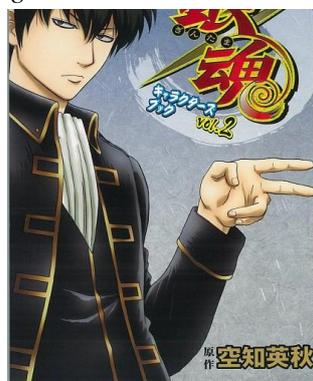


Figure 5. Hijikata in *Gin Tama*



Figure 6. Hijikata in *Hakuōki*

5. Becoming Shinsengumi

Shinsengumi's fluidity is displayed at the Hino Shinsengumi Festival where local residents and visitors communicate their perceptions about the group through social interaction. As the hometown of core Shinsengumi members, Hino city was compelled to remain silent about its affiliations due to the group's stigma. With Shinsengumi's gradual redemption into banal heroes, the city began celebrating the symbol since 1998 and became a Mecca where people from various social and geographical standings display and share their Shinsengumi narratives. The festival's highlight, the Shinsengumi Parade, is open to any willing applicant who wishes to dress in period costumes and perform as Shinsengumi or persons affiliated with Shinsengumi including even Sakamoto Ryōma, who was in fact an adversary of Shinsengumi. Noting the immense success of *Hakuōki* (2008), a dating simulation video game featuring Shinsengumi as seductive vampires, the 2012 festival organisers also invited *Hakuōki* fans to parade as their favourite characters. The organisers explain it would not be possible for Ryōma or characters of a fantasy to feature at other more established Shinsengumi festivities in Hakodate or Kyoto. However, they assert the Hino festival is constrained by fewer conventions since they are still an emerging underdog with a relatively short history and open to progression.

Inasmuch as the festival is a celebration for Shinsengumi fans, it is also a public forum where stakeholders from both within and outside Hino come together for various reasons. In addition to the fans, the 2012 parade performers included individuals from small to large local businesses, academic institutions at all levels from nurseries to universities and more. For example, Hino Motors, a long-term local corporate supporter supplying rental buses, began dispatching their employees as parade performers since 2012. The parade translates into an opportunity for the

company to foster goodwill with the residents and other local businesses as well as the city council. Likewise for the parade volunteer staff consisting of members from the Hino Civic Movement for a Bright Society and a local university volunteering club, the parade becomes a site of community-building as they cooperate to entertain visitors from all corners of Japan. Following Shinsengumi's long-awaited penetration into the mainstream, the city could proudly proclaim its ties to the group to the Japanese public and foster a sense of identity through the process.

At Hino, Shinsengumi's symbolic capacity to embody various gradations of history and fantasy is facilitating individuals with different desires and intentions to connect as they gather at a tangible public space. Since these actors do not share a single definition of Shinsengumi, their interactions at the festival amount to no more than loose ties. Some may belong to a particular locality or a fan-club, but the people gathered at the festival are not bound to a single Shinsengumi community. In fact, individuals are acutely aware of the differences between each other's understanding of Shinsengumi. A local volunteer guide explains he is happy to welcome Ryōma or *Hakuōki* characters and invite more visitors to his city as long as they approach Hino and other participants with respect. For a regular parade performer from a neighbouring city, the fact that other performers may prefer images of Shinsengumi other than her favourite does not deter her from Hino, one of the very few places where fans could display their affection for Shinsengumi in public. Yet, she is not interested in socialising with those participants beyond the festival's limits. In other words, Hino is a crossroad where different gradations of attachment toward Shinsengumi are displayed and acknowledged, not a battleground of differences. In this manner, the festival has become a site for narrators of Shinsengumi to project and compare their subjectivities without the risk of rejection.

6. Becoming-minor through Shinsengumi

A tracing of the cultural Shinsengumi's genealogy in popular culture has revealed the symbol could mirror a myriad of realities and fantasies in contemporary Japan. Furthermore, the diverse spectrum of Shinsengumi being narrated at the Hino Shinsengumi Festival demonstrates various subjectivities could equally be recognised as Shinsengumi. Such fluidity and accessibility of the symbolic Shinsengumi stem from the group's distinctive position in contemporary popular culture. For a long time, Shinsengumi's orthodoxy, i.e. its official history, could not attract the public's interest whether as a serious history or popular culture until it gained popularity as a counter-culture in the 1970s. The symbol is currently embraced by the mainstream, at least within popular culture, but its orthodoxy is no longer definable due to a lack of primary sources and a growing awareness for plural histories. As a result, contemporary narratives of Shinsengumi become distinguishable through a two-tier process. Personal interpretations are qualitatively different to the historical Shinsengumi. However, since the difference between a subjective Shinsengumi and the orthodoxy is qualitatively indistinguishable to the difference between another interpretation and the real, contesting personal differences does not produce individuality. Thus, subjectivities could be projected through Shinsengumi by pronouncing personal differences, instead of rejecting or denying the value of other interpretations. In this respect, the cultural Shinsengumi does not belong to the mainstream or challenge the mainstream like

counter-cultures; it is a subculture, a stream of contemporary popular culture which introduces new communicative possibilities through recognition of differences.

In other words, at the phenomenological level, Shinsengumi could represent everything at once: for a young woman, they could be samurai-turned vampires of a video game; for readers of a boy's manga, they are socially awkward young men with eyes only for their hobbies and friends; or for the local festival organisers, hyper-masculine underdogs with wild ambitions. Various stakeholders could thus exchange their personal understandings about history and social realities through Shinsengumi without the need to align their interests as long as they agree on the indefinability of the symbol. In other words, due to its detectable but indefinable orthodoxy that pacifies contests between subjective realities, Shinsengumi has transformed into a symbol for the becoming-minor who de-territorialise and redefine their selves and social realities by narrating individual comprehensions about the symbol (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986). This becoming-minor symbol allows individuals to become self-reflexive for they could recognise and confirm the differences between their selves and others. By combining Shinsengumi's capacity as a becoming-minor symbol with their newfound capacity to access, archive and circulate information, individuals in post-capitalist Japan become capable of communicating their definitions of social realities. In other words, Shinsengumi as a popular cultural symbol could facilitate communication through creativity.

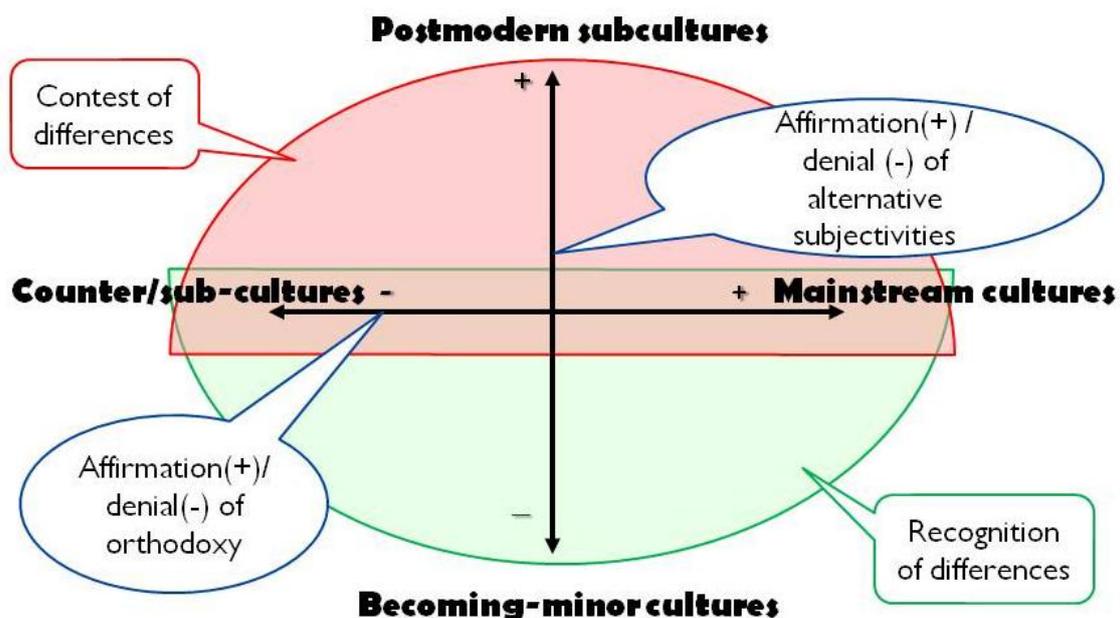


Figure 7. Contemporary popular cultures

The postmodern erosion of traditional centre-periphery hierarchy has not only culminated in the befuddling fragmentation of the masses into individuals, it has also introduced a possibility for mutual recognition of individualities. That is, the meaning of subjective realities and the ways in which those realities are produced and communicated vary in different streams of popular culture. By employing the concept of becoming-minor cultures as a kind of popular culture which facilitates accommodation of differences, existing understanding of popular culture as a contest of differences between and within the mainstream and multiple subcultures could be refined to

reflect changing social realities (Figure 7). From this viewpoint, subculture in a broader sense could be appreciated as an umbrella-term encompassing variants ranging from counter-cultures, postmodern subcultures and becoming-minor cultures which stand separate from the majority (Figure 8).

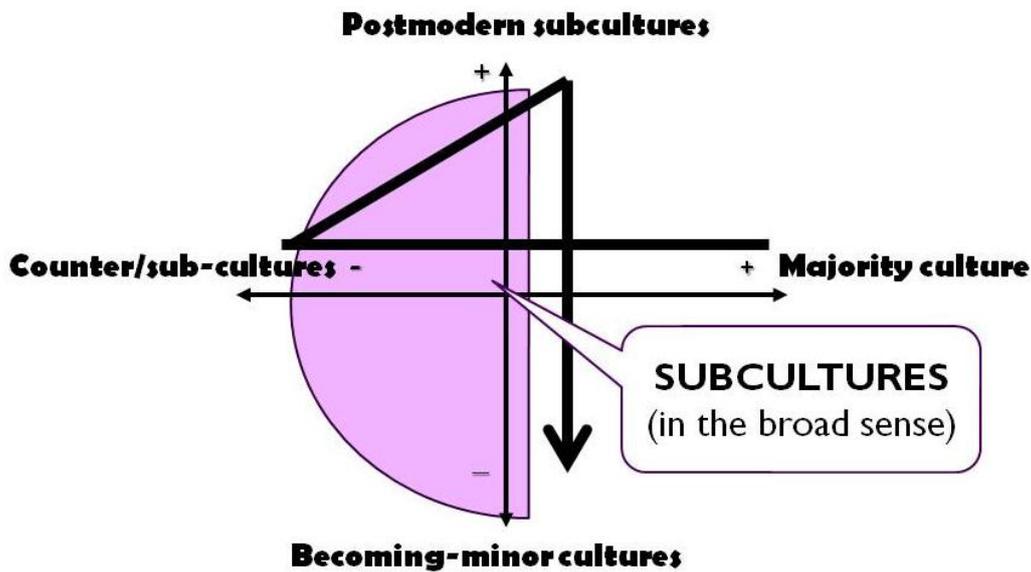


Figure 8. Subculture in advanced capitalist societies

7. From a revised topology of contemporary popular culture

Shinsengumi is an example of postmodern subculture and more broadly, a kind of contemporary popular culture which facilitates communication by capacitating individuals who engage with the culture to become-minor. That is, individuals could pronounce and accommodate subjective differences through the becoming-minor symbol. In practice, the symbol has transformed the Hino Shinsengumi Festival into a transient public forum where becoming-minor individuals could connect across existing social and physical boundaries by projecting personal comprehensions about their social realities. In this light, the symbolic Shinsengumi poses an invitation to explore alternative territories and bondings in advanced capitalist societies by contemplating the de-territorialising capacity of grassroots popular culture.

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About the Author

Rosa Lee is a PhD student in sociology at the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences in the University of Tokyo. Her research interests include theories of culture and society, and collective actions.