

The Landmine Style Phenomenon: Style Construction and Cross-Cultural Dissemination in East Asian Subcultural Fashion (2010–2026)

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Abstract

Since the late 2010s, landmine-style fashion has rapidly spread among young women in East Asia. However, systematic academic research on this emerging subcultural aesthetic remains limited in China. This paper reviews studies published between 2010 and 2026, integrating Hebdige's theory of subcultural style with a framework for meaning reconstruction in cross-cultural communication. The review unfolds along two dimensions: style genealogy and construction, and cross-cultural dissemination. Findings indicate that existing research has accumulated substantial descriptive work on visual characteristics and localization processes, yet lacks a systematic explanation of how derogatory labels undergo semantic reversal to become globally circulating fashion styles. A central tension emerges between interpreting landmine-style as an active form of stylistic resistance and as a symptomatic expression shaped by structural conditions. Future research should pursue cross-regional comparisons and examine the dynamic processes of meaning transformation in transnational style circulation.

Keywords

landmine-style, subcultural fashion, style construction, cross-cultural communication

1. Introduction

Since the late 2010s, landmine-style fashion has gained rapid popularity among young women in East Asia. This aesthetic features a distinctive visual logic that juxtaposes sweetness with darkness: soft pinks and black, lace and ruffles, exaggerated teary-eyed makeup, and accessories featuring Sanrio characters such as Kuromi [1]. The term Jirai-kei originates from Jirai Onna, a slang term that emerged around 2010 on Japan's 2channel forum, used to describe women who appear cute but possess destructive tendencies. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this derogatory label was reappropriated into a marketable fashion trend [1].

This paper examines landmine-style as a subcultural fashion phenomenon, focusing on two core questions: how is this style constructed, and how does a pejorative label transform into a wearable identity marker? How has this style been differently received and adapted in China, Japan, and South Korea?

To ensure a systematic and transparent review process, we conducted a structured literature search across four databases: CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure), Wanfang Data, Semantic Scholar, and the

Korean Citation Index (KCI). The search spanned from 2010 to 2026, with final retrieval completed in August 2026. The following Boolean search string was used:

Topic = (Jirai-kei OR Jirai Onna OR landmine style OR Ryōsan-gata OR sick-cute fashion OR yami-kawaii) AND (subculture OR fashion OR style OR construction OR communication OR dissemination OR East Asia OR China OR Japan OR South Korea)

The initial search yielded 47 potentially relevant records. After removing duplicates (n=12), 35 records remained. These were screened based on title and abstract according to inclusion criteria: peer-reviewed academic publications directly related to landmine-style or other East Asian subcultural fashion styles, focusing on style construction, cross-cultural communication, or subcultural theory. After screening, 18 records were selected for full-text evaluation. After reviewing the full text, 12 records were excluded: 6 had only indirect relevance to the landmine-style subculture, 4 made limited theoretical contributions, and 2 were duplicates. Ultimately, nine core records met all inclusion criteria and were selected.

These nine sources represent the current academic landscape on the landmine-style subculture. Hebdige [2] provides the foundational theoretical framework for understanding subcultural style construction; Kim [3] offers the sole ethnographic study on Korean landmine-style culture; Wang [4] presents a critical sociological analysis of contemporary Japanese youth culture; Xu and Mu [5] and Wu [6] represent peer-reviewed Chinese studies examining adjacent subcultural fashion styles; Sun [1] is the only academic paper directly comparing Chinese and Japanese landmine-style cultures; Lieber-Milo [7] provides a theoretical framework for understanding kawaii as an emotional expression; Seko and Kikuchi [8] analyze the menhera prototype that directly preceded landmine-style; Kawamura [9] offers an authoritative historical overview of Japanese subcultural fashion. Together, these sources capture the existing theoretical, empirical, and comparative dimensions of research on landmine-style, while also revealing the gaps identified in this review.

Existing research provides significant theoretical resources. Hebdige's theory of incorporation [2], along with Xu and Mu [5] and Wu's [6] studies on local subcultural fashion, collectively form the theoretical foundation. However, three shortcomings remain: most studies focus on single regions; existing analyses tend to examine static relationships between style and social structure; and compared to the rapid social diffusion of this aesthetic, theoretical research on landmine-style within the Chinese academic context remains limited.

2. Style Lineage and Construction

2.1 From Derogatory Label to Fashion Trend

The transformation of landmine girls from a pejorative term into a fashion category represents a significant semantic reversal. First appearing in 2010 on 2channel, the term described women who appeared cute but exhibited destructive tendencies [1]. By 2020, social media platforms began circulating makeup tutorials and outfit posts tagged with landmine-style, emphasizing visual codes over personality traits. This shift was driven by multiple factors: social isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic; the rise of the *pien-kei* (tear-eyed) makeup trend, which normalized the aesthetics of tearful eyes; and the popularization of sick-cute visual vocabulary through underground idol culture [1].

China's reception of landmine-style followed a distinct trajectory. The spread of this style was driven by the game *Needy Girl Overdose* and its dissemination across visual platforms, during which it was rapidly commodified and stripped of its heavier psychological connotations [1]. This contrasts with Japan, where the style remains closely tied to male host clubs and the entertainment industry.

2.2 Visual Symbol System

Landmine-style fashion centers around black, white, and dark pink, often paired with ruffled skirts, platform boots, necklaces, and heart-shaped belt buckles [3]. Makeup techniques are distinctive: practitioners apply red or pink eyeshadow to the lower eyelids to create a puffy, tear-stained effect, combined with drooping eyeliner and large-diameter colored contact lenses [1]. Status symbols include pink Monster Energy drink cans, Vivienne Westwood jewelry, and Sanrio characters, particularly Kuromi [3].

The visual vocabulary of landmine-style does not emerge in isolation. Seko and Kikuchi [8] trace the prototype of *menhera* in Japanese popular culture, illustrating how images of self-harm and emotional distress are aesthetically reproduced through media. Lieber-Milo [7] further argues that *kawaii* functions as an emotional expression tool, enabling individuals to convey feelings that might otherwise remain unspoken. These theoretical perspectives help explain how the tearful eye makeup and fragile appearance of the landmine-style aesthetic operate not merely as fashion choices but as visual communication, functioning as a semiotic resource for expressing emotional states.

2.3 Style as Collage: Theoretical Interpretations

Existing research remains divided on how to theorize the construction of landmine-style. Hebdige's [2] framework interprets subcultural styles as bricolage, appropriating and recombining cultural symbols to create counter-hegemonic meanings. From this perspective, landmine-style practitioners actively assemble visual elements to construct a style that challenges mainstream norms. Kawamura [9] provides historical context for this process, documenting how Japanese youth subcultures have consistently used fashion as a medium for identity expression and social commentary.

Wang Qin [4] offers a different interpretation. Drawing on phenomena such as JK strolls and maid cafes, he suggests these cultural expressions represent not active resistance but symptomatic manifestations of structural conditions, particularly relational poverty, a state in which young people experience severe lack of meaningful social connections [4]. The landmine-style aesthetic, with its tearful eyes and vulnerable appearance, can thus be understood as a signal of suffering within shared experiential communities [4]. These competing interpretations reflect a deeper question: when style practices simultaneously express creative agency and social pain, how should researchers determine their meaning?

3. Cross-Cultural Transmission

3.1 Divergent Trajectories in East Asia

Comparative analysis reveals fundamental divergences across three contexts. In Japan, landmine-style remains associated with male host clubs and the entertainment industry [1]. In China, the style has been rapidly commodified and stripped of its psychological connotations, merging with radical feminist discourses on visual platforms [1].

Kim [3] provides a third comparative case through ethnographic research on Korean landmine-style. This study shows that Korean landmine-style is not a direct import but a localized product, combining Japanese visual vocabulary with indigenous Korean stylistic lineages, particularly the depression gallery culture that emerged on DC Inside in 2015 [3]. Kim argues that Korea's adaptation involves active meaning-making, in which visual elements are reinterpreted through local cultural frameworks [3]. This finding indicates that cross-cultural transmission of subcultural fashion may involve active transformation through local cultural lenses, rather than passive adoption.

The three national contexts differ not only in the meanings attached to landmine-style but also in the social functions the style performs. In Japan, the style operates within a framework of visible social marginalization, where practitioners are often associated with the host club economy and the broader Kabukicho entertainment district [1]. The style thus functions partly as a marker of participation in a specific urban subcultural milieu. In China, by contrast, landmine-style circulates primarily within platform-based fashion communities that are largely detached from the physical spaces and economic structures of the Japanese context [1]. The style functions there as an aesthetic identity marker within digital communities rather than as a signal of participation in a specific urban subculture. In South Korea, the style operates within yet another framework: it is connected to an indigenous lineage of depressive self-expression that emerged from online communities such as the DC Inside depression gallery [3]. The style thus performs a function that is simultaneously expressive and communal, linking practitioners to a pre-existing tradition of sharing emotional distress through visual means.

These differences in social function help explain why the same visual vocabulary produces different localized meanings. In Japan, the black-and-pink color scheme and teary-eye makeup carry connotations of a specific social world tied to nightlife and entertainment. In China, the same elements are read primarily through

the lens of aesthetic style and platform-based identity performance. In South Korea, they are interpreted through a framework of shared emotional experience rooted in online communities of self-expression. The visual vocabulary remains recognizable across all three contexts, but its social meaning shifts according to the institutional and cultural frameworks within which it is embedded.

3.2 Mechanisms of Meaning Change

These divergent trajectories reveal a key mechanism: processes of decontextualization and recontextualization. As landmine-style spreads from Japan to China, its original associations with the Japanese entertainment industry are stripped away [1]. The style's visual elements are then recontextualized within China's platform-based fashion discourse, acquiring new meanings. In Korea, the style undergoes a different form of recontextualization, integrating with pre-existing local stylistic traditions [3]. Taken together, the reviewed studies suggest that subcultural fashion styles may not carry fixed meanings when crossing national borders, but are continuously reinterpreted as they traverse diverse local cultural frameworks.

The decontextualization phase involves detaching visual symbols from their original social and cultural contexts. In Japan, the term carries specific connotations tied to the host club industry, Kabukicho nightlife, and a broader subculture of marginalized women [1]. When these symbols enter China, such associations remain largely unfamiliar to local audiences. Visual elements, including black-and-pink color schemes, teary-eyed makeup, and Sanrio accessories, become floating signifiers open to new interpretations.

The process of recontextualization involves reinterpretation within a new cultural framework. In China, landmine-style is recontextualized within visual platforms like Xiaohongshu, where fashion content is organized around aesthetic categories rather than social commentary [1]. The style is framed as a replicable look, with tutorials focusing on achieving the teary-eyed makeup and coordinating outfits. It also merges with radical feminist discourse, suggesting that the same visual elements express gender-political positions distinct from their Japanese origins [1].

The Korean case demonstrates a different pathway of recontextualization. Kim's research shows that Korean landmine-style hybridizes Japanese visual elements with local stylistic traditions, particularly the depression-themed gallery culture on DC Inside since 2015 [3]. This indigenous lineage already includes visual conventions associated with self-harm, chronic depression, and nihilistic worldviews. As a result, Japanese visual vocabulary is recontextualized within a Korean framework where meaning around these themes is already established. The outcome is a unique, creative synthesis shaped by Korean sensibilities, rather than a direct translation of Japanese meanings.

A comparative examination of the three cases reveals that the mechanism of meaning change operates differently depending on the receiving culture's existing repertoire of visual and emotional expression. In China, where platform-based fashion discourse provided the primary interpretive framework, the style's transformation centered on aesthetic commodification and the removal of psychological content. In Korea, where an existing tradition of depressive self-expression provided a ready-made interpretive framework, the style's transformation centered on emotional and communal resonance. The Japanese case, by contrast, shows the style operating within its original context, where its meanings remain tied to the specific social world of nightlife and entertainment industries [1].

This comparative finding suggests that the meaning of landmine-style is not determined by its visual elements alone but is shaped by the interaction between those elements and the receiving culture's existing structures of meaning. The same black-and-pink outfit, teary-eyed makeup, and Kuromi accessories signify different things across contexts: in Japan, connections to nightlife industries and social marginalization; in China, a platform-mediated aesthetics intertwined with feminist expression; in Korea, a hybrid style linked to traditions of depressive self-expression.

Overall, these studies suggest that subcultural styles may not spread as stable, fixed meanings, but are selectively adopted as visual vocabularies in each new environment. The reviewed evidence further indicates that practitioners appropriate visual symbols and integrate them into local meaning systems, producing forms that are neither purely original nor entirely native. As the literature shows, the mechanisms of meaning change involve not merely loss or distortion, but creative reinterpretation.

4. Conclusion

This paper has reviewed scholarship on landmine-style fashion along two dimensions: the genealogy and construction of the style, and its cross-cultural transmission. There is consensus on two points. First, landmine-style's visual symbols exhibit recognizable trans-Asian features [1,3]. Second, landmine-style functions as a site of ongoing negotiation among participants, gender norms, and digital technologies [5].

Disagreements arise on two key issues. First, how to interpret the style's meaning, whether as active stylistic resistance or as symptomatic expression of structural conditions. Second, how to assess meaning transformation in cross-cultural transmission: Sun [1] emphasizes the stripping away of original meaning in China, while Kim [3] highlights creative hybridization in Korea.

Two future research directions emerge. First, there is a need for cross-regional comparative studies to understand how identical visual styles acquire divergent meanings across cultures. Second, systematic theoretical explanations are required for mechanisms of meaning reversal, especially how derogatory labels transform into fashion categories. The reviewed literature suggests that landmine-style is not merely a fashion trend, but a complex cultural phenomenon through which young East Asian women negotiate identity, emotional expression, and social belonging in the digital age.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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