

2019

Case studies on contemporary Asian migration, diaspora, and community building practices in Montana

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Tattooing In Japan: The Art of Living Boldly

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April 2019

Senior Thesis

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Introduction

It was a warm spring night in 2017, and as I was sitting on the subway traveling from Ginza to Akihabara, I could feel the stares of dozens of eyes on my skin. Whenever I tried to spot the watching eyes, they would skitter away. Certainly, it would be awkward to be caught staring at a young woman's bare thighs on a non-crowded train, but more than that, there was the desire to leave no evidence of the curiosity toward the large tattoos that marked my thighs. I experienced much the same reaction wherever I went during my week in Japan. The carefully concealed eyes on my legs, my back, my arm. None of my eight tattoos are what you might call 'subtle,' especially the Chinese poem that takes up my entire back. As such, I'm fairly used to the attention. However, the deliberately invisible stares of the Japanese were new to me. They stood in stark contrast to the unguarded comments I so often received on subways in Beijing that spring, and made me wonder why the Japanese react so differently when confronted with tattoos.

I had only recently learned of the prohibition of tattoos in hot springs and public bathhouses, and I had no idea just how deeply the history of tattooing was embedded in the psyche of Japan. I knew of the association tattoos had with the Japanese mafia, the *yakuza*, but I knew nothing of how that connection began, or even when the practice of tattooing had developed in Japan. As it turns out, tattooing has existed in Japan for thousands of years, though its function has undergone drastic changes, from ritual protection to punishment to aesthetic. Few countries in the world have as complicated a relationship with tattoos as Japan, which makes its rich tattoo culture all the more interesting.

Japanese tattoos have been at the forefront of the global tattooing industry since the country opened its doors to the world at the start of the Meiji period, in 1868 (Bratt and Poysden, 145). From their intricate and deeply symbolic designs to their unique subtleness of color, Japanese tattoos have captured the hearts of tattoo aficionados the world over. In every major city, a specialist in Japanese tattoos can be found, and people of every nationality bear Japanese or Japanese-inspired art on their bodies. In fact, on my left arm are tattooed five Japanese red spider lilies, or *higanbana*. Japanese plants, animals, and historical figures are among the most commonly seen tattoo designs, in Japan and the rest of the world alike. There's just something about Japanese motifs that captivates the heart and mind of art lovers; I will discuss this unique appeal at greater length in the second chapter.

While things like *koi*¹ and *samurai*² are common skin décor found all across Japan, the tattoo culture has opened up to a variety of Western themes and techniques, as well. It is not ³uncommon to see heavily tattooed musicians in the rock and metal scenes, mainly sporting monochrome designs of Western origins. The Japanese tattoo magazine "Tattoo Tribal" often features such musicians on its cover. Due to the mixing of tattoo artists from all over the world, Japan has truly mastered the variety of styles the tattooing industry has to offer. However, there exists a division between traditional Japanese tattooing masters and modern artists. As the position of tattooing in Japanese society

¹ Japanese carp.

² All Japanese words will be italicized, excluding names.

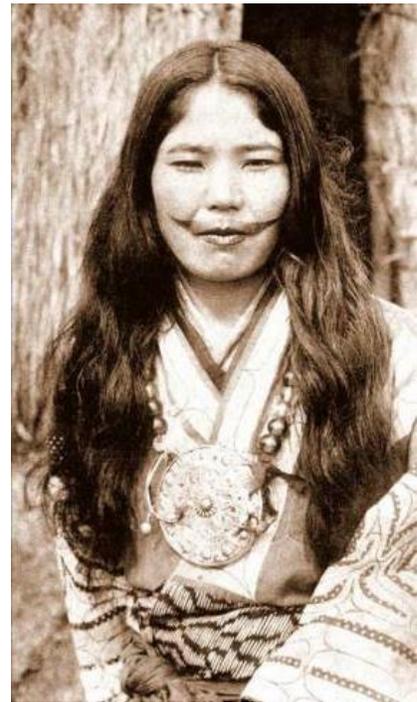
evolves, new issues have come to the forefront of the tattooing world. These matters will be covered in chapter three, along with the future of tattooing in Japan.

In order to understand the complex relationship the Japanese have with tattoos, it is first necessary to understand Japan's history. There is no short answer as to why tattoos bear the stigma they do today in Japan. Many Japanese citizens wouldn't even be able to tell you. It's been associated with the lower class and with crime for centuries, and only in recent years has it come into vogue amongst the younger generations. Tattoos are generally seen as part of foreign culture to the Japanese, something that's fashionable for foreigners but not so much for Japanese. However, it wasn't always this way. The first chapter will discuss the origins of tattooing as a practice in Japan, the influence Confucianism had on Japan's perception of body modification, and Japan's golden age of tattooing.

With the relatively in-depth discussions around Japan's history of tattooing, the aesthetic of the Japanese tattoo, and modern Japan's relationship with tattoos, it should become clear that Japanese tattoos, whether traditional or modern, are not like others; Japanese tattoos are more than just tradition, yet more than just fashion. They are a commitment, a life-altering path one must walk. In addition to texts on Japanese tattoos, I will use interviews with various Japanese tattooists to offer a unique glimpse into their world, a world completely different from that of the model citizen. Whether a *yakuza* gangster or a businessman, the tattooed Japanese walks a unique path, one that shows no signs of changing in the immediate future.

Chapter One – The History of Tattoos in Japan

Tattoos have long been documented in Japan. Prehistoric pottery samples from the Jōmon period (10,000 BCE to 300 BCE) depict markings on the face and bodies of the clay figurines, likely evidence that the indigenous peoples of the land that came to be known as Japan practiced tattooing and/or scarification³ (Bratt and Poysden, 114). It is possible that those prehistoric people are the ancestors of other indigenous groups in the islands surrounding mainland Japan, who also have a tribal and ritualistic tattoo culture. In the northern island of Hokkaido, the Ainu have a tradition of tattooing the face and arms, with women being the primary recipients of tattoos (Bratt and Poysden, 116). Records of their tattoos date back to the early seventeenth century, when Jesuit priests visited Hokkaido and were fascinated and horrified by the bold markings inked into their skin. Ainu tattoos are unique and distinctive—large swathes of black ink around their mouths indicate that a woman has reached sexual maturity, and tattoos are



Picture of an Ainu woman with *anchipiri* (Mitchel, 2014).

further applied to the brow, cheeks, and arms. Upon betrothal, an Ainu girl's husband-to-be would begin the tattoo around her mouth. These tattoos are called *anchipiri*, and would be completed upon marriage. *Anchipiri* was also a sign of beauty and prestige; Ainu women believed that without the tattoo around their mouths, their souls would never find salvation in death. Traditionally, the Ainu tattooing technique is old and

³ Scarification is the process of carving designs out of the skin so that when it heals, a raised scar is left in the shape of the desired design.

unrefined; ashes are rubbed into incisions made in the shape of the desired tattoo (ibid., 116).

Similarly, in the southern Ryūkyū Islands, the indigenous people have old tattoo traditions (first documented by the Chinese in 622 CE) that center around women. These women would tattoo their hands, wrists, and fingers with designs inspired by woven fabrics, though women on the neighboring island of Miyako would use these tattoos as a sign of mastery in complicated patterns for weaving. The Ryūkyū women tattooed patterns comprised of lines and dots that represented food, plants, and tools of their crafts. They also practiced marital tattooing like the Ainu, though instead of facial tattoos, women would tattoo their husbands' "ancestral signs" on their hands (Bratt and Poysden, 117). Despite these indigenous peoples' distinct identity from the rest of Japan, it is important to see that tattooing was not originally punitive in purpose throughout the entirety of Japan.

Using tattoos to mark criminals was a development of the Kofun period (300 CE – 710 CE) shortly after the introduction of Confucian beliefs. Where tattooing had once been commonplace in Japan, the conservative Chinese ideology rejected tattooing as a barbaric practice that showed disrespect to one's parents through the sullyng of the body given to them (Bratt and Poysden, 115). Prior to this shift in ideology, Chinese records of Japanese people from the Yayoi period (300 BCE – 300CE) reference the prevalence of markings on the body as decoration and indicators of rank and importance (Bratt and Poysden, 114 – 115). The Japanese records of tattoos during this time come mainly from Japan's two origin chronicles—the *Kojiki*⁴ and *Nihon Shoki*⁵. These tales, published in

⁴ "Record of Ancient Matters"

⁵ "Chronicle of Japan"

712 CE and 720 CE during the Nara Period (710 CE – 784 CE), tell of Japan's birth and the divine ancestry of Japan's ruling family. Inspired by the Chinese tendency to justify rulers through divine genealogy, Emperor Temmu (r. 672 CE – 686 CE) ordered an official compilation of Japanese myths. Though published decades after his reign ended, Emperor Temmu's legacy left these influential texts that, although biased, offer important insights into the lives of Japanese during these early centuries (Bratt and Poysden, 17 – 18). For a better understanding of later subjects, I will briefly describe the creation myth here.

The inspiration for countless creative works even today, the *Kojiki* details the creation of Japan by the deities Izanagi no Mikoto and Izanami no Mikoto. After creating the land, they gave birth to gods and goddesses to govern their new creations. However, Izanami no Mikoto passed away while giving birth to the god of fire, which made her husband, Izanagi no Mikoto, so distraught that he journeyed to the underworld, *Yomi*, in search of his wife. Though Izanami told her husband not to look upon her while she persuaded the god of death to let her go, he could not resist a peek. Upon seeing the decaying corpse of his beloved, Izanagi no Mikoto was horrified. He fled the underworld, pursued by the "Eighty Ugly Females of Yomi" that the betrayed Izanami no Mikoto sent after him. In order to free himself of their pursuit, Izanagi no Mikoto performed a cleansing ritual, during which the sun goddess Amaterasu and the storm god Susanō were born. Japan's Imperial Family descended from Amaterasu, whose great-great-great grandson was the first emperor of Japan (Bratt and Poysden, 17). The deities in this myth, particularly Amaterasu, intersect with the world of tattooing through the stories behind

Japanese art motifs. The other mythical beings cited in these chronicles will be discussed at greater length in the next chapter.

In addition to deities and mythical creatures, the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* provide records of tattooing practices from the Yayoi and Kofun eras. While the *Nihon Shoki* portrays the tattooed people as barbarians thanks to the prevalence of Confucian ideals at the time, the *Kojiki* tells the story of a young lord in the service of Emperor Jimmu, the first Japanese emperor. The young lord, Okume, is distinctive for the tattoos he bears around his eyes. This story supposedly took place in 97 CE, during the time when tattooing was common to distinguish status. Okume was tasked with obtaining a bride for Emperor Jimmu from a group of women belonging to a country of tattooed people. Though this country was considered barbarian, the emperor nonetheless selected a wife from among them (Bratt and Poysden, 115 – 116). These chronicles provide a sense of when the attitudes toward tattooing shifted and in which regions tattooing was common. Since few Japanese records of tattoos exist from this time, the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* are notable in this area.

Around the time these two mythical canons of Japan were published, tattoos came to serve as marks of criminality. Penal tattooing in Japan was documented as early as the eighth century CE, and was used regularly for the next thousand years (Friedman, 258). Tattoos could be used to replace death sentences⁶ and to brand criminals, and were administered to highly visible locations accordingly (Bratt and Poysden, 121). Depending on the offense and the region, punitive tattoos varied in design and location. In Edo, the

⁶ Tattoos could also replace mutilation sentences such as amputation of facial features. It wasn't until the Kyōhō Reforms (1716 – 1736) that tattooing was declared as reserved only for minor punishments (Bratt and Poysden, 121).

character for evil (*aku*) was tattooed on the forehead. Likewise, in Chikuzen Province, a horizontal line was tattooed across the center of the forehead. Subsequent strokes were added until the criminal's forehead spelled the character for dog (*inu*). In other provinces, the offender's arms were tattooed with circles, characters, or bands around the arm to indicate their status as criminals (Bratt and Poysden, 121 – 122). As such, tattoos came to serve as an indicator of the lower class. If this practice sounds like cattle branding, that is because there is a similarity; these tattoos of identification marked their bearers as subhuman (*hinin*), a status they could never escape (Bratt and Poysden, 122). Thus, for almost all of Japanese history, tattoos have been either ritualistic or punitive, and always associated with the lower class.

However, in spite of the use of tattoos as a means of dehumanization by the government, the resourceful and cunning ex-convicts devised a means of disguising their marks of disgrace—decorative tattoos. Flowers and other simple designs were the easiest, though the cover-up tattoos came to be used for “talismanic protection” or to designate certain groups, like the *tekiya* (Bratt and Poysden, 106). *Tekiya* were nomadic merchants, often working in a realm of questionable legality (Bratt and Poysden, 71). They were usually heavily tattooed, and it is probable that the *yakuza* evolved from the *tekiya* of the Edo era (1600 – 1867), along with professional gamblers (Bratt and Poysden, 100). It was at this time that tattoos had their most dramatic evolution. Tattoos had originally been referred to as *irezumi*⁷, which designated the tattoos given to criminals. However, with the rise in voluntary tattooing, a new term for tattoos came about—*horimono*⁸.

⁷ “Inserted ink;” this word is now used in Japan without any negative connotation.

⁸ “Engraved/carved thing”

During the Edo Period, the working class saw an increase in power and influence, and as such, the arts of the lower classes enjoyed incredible popularity. *Kabuki* theater arose in opposition to the refined, expensive *Noh* theater, often performing folktales with dramatic and carnal elements. The Yoshiwara pleasure quarter enjoyed increased patronage, with courtesans and prostitutes at the forefront of textile fashion (Stanley-Baker, 191). People began to focus more on the pleasures of the flesh, enjoying themselves to the fullest through drink, women, and art. Thus, the art came to reflect this ‘floating world’ lifestyle, wherein people were content to float through life without examining the reality of poverty too closely; and thus, floating world paintings, *ukiyo-e*⁹, were born (Stanley-Baker, 188). Woodblock print artists made images depicting heroes of lore, samurai, and erotic encounters with prostitutes. The turning point from small, relatively modest tattoos to the large, full-body tattoos often associated with Japanese tattooing was when Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797 – 1861), a famous woodblock artist, made a series of prints portraying the 108 heroes of the *Suikoden*¹⁰, a tale that originated in China in the fourteenth century. It became popular in Japan at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when in 1805, Katsushika Hokusai illustrated a Japanese version of the tale. Shortly thereafter, Kuniyoshi released his print series, and as a direct result, Japanese bodysuit tattoos came to the forefront of the art world in Japan (Bratt and Poysden, 136). His *Suikoden* series originally ran from 1827 to 1830, and it was around

⁹ This term is commonly used synonymously with woodblock prints, but that is a mistake. Not all woodblock prints are part of floating world (*ukiyo*) culture, so I will refer to them simply as woodblock prints in this thesis.

¹⁰ The *Suikoden* was a tale of heroic and valiant outlaws who fought against corruption and injustice on behalf of the poor. Five of the characters sported tattoos, which were portrayed in an alluring and mysterious light befitting their status as heroic outlaws. The most notable was Kumonryū Shishin (Chinese: Shi Jin), a man who became skilled in martial arts and received a tattoo of nine dragons across his arms and torso. In Kuniyoshi’s prints, fifteen of the heroes are tattooed (Bratt and Poysden, 131 – 134).

this time that tattoo families came about (Friedman, 257). Kuniyoshi's *Suikoden* prints featured figures covered in large, intricate tattoos, more so than the original story (Wanczura, 2019). Due to the popularity of these prints, many tattooists in Edo began tattooing their clients after the characters' tattoos, and later entire woodblock print designs (Bratt and Poysden, 136). Other notable woodblock print artists like Yoshitoshi Tsukioka (1839 – 1892) and Utagawa Kunisada (1786 – 1865) also made elaborate prints featuring tattooed figures, adding to the fervor for bodysuit tattoos (Wanczura, 2019). As such, it can be said that the development of *horimono* closely mirrored the development of woodblock prints; the more colorful and detailed the woodblock prints became, the more colorful and detailed the tattoos.



“108 Heroes of the Suikoden – Tattooed Zhang Shun” by Utagawa Kuniyoshi (Wanczura, 2004).

These three lower class art forms—*kabuki*, woodblock prints, and *horimono*—

were constantly drawing inspiration from each other. There were woodblock print artists who focused on creating images of *kabuki* scenes and characters, many of which involved tattoos. In turn, many *horimono* take inspiration from *kabuki* plays, even favoring the *kabuki* version of previously-established stories when they draw characters. The popularity of tattoos in *kabuki* also owes thanks to the *Suikoden* print series (Bratt and Poysden, 129). *Sakurahime Azuma Bunshō* (The Scarlet Princess of Edo, 1813) was a popular play that featured two lovers with matching arm tattoos. Tattoos would often be a central part of a character's identity, and sometimes served as a major plot point. One such play, *Benten Kozō* (Benten the Thief, 1862), has a climax during which Benten, who is undercover as a woman, is exposed along with his cherry blossom tattoos (Bratt and Poysden, 138 – 139). In fact, tattoos were so popular in *kabuki* that a special, skin-colored garment (*niku juban*) was designed so that the actors could apply the paint to the cloth instead of their skin (Bratt and Poysden, 139).

Previously, tattoos were done using black *sumi*¹¹ to make outlines, and it wasn't until the rise of woodblock prints with their vibrant color palette that tattoos started incorporating color. During the Edo period, tattooists used ink made with vegetable- and mineral-based pigments mixed with rice paste. There were no inks made specifically for tattoos, so they used the same ink as a regular painter. Thus, there were sometimes complications and health hazards involved in the application of colored ink. Red ink was especially dangerous, as it was made using a mixture of the poisonous substances iron sulphate and green vitriol. As such, tattooists could only color small areas with red ink at

¹¹ *Sumi* originated in China and was brought to Nara, Japan by a Buddhist priest named Kūkai roughly 1300 years ago, during the Tang Dynasty. It was made by mixing soot with glue, and primarily used for calligraphy. Within twenty years, *sumi* was being used all over Japan for various forms of art. It takes the form of a stick of ink which, when rubbed in a small amount of water contained in an ink stone, produces liquid ink (Bratt and Poysden, 109).

a time “before the pain became unbearable, followed by fever and weakness,” (Bratt and Poysden, 109). Even as recently as the mid-twentieth century, *horishi* were using these dangerous inks. There were ways to lessen the toxicity to some degree, though the ink was still far from safe. The late *horishi* Horihide spoke of the technique they would use to mitigate the toxins: “You would have to boil [the red ink] every day for a week and remove the mercury that floats up to the top until it doesn’t come out anymore. Then we would dry it and soak it in *shouchu* alcohol and then use it on the clients” (Okazaki, 56). In spite of the hazards, *horimono* were incredibly popular in Edo amongst the working class. Firefighters and palanquin bearers were among the first to participate in the trend, as they were often bare but for a loincloth. When the firefighters weren’t fighting fires, they wore thick coats called *kajibaori*, which bore designs similar to the patterns etched into their bodies. The tattoos worn by firefighters were large and beautiful, symbolizing their masculinity and strength as well as displaying their group affiliation and loyalty. Because they cut such striking figures, they were often the subject of woodblock prints, some of which can still be seen in the Tokyo Fire Museum (Bratt and Poysden, 126 – 127). Bodysuit tattoos were thus sometimes referred to as *isamihada*, or ‘courage skin,’ because of the strength and endurance needed to sit through a tattoo (Bratt and Poysden, 125). Even today, full-body tattoos are associated with firefighters and other manual laborers who have the strength needed to wear bodysuit tattoos.

With such a vibrant tattoo culture in Edo, it is hard to believe that tattoos were banned three times during the Edo Period. The *bakufu*¹² banned tattoos in 1789 when ex-convicts were popularizing cover-up tattoos, in 1811 when *horimono* were just starting to

¹² The military Shogunate during the Edo Period.

gain traction, and again in 1840, at which point bodysuit *horimono* were in full swing. Though both client and artist were subject to persecution, tattooists continued to find clients willing to accept the risk (Bratt and Poysden, 125). In the twenty or so years before the Meiji Restoration began, tattooing made a comeback in the pleasure quarters before again coming under fire (Bratt and Poysden, 126). Even during the Meiji Period (1868 – 1912) and the new bans on tattooing, *horimono* culture would not be extinguished. In fact, tattoo conventions in Japan date back to Edo around 1830. Tattooists and their clients would gather in bathhouses or at waterfalls to display their work, and prizes were awarded for competitions (Bratt and Poysden, 145 – 146). These covert exhibitions only fanned the fire for tattooing. However, in spite of the persistence of the Japanese tattoo industry, the government cracked down on tattoos more than ever. Tattoos were banned in 1869, and more seriously in 1872. The reinforced ban differed from those before in that this time, it targeted indigenous tattoo cultures, as well. Anyone found with a new tattoo was fined, and practicing tattooists had their homes raided, their design books and materials destroyed. Occasionally, the police even went as far as to raid bathhouses in search of fresh tattoos (Bratt and Poysden, 141). The one sliver of hope for a future in which tattoos would be accepted was the fact that only Japanese citizens were banned from getting tattoos. Foreigners could still get tattooed in Japan (though only in Yokohama), meaning there was still a way for tattooists to practice their craft without being penalized.

And indeed, this exception to the ban played a role in the eventual dissolution of the Meiji prohibition on tattooing. Japanese tattoos were so popular among Westerners, even King George V, Prince Edward, and Czar Nicholas II came to receive a tattoo by

Horichō at the beginning of the twentieth century. By this time, Japanese tattoo artists had already come to the United States and begun opening their own shops (Bratt and Poysden, 142). After World War II, many American military personnel wanted Japanese tattoos, putting pressure on the Japanese officials to legalize tattooing. In 1948, the ban was repealed, tattoos were made legal for anyone older than eighteen, and Japanese tattoos were recognized officially (Bratt and Poysden, 147). Once tattooing was legalized in Japan, it wasn't long before the Japanese tattoo industry started globalizing. The famous American tattoo artist, Sailor Jerry (1911 – 1972), played a big role in the exchange of Japanese and American tattoos. In 1960, he opened a new shop in Honolulu, where he began to incorporate traditional Japanese designs and motifs into his work, popularizing them throughout America. In turn, he brought Western techniques to Japan through the Tokyo tattooist Horihide (1929 – 2017). Through Sailor Jerry, Horihide promoted Japanese tattoos throughout America (Bratt and Poysden, 150 – 151). It was shortly after this cross-cultural exchange that Western tattooing really gained popularity in Japan among the young people who were into rock 'n roll culture.

The artist Horihide was the first Japanese artist to bring tattoo machines to Japan. In an interview with him, Horihide spoke of his exchange with Sailor Jerry and how it revolutionized tattooing in Japan. Prior to visiting Jerry, Horihide and the other Japanese tattooists only used red and shades of black, with occasional muted yellows. When he visited Jerry, Horihide encountered a full range of colors that were safe for application to the skin. Horihide was amazed at how readily the colors took to the skin, though these new colored inks could only be used with tattoo machines. Of this new discovery, Horihide said, “The colors would just go in so easily, I really thought it was amazing,”

(Okazaki, 59). With the arrival of Western techniques, equipment, and motifs, the term *yobori* came to distinguish Western tattooing from traditional Japanese tattooing (*wabori*), which is done manually through a technique known as *tebori*¹³. Tattoos produced with this technique and design are always called *horimono*, as opposed to *irezumi* and *tatu*, which nowadays refer to Western tattoos (Bratt and Poysden, 106). Furthermore, many *horishi* believe *tebori* is more than just a technique; unlike machine-drawn tattoos, those made using *tebori* have a certain unique presence that cannot be replicated from one tattoo to another (Okazaki, 44, 46). Due to the difficulty in mastering the *tebori* technique, *wabori* tattoos are more expensive and revered than *yobori*.

Tebori is also reportedly less painful than machine tattooing, due to the slower nature of the process. Using needles affixed to a bamboo handle, the tattoo masters, *horishi*¹⁴, rhythmically drive the needles into the skin at a rate of 90 to 120 strokes per minute. Originally, the needles were attached with silk thread, though modern *tebori* sticks use metal clips, making it possible to remove and sterilize the parts¹⁵. Much like modern tattoo machine needle configurations, *tebori* needles vary in amount depending on the desired thickness of the stroke. There are usually anywhere from two to thirty-six needles attached to a single bamboo handle. And rather than dipping the needles directly into the ink, *horishi* first dip a calligraphy brush in ink and then use it to saturate the needles before applying them to the skin. The needles are inserted deep beneath the skin

¹³ “Hand-carved.”

¹⁴ The word *horishi* is comprised of *hori*, which means ‘carving,’ and *shi*, meaning ‘master’ (Friedman, 257). I will only use this term to refer to masters of *wabori*; all other tattooists will be referred to as just that.

¹⁵ Proper sterilization and care for products is essential in tattooing. Safety in the tattoo studio will be covered in chapter three.

at a horizontal angle, deeper than a machine drives the needles. Thus, the real skill of the *horishi* comes through in the evenness of the color, which is achieved by repeatedly inserting the needles at the same depth with each stroke (Bratt and Poysden, 107). Due to this slow process, it can take years of weekly visits for a *horishi* to complete a piece. It is a commitment for both the client and the tattooist, so many *horishi* are highly selective about who they tattoo (Bratt and Poysden, 109). Their shops are hard enough to find as it is, with many *horishi* still operating out of their own homes (Okazaki, 12). The length and price of getting a *wabori* tattoo deters many young Japanese, who consider it more fashionable to get *irezumi*, the Western-style tattoos made popular by the rock 'n roll movement.

As with the tattoos themselves, tattooing as a craft is changing in Japan due to convenience and popularization of *irezumi*. As with *yobori* and tattooing practices in Western countries, *wabori* is taught through apprenticeship. However, the apprenticeship format varies drastically between traditional *wabori* and now *yobori*. In Western tattoo shops, the shop owner and other experienced artists in the shop teach the apprentice the basics from the start, teaching them how to assemble equipment and prepare the tattoo station before they ever pick up a machine to tattoo. Once they are well-versed in safety precautions and how to use the equipment, they begin practicing on fruit or synthetic materials with a similar texture to human flesh. After getting a feel for the machine, they may begin by tattooing themselves or an acquaintance. It is only with the owner's approval and after obtaining certification in blood-borne pathogens and first aid that they can begin tattooing on clients. An apprenticeship in America typically lasts around a year, depending on how much work the apprentice makes. In contrast, traditional

Japanese apprenticeships begin with the student working around the shop without any kind of instruction in tattooing. Touching the tools of the trade and even asking questions are forbidden, to encourage the student to simply observe. Eventually, the apprentice learns how to make the tools and ink, and begins experimenting on their own flesh or that of fellow apprentices. Copying the master's designs is a key part of the learning and practice. This process takes years, before the apprentice is ever allowed to tattoo clients under the master's supervision. It is at this time that the proper styles and techniques are passed down. Once the apprentice has matured in their craft to the master's satisfaction, they are given a "tattoo name," usually beginning with *hori*¹⁶ (Bratt and Poysden, 109). Most of the tattooists in Japan now are those specializing in *yobori*, and with apprenticeships in these Western shops being easier to find, there are fewer *horishi* now than ever. That being said, the motifs and designs I will be focusing on in the next chapter are those belonging to *wabori*, the art that makes up a *horimono*.

¹⁶ The prefix "*hori*" means engraving, but is used to denote a master of the *wabori* practice.

Chapter Two – The Art of *Wabori*

The same motifs used in woodblock prints of the Edo period make for excellent motifs in Japanese tattoos. Many *horishi* look to woodblock art for inspiration, following the same designs and rules Japanese artists have been using for centuries. And as anyone who has studied traditional Japanese tattoos has experienced, there are lots of rules involved in the designing of a *horimono*. Though techniques may sometimes overlap in Western and Japanese tattoos, the rules are strict. Horiyoshi III (1946 –), a famous *horishi* living in Yokohama, said of Japanese tattoos, “There are a plethora of things which are set. For example, top and bottom, left and right, the seasons, day and night, there are lots of meticulous rules, and from there, one design is created. Western tattoos have a lot more freedom...in Japan...meanings are essential, so there are lots of rules” (Okazaki, 38). When picking a central figure for a design, a *horishi* must think carefully about how to coordinate the central motif with supporting motifs. It is about more than just appearance; for *horishi*, the various aspects of a design must be compatible in meaning and season, and thus, it takes many years to truly understand the construction of a *horimono*.

While it is easy to point out which motifs are most common in *horimono*, it can be more difficult to put them together into a cohesive design and to pick apart such a design. Animals, flowers, clouds, waves, historical figures, folkloric creatures: all of these are popular motifs in Japanese art, but they all have coordinating elements that must be watched out for. The aforementioned Horihide—the first Japanese tattooist to bring tattoo machines to Japan—was a master of designing *horimono*. Of matching up elements of a *horimono* design, he said:

In Japan, there are seasons. For example, snakes up until May are hibernating...but there are people that tattoo snakes that are surrounded by cherry blossoms—especially people who didn't have a [teacher]. Or carps that go upstream up a waterfall are teamed with chrysanthemums and peonies. This is also a mistake; they only go upstream in October in the beginning of Autumn, so you would see maples then. It is really fixed. *Karashishi*¹⁷ [with] peonies, dragons [with] chrysanthemums, these are really set...people really mess it up, like a dragon with the cherries, and dragons with peonies is a huge mistake (Okazaki, 56).

The fixed nature of tattoo designs in *wabori* is also noted by the self-taught *horishi* Horitoku. In addition to the central motifs, the background must also match and fit the meaning. “The area around the tattoo [is important.] There are meanings within these backgrounds. To separate heaven and earth, water and rocks. This background is really important for people” (Okazaki, 77). From here, I will discuss the most popular motifs in more detail, along with their meanings and coordinating support motifs.

The motifs I will discuss are divided into three categories: animals, religious and historical figures, and background or supporting motifs. Depictions of folktales, religious figures, and historical battles are all standard designs used in *wabori*. To this day, characters from the previously-mentioned *Suikoden* remain popular, especially the nine-dragon-tattooed Kumonryū (Bratt and Poysden, 201). Other popular characters, like Kintarō and Benkei (young men renowned for their strength and fighting prowess), are also common. They are sometimes tattooed in conjunction with *koi* (Japanese carp), which serve as symbols of endurance, strength, and determination. In Japan, it is believed that a

¹⁷ Japanese lion-dogs, also known as fu dogs.

carp that manages to swim up a waterfall will become a dragon. As such, *koi* tattoos are common on people who either wish to or have already overcome an obstacle in life (Bratt and Poysden, 171). The meaning behind choosing a certain animal to get tattooed “[expresses] the tattooed person’s desire to become identified with the spirit of his or her totem animal” (Mori, 133). *Koi* and their evolved dragon forms are the perfect example of this. *Koi* are one of the most easily recognizable tattoos throughout the world, though they are often mistakenly tattooed alongside cherry blossoms (*sakura*). In fact, I remember watching the popular American TV show “Ink Master” in 2015 and 2016 and seeing many American artists who specialize in Japanese tattoos. In Season 6, one of the daily challenges that stuck with me was the *koi* challenge, in which all the contestants had to tattoo a *koi* using a pattern made by Mike Rubendall¹⁸ (“Ink Master...” 2019). I recall countless waves and *sakura* petals, though at the time I had no idea of the significance in choosing matching motifs. This, to me, is what really sets Japanese tattoos apart from their Western counterparts. The amount of research and preparation that goes into each design is incredible, and the knowledge of their subjects far exceeds simple aesthetics.

Like *koi*, Japanese dragons (*ryū*) are one of the most common water-themed designs, and are also not uncommon counterparts to historical or mythical figures. Japanese dragons have a distinctive appearance from the Western dragon. They are portrayed with “the head of a camel, the horns of a deer, the eyes of a hare, the ears of a bull, the scales of a carp, the paws of a tiger, claws resembling those of an eagle and whiskers” (Bratt and Poysden, 167). Japanese dragons have three claws and large noses, as well as bushy, whiskery

¹⁸ Mike Rubendall is one of the foremost tattooists in the United States. He specializes in traditional-style Japanese tattoos and has received awards all over the world for his work (“Mike Rubendall”, 2019).

eyebrows and beards. They are often drawn and tattooed with water and waves because of their connection with water. Due to the power and wisdom they represent, many Emperors claimed to be descended from dragons who disguised themselves to mate with humans (ibid., 167). As shown in the image below, dragons and chrysanthemums are often tattooed together.



Tattoos of dragons done by Horimitsu, a *horishi* located in Tokyo (Friedman, 288).

Closely associated with the dragon is the tiger (*tora*), a beast that represents strength, longevity, and courage. Tigers are not native to Japan, and so first appeared in Japanese artwork with Zen Buddhist art, fending off demons and evil spirits. Buddhism has had the biggest external influence on Japanese art, taking hold in Japan in the sixth century CE when the Imperial court welcomed Chinese Buddhist sculptors and artisans as well as monks (Bratt and Poysden, 164). They brought with them not only a new spiritual

philosophy, but also advanced cultural pursuits such as art. This was Japan's first encounter with tigers, so to speak, and they captured the minds of the Japanese from then on. In the Edo period, tigers were associated with the *samurai* for their strength and fighting prowess. Tigers and dragons alike are figures associated with good fortune and protection, said to stand as equals among beasts. In art, tigers are often drawn together with dragons, though they may also be depicted with bamboo, wind, or fighting demons. A tiger colored orange is a young tiger; the Japanese believe tigers live for one thousand years, turning white when they reach five hundred years (Bratt and Poysden, 175). So while tigers themselves are not a mythical creature, they have mythical qualities that sets them apart from common animals.

Similarly, the fox (*kitsune*) is a real animal that has an established spot in mythical canon. In Japanese folklore, foxes are notorious for their cunning tricks and shape-shifting abilities (Bratt and Poysden, 173). Neither good nor bad, the fox is a mischievous trickster spirit that can bring good fortune or ruin, depending on how it is treated. Foxes are associated with the sensuality of women, as foxes were often said to transform into a beautiful young woman in order to seduce and trick men. In contrast, the Shinto fox god, Inari, is a benevolent deity and his fox messengers are common shrine guardians throughout Japan. As with tigers, the color and appearance of the fox determines its nature and age; black foxes symbolize good luck, while white foxes are an ill omen, and foxes with multiple tails are that many centuries old plus one—a nine-tailed fox has lived for a millennium and obtained incredible powers. These nine-tailed foxes turn silver or gold. In artwork, foxes are commonly depicted with the *hōshu no tama*, a jewel that grants wishes (Bratt and Poysden, 173 – 174). Whereas foxes in Western art are usually an aesthetic choice or due to a partiality for the species, in Japanese art, foxes—as with everything

else—carry deeper meanings and the artist must choose what narrative they want the fox to convey before they even begin to design its image.

Other mythical creatures that can be found in *horimono* are phoenixes (*hō'ō*), lion dogs (*shishi*), and Yamata no Orochi¹⁹, a giant, eight-headed serpent. Phoenixes in Japanese mythology are different than their Western counterparts in both appearance and purpose. They appear as a pheasant-peacock hybrid with long, multi-colored tail feathers, and they represent peace and prosperity, as they are only said to appear at such times. Like tigers, the phoenix is closely associated with dragons—if the dragon is the emperor, the phoenix is the empress (Bratt and Poysden, 168). *Shishi*, or fu dogs, also come in pairs. A male and female are often paired together outside palace, temple, and tomb gates as guardians and symbols of protection. *Shishi* depicted with open mouths ward off evil, while those with closed mouths keep in good luck. Their purpose in tattoos is the same as their purpose as guardian statues. They are often paired with peonies (*botan*) in Japanese paintings and tattoos, which combination is called *karashishi botan*. *Shishi* represent power, success, and divine protection. As such, they are occasionally tattooed on the stomach of a woman wishing for a safe birth (Bratt and Poysden, 169 - 170). Orochi, on the other hand, is an evil snake demon from mythology. Orochi terrorized Japan during the days of the founding deities and was slain by Susanō, the brother of the sun goddess Amaterasu (Bratt and Poysden, 169). Though auspicious creatures seem like the obvious choice for a tattoo, we see that this is not always the case, and people get a variety of mythical creatures with different meanings.

¹⁹ Referred to as simply Orochi from now on.

Aside from—sometimes in addition to—animals, religious iconography is highly popular content for *horimono*. Daruma is a bodhisattva who brings good fortune and is often rendered in seated meditation. Similarly, Fudo Myōō is thought to be an incarnation of the Buddha, representing forces of good and knowledge. He is often depicted wreathed in flames, holding a sword in his right hand and a rope in the left, which he uses to smite wickedness and bring people to the light of truth, respectively. Alternatively, his sword may be pictured without him, a dragon wrapped around it; this design is referred to as *kurikaraken ryū*. Sometimes, Fudo Myōō is also drawn with a waterfall, in his other capacity as the god of waterfalls (Bratt and Poysden, 176 – 177). Other deities commonly depicted in tattoos are the thunder god Raijin, the wind god Fūjin, and the goddess they serve, the bodhisattva Kannon (known as Guanyin in Chinese). Raijin is red, and either drawn with lightning or his thunder drums, which bear a distinctive design of three commas swirling in a circle around each other. Fūjin has horns and carries a large bag filled with wind. They both resemble Japanese demons (*oni*), but are respected as guardians of Japan (Bratt and Poysden, 178). Kannon is known as the goddess of mercy and is often shown atop a lotus flower. She is said to take thirty-three forms for the salvation of humanity, often boasting many arms or multiple heads in these alternate forms. In her capacity as a water goddess, she is shown with a dragon, which combination is commonly used in Japanese tattoos (Bratt and Poysden, 181 – 182). Another merciful, benevolent bodhisattva, Jizō, is commonly used for protection for children and expectant mothers. He is portrayed as a bald monk with a ringed staff and a halo behind his head. Jizō is popular with the Japanese for his intervention in Hell on behalf of the suffering souls, especially children's, and so is sometimes shown surrounded by the flames of Hell (Bratt and Poysden, 179 –

181). All of these humanoid figures are usually drawn in the style of handscroll paintings (*emaki*) and woodblock prints, with non-distinct facial features. This is called *hikume kagihana*, or line-eye hook-nose. Reminiscent of the expressionless faces of *Noh* masks, faces tattooed in this style do not bear any distinguishing features the way realistic portraiture does (Stanley-Baker, 79, 81).

Other notable religious figures are the “Seven Gods of Luck” (*shichifukujin*), which are deities from Buddhist, Daoist, and Shinto beliefs alike. Each of the seven gods presides over different facets of life, though some are definitely more popular than others. Benzaiten is the goddess of love and music, often associated with water and serpents. She is usually depicted in tattoos with her *biwa*, a traditional Japanese lute, and surrounded by dragons or snakes. As the only goddess among the seven, she is especially popular. After her are Bishamonten and Daikokuten. Bishamonten is the god of treasure and war, most often depicted in armor and bearing a spear. Daikokuten is the god of wealth, and is commonly portrayed with a bag full of treasure. Ebisu, closely associated with Daikokuten, is the god of food and is drawn with a fishing rod and a basket of fish. Fukurokujū and Jurōjin are gods of wisdom and learning respectively, as well as longevity. They are both shown with long white beards and accompanied by turtles, to represent their wisdom and old age. Hotei is the god of happiness, most commonly depicted with his round stomach bared as he lies with a sack of never-ending food and treasures (Bratt and Poysden, 190 – 194). Sometimes, rather than individual designs, the seven gods are drawn together in one tattoo.

Overlapping with both mythical beings and religious lore are *yōkai*, Japanese spirit monsters. *Tengu*, winged goblins that live in the mountains, are known for their long, beak-like noses and capricious nature. Highly skilled at fighting, they are sometimes drawn with

a ringed staff battling with priests and monks. Their appearance is distinctive and easily recognizable, though sometimes they shape-shift into crows (Bratt and Poysden, 195 – 196). Japanese angels, *tennin*, may or may not have wings, but are equally distinguishable for the flowing *kesa* wrap that denotes their status as heavenly beings (Bratt and Poysden, 196). But perhaps the most common of all the *yōkai* (in terms of frequency in tattoos) is the *hannya*. *Hannya* are said to be the spirits of scorned and angry women, and their gruesome snarl certainly conveys a righteous and powerful fury which makes them quite intimidating. As such, they are used as symbols to ward off evil, though many people favor them in tattoos for their fierce appearance (Bratt and Poysden, 179). *Yōkai* tattoos are as diverse and unique as the artists and clients themselves, so these are just a few of the most popular characters used as central motifs.

No less important than the central figures are the background and supporting motifs, which often consist of plants, water, and clouds. Japanese flowers are common tattoo designs the world over, and are usually used as part of larger compositions even when the flower is not the central focus. Japanese cherry blossoms are one of the most popular flowers in Japanese art, and tattoos are no exception. Not only are the delicate pink blossoms beautiful to look at, but they are heavily associated with the Japanese aesthetic of *mono no aware*, or the appreciation for the short-livedness of things (Bratt and Poysden, 205). *Sakura* only bloom for a short time in the spring, and that short lifespan only adds to their beauty. For this reason, *sakura* are common tattoos among the *yakuza*, who believe that their lives are short and glorious. *Sakura* are also commonly added to tattoo portraits of beautiful women to symbolize the fleeting nature of youth and beauty.

Chrysanthemums (*kiku*) are also common in Japanese tattoos for their unique beauty. Their many overlapping petals are delicate and striking, but they are also a symbol of nobility, as the crest of Japan's Imperial Family. Like *sakura*, chrysanthemums represent Japan and are a source of national pride, and as mentioned and shown earlier in this chapter, chrysanthemums are commonly used in the background of a dragon tattoo (Bratt and Poysden, 205). The lotus (*hasu*) is another recognizable flower from Chinese and Japanese art, and it is one of the most popular designs used to represent Buddhism. It is closely associated with many Buddhist deities. Bodhisattvas are often drawn seated on a lotus, especially Kannon. The lotus, which blooms from muddy waters, represents the beauty that can arise from the filth if one perseveres (Bratt and Poysden, 206). Peonies (*botan*) also pair with other designs. The previously-mentioned *karashishi botan* design is a combination of *shishi* and peonies. Their overlapping petals are regal and distinctive, and red peonies are the most commonly-tattooed in Japanese art. They represent wealth and power, and are also sometimes tattooed along with *samurai* or royalty. As such, the peony is known as the “King of Flowers” in Japan—a suitable match for royalty or the “King of Beasts” *shishi* (Bratt and Poysden, 209). Maple leaves (*momiji*) are common fall motifs and are often tattooed with water and *koi*, which likewise appear in the fall. It would be improper to tattoo *momiji* with animals that are active in the other seasons. Their vibrant red and gold colors make for striking additions to tattoo compositions (ibid., 209).

Clouds and water are the most common backgrounds and borders for Japanese tattoos. Rather than realistic depictions, they are highly stylized to resemble woodblock prints. Clouds (*kumo*) are rounded, curling masses that are commonly used to border a bodysuit tattoo. Water (*mizu*) presents with layered lines, and waves are slender, finger-

like shapes that cluster around a central motif. The aforementioned flowers and leaves are usually tattooed floating on the surface of water (Bratt and Poysden, 211). The commonly-recognized Japanese bodysuit, with its bare stripe of skin down the middle of the abdomen and chest (*nukibori*), uses water or clouds as borders at the neck, wrists, ankles, and lining of the bare chest in *nukibori* designs (Bratt and Poysden, 129). Whether in full color or in the original black and vermilion, such combinations are always striking.

In terms of central motif and supporting background, *horimono* also resemble *kimono* designs. In both flesh and fabric, “crashing waves and diving plovers, diagonal grouping[s] of wisteria and chrysanthemum, even the aggressive hawk and dragon, are all typical patterns” (Stanley-Baker, 169). As mentioned in the previous chapter, the clothing worn by the heavily-tattooed firefighters likewise resembled the designs on their bodies. I do not believe that this is a coincidence—art and fashion were evolving at the same time, and when exposed in all but a loincloth, the *shokunin*²⁰ who bore bodysuits gave the illusion of being clothed in elaborate garments. In this way, tattoos and fashion have always gone hand-in-hand, so the trend in fashionable tattoos seen in modern Japan should come as no surprise.

²⁰ *Shokunin* was the name for the lower class. People in occupations like firefighters, artisans, and palanquin bearers all fell under the category of *shokunin* (Okazaki, 12).

Chapter Three – Tattoos In Modern Japanese Society

In current Japanese society, while tattoos are on the rise, they still have a long way to go until they're considered acceptable. Tattooed people are not permitted in public hot springs (*onsen*) and bathhouses, as well as some beaches and hotels (“Tattoos Forbidden...”). Having tattoos may prevent someone from getting a job, and many young people express unwillingness to date someone with tattoos (“What the Japanese...”). Young people who have studied abroad or lived overseas for a time come back to Japan with more positive views on tattoos, realizing that plenty of nice, ordinary people get tattoos and that body modification does not mean a predisposition to crime (“Tattoos Forbidden...”). The number of *yakuza* clientele is also dropping, as it is easier for them to operate inconspicuously without tattoos (Mitchel, 2014). Still, while the rise of using *horimono* to denote *yakuza* gangster status in the early twentieth century harmed public perception of tattooing—and continues to affect the minds of the older generations—it also kept the art form alive (Friedman, 261). Now, as it becomes more fashionable to have tattoos, just about any random person on the street could have a tattoo.

There are several channels on YouTube that have conducted interviews in Japan about people's feelings toward tattoos. The popular YouTube channel, Asian Boss, did an episode in which one of the team members, a half-Japanese man named Kei, interviewed a tattoo artist in Yokohama as well as passersby of all ages on the streets. When asked about his clientele, Aki, the tattooist, responded that he mainly gets salarymen, manual laborers, and people in the beauty industry coming to his shop (“What the Japanese...”). His customers are usually in their twenties and thirties, and the most commonly requested styles are monochrome or anime tattoos rather than *horimono*. In this way, we can see

that the current trend is toward *irezumi* rather than the more traditional (and more stereotyped) *horimono*. One of the men interviewed brought up the recent trendiness of tattoos, particularly the small *wan-pointo* (Japanese approximation of ‘one-point’) tattoos that are tattooed only on a small area of the body such as the wrist or the ankle (ibid.). In another YouTube interview, this time conducted by Cathy of the Ask Japanese channel, the appeal of *wan-pointo* tattoos was also brought up. It is worth noting that all of the people she interviewed were young adults, so almost all of them replied with a favorable impression of tattoos (“Tattoos Forbidden...”).

Still, there has been controversy in recent years regarding tattoos, particularly whether it should be considered art or a medical procedure. The Japanese government still does not acknowledge the traditional cultural value of *horimono*, refusing tattoo masters the illustrious title of “Living National Treasure” that is granted to other masters of different arts (Bratt and Poysde, 150). This makes it difficult for tattooists to get the protection they need for their business. In 2001, an obscure law was signed stating that tattooing qualifies as a medical procedure due to the use of needles to pierce the skin (“Stigma and Legal...”). Tattooists were largely left alone, however, until in 2015 a tattooist from Osaka was arrested on the grounds of breaking the law as someone who was not a doctor performing what had been ruled a medical procedure. Though he was eventually acquitted, the court nonetheless decided that a medical license is needed to tattoo (ibid.). When asked whether he agrees with the court’s ruling, Aki replied that he doesn’t think tattooing has anything to do with medical procedures (“What the Japanese...”). He believes just because someone has a medical license, it doesn’t mean they’re qualified as an artist. It is his belief that the crackdown was a result of complaints

against cosmetic tattooists, and that in turn affected other tattoo artists. The responses from the people interviewed in the streets varied in regards to the ruling. Since tattoo artists are breaking the skin in their work, one woman said there is a health risk involved, making it necessary to be licensed for medical procedures. Similarly, a different woman argued that the procedure is similar to an operation, so she was in favor of the ruling. Another man replied that he doesn't think tattooing is a medical procedure, and thus the license is unnecessary. One man who was interviewed had two three-quarter sleeves of tattoos on his arms. He believes that while tattooing is an art form, sanitation is paramount. Rather than a medical license, however, he thinks a specialized license for tattooists would be more practical, one that ostensibly certifies a knowledge of how to maintain proper hygiene when working with incisions (ibid.).

In American tattoo shops, such licenses are indeed necessary. You cannot work as an artist in a shop unless you're licensed, and you cannot get your tattoo license without being certified in blood-borne pathogens and first aid. Hygiene in the shop is also strictly maintained. Regarding his own shop, Aki emphasized how important sanitation is. All the needles are disposable, one-time use, and gloves are always worn when handling supplies and the customer's skin. Aki opens all equipment in front of the customer for guaranteed sterilization ("What the Japanese..."). With sanitation being so carefully maintained in tattoo shops, I believe that a medical license is unnecessary. As long as you do your research before going to a shop to make sure it's reputable and follow all the after-care instructions, the risk of infection is almost non-existent. In spite of this, there are actually some older *horishi* who have no problem with the ruling. They have no intention of getting a medical license, but they're unbothered by the questionable legality

of tattooing, most likely due to the origins of *wabori* in the underground. Horiyoshi III went so far as to say that “tattoos should have a dash of the outlaw about them” (“Stigma and Legal...”). In this sense, the divide between *horishi* and *yobori* tattooists is clear; *horishi* operate mainly in secrecy and gray areas of the law, and other tattooists seek to popularize and destigmatize tattoos in mainstream Japanese society.

Now, the best place to see tattoos—specifically *horimono*—is at festivals. People who otherwise cover their tattoos with clothing strip down to loincloths and show off their ink without fear. The Sanja Festival in Asakusa, a district known for being home to *horishi* and *yakuza*, is one of the best for finding tattoos. Asakusa is the site of old downtown Edo, where the pleasure district was located. With so much history in the area, Asakusa is considered a prime spot for *horishi* to set up shop (Okazaki, 24). *Yakuza* come out and show off their tattoos, carrying portable shrines, participating in the parades, and just flaunting their ink. There are even self-taught artists who use the Sanja Festival as an opportunity to study professionals’ work and improve their own (Okazaki, 62). However, while the *yakuza* members mainly have *horimono*, their wives are as likely to have *horimono* pieces as they are to have *irezumi*.

With *irezumi* becoming more popularized, there is also an increase in those who decide to learn tattooing on their own, without an apprenticeship. As in many countries the world over, it has become easier to get ahold of tattooing supplies, so anyone can start tattooing on their own, whether for better or worse. In America, the majority of tattoo artists are adamantly against self-teaching with tattoo equipment. This seems to likewise be the case among *horishi*, though mainly because the important meanings behind designs will be missed without a proper teacher. As Horihide said, “Usually, if someone

has a master, they learn these things, but people who are tattooing ‘cause it’s fun; they are doing something meaningless, so they do meaningless tattoos, even if they are technically amazing” (Okazaki, 56). While I agree that it’s important to have a teacher and appreciate the depth of the art, I disagree with him regarding what makes a tattoo meaningful. There is meaning in beauty, even if the design itself does not have a specific meaning. There is meaning in the act of marking your body permanently. Horiyoshi III likewise doesn’t believe people necessarily need to have a meaning behind getting a tattoo. He accepts that for some people, it is just a fashion choice, and that is just as valid. “Meaning can come later,” he said (Okazaki, 38). Nothing in life is ever meaningless, and I think calling fashion tattoos meaningless discredits the meaning behind the very concept of tattooing.

The subjectivity of ‘meaningful’ tattoos is highlighted in the short memoir of Kyoko Mori, “*Yakudoshi*²¹.” After her cat, Oscar, died of a heart disease, she struggled with meaning in life and moving on without him. Kyoko was already middle-aged, but decided that getting a tattoo of Oscar was the best thing she could do for herself. She had an image of Oscar curled into a circle tattooed on the back of her neck, the place where the third eye that reflects on the past is said to reside (Mori, 133). The placement only added meaning to her tattoo, as she felt that she could finally move forward with Oscar watching over her. Kyoko’s tattoo was deeply meaningful to her, but it was also beautiful, fashionable even. It brought her comfort and reassurance and allowed her to heal. Tattoos can indeed be powerful tools for healing. People get tattoos over scars, commemorative tattoos, and even realistic nipple tattoos to make them feel normal again after mastectomies. When cultures like Japan’s stigmatize tattoos so heavily, it cuts off

²¹ *Yakudoshi* is the word for specific years of a person’s life believed to be the most prone to misfortune (Mori, 127).

options for healing, self-care, and personal growth. However, in a way, once a person gets past that barrier and gets tattooed, it opens up a new level of growth that would have been impossible otherwise, as they learn to field the challenges of life as a minority.

Still, a growing number of people are willing to face the stigma in Japan. More celebrities are getting tattooed, and as visible members of society, this has opened up discussion about the future of tattoos in Japan. Many of the musicians in the bands I listen to have tattoos, as well as models and other people associated with the rock genre. The Japanese tattoo magazine “Tattoo Tribal” often features tattooed musicians on its cover, the majority of whom are decorated with *yobori* tattoos. Many of these artists have an image as rebels, and in their subculture community tattoos are pretty common. However, when people who aren’t associated with such a heavy genre get tattoos, their fans seem to have a harder time accepting it. In one such case, the model and fashion icon Ryuchell came under fire for tattooing his wife’s and newborn child’s names on his arms. Critics said that it was a mistake for him to ruin his chances for taking his family to an *onsen* one day, while others called him selfish (St. Michel). Yet, other fans supported his decision to take ownership of his body, and while the response was mixed, visible moves like this help open up the discussion about tattoos and why people react to them the way they do.



Hazuki, the vocalist of metal band Lynch, has appeared on the cover of *Tattoo Tribal*. He has two sleeves of tattoos as well as a tattoo on his neck. Hazuki is a good example of the monochrome *yobori* tattoos that are popular among people now (Lynch_hazuki, 2016).



Ryuchell's arm tattoo dedicated to his wife (Ryuzi33world929).

Conclusion

Wabori tattoos will always be among the most impressive tattoos to me, and after learning about how hard people fought to preserve the tradition, my respect for the art has only increased. However, I also recognize the unique position *yobori* tattoos occupy in Japan, as a means of proclaiming one's uniqueness and aversion to the strict confines of traditional society. More so than in Western countries, getting tattooed in Japan is a commitment to a life of restrictions—with limited access to public facilities, judgment from those around them, and fewer job prospects, Japanese do not get tattoos lightly. It is a vastly different culture than in America, where a good number of people at the gym, the pool, and the beach sport tattoos. In the introduction, I wrote about my experiences as a tattooed person in Japan, but the reality, as has been demonstrated through these three chapters, is that I was a tattooed *foreigner* in Japan. The stares I felt were likely due to curiosity rather than discrimination. Japanese people accept that tattoos are just a part of foreign culture, so they are more accepting of tattoos on foreigners, and sometimes even admiring (“What the Japanese...”). So for a Japanese person to commit to tattoos carries more meaning, I think. Certainly, even people in more tattoo-friendly countries can face discrimination, but the impact it has on our lives is just not the same. I can walk out in public with my tattoos on display and not be feared by everyone around me. I've never had a problem with employers telling me to hide my tattoos. And I've certainly never been denied access to the pool. If this was the level of discrimination I had to face, even I might have been more hesitant to go down this road. And that is why I think tattooing in Japan is more special.

As far as where the future of tattoos in Japan is headed, I believe that they are only going to become more accepted. As more people get tattoos, more people will see that it's not just for criminals. They will learn of the history of tattoos in Japan as they become less taboo, and I think the cultural aspect of it will only draw more people to the art. Woodblock prints are a highly-prized traditional Japanese art form, and *horimono* are closely related, so I believe it's only a matter of years—maybe as early as ten years—before people come to see the beauty of it and the value it has as a part of Japanese history and art. For that reason, I do not foresee *wabori* dying out in Japan, or being entirely replaced by *yobori*. While *yobori* certainly has its place in the trendy, rebellious circles of Japanese society, I think the sheer cultural relevance of *wabori* will ensure it stays alive, in addition to the unique beauty and intrigue surrounding the *horimono* themselves. As I already mentioned, festivals are popular places to see *horimono*. This special atmosphere contributes to the enthralling nature of these tattoos that hold such a unique place in Japanese society. The *horishi* Horitoku has stated that he believes *wabori* will continue to dominate the Japanese tattoo industry, protected by people who believe in traditions. “It is a tradition from long ago—I guess that is the appeal” (Okazaki, 68). And if the global popularity of traditional-style Japanese tattoos is any indication, I think he is right that *wabori* has a long life ahead of it. Especially for those who are proud of their cultural history, I think *wabori* is a way of carrying on that tradition and showing their appreciation.

I also believe that, as more foreigners come to live in Japan, *yobori* will quickly come to be more acceptable. I, myself, hope to one day open a tattoo shop in Tokyo, where people are more open to foreign influences. And with the Olympics coming up

next year in Tokyo, I think Japan is about to reach a turning point. With all the tattooed athletes, spectators, and media coming to Japan, I believe proprietors will find it a good opportunity to increase their revenue by lifting their tattoo bans. Even if the acceptance is only temporary, I think it will cause enough of a chance for people who wish for the destigmatization of tattoos to push for policy change. It's a fact that Japan will have to confront tattoos and their perceptions surrounding them. It's only a question of how quickly change will come, and who will be the driving force behind it. The influx of foreigners could be the push needed, as was the case after World War II when tattoos were legalized, or the Japanese tattoo community could rally together to fight for their rights to live public lives. I personally think the latter will be the case. After seeing how tattooists are reacting to the court ruling regarding a medical license, I think they will come to a point where, after the Olympics, they will push for their livelihood to be protected.

In the street interviews with Kei from Asian Boss, many of the people saw change on the horizon. One middle-aged lady believes that soon, tattooed people will be able to enter public bathhouses and *onsen*, while another, younger woman surmised that because of the upcoming Tokyo Olympics, changes will have to be made regarding the no-tattoos policies ("What the Japanese..."). If even the Japanese anticipate a policy shift, the proprietors are bound to feel the pressure and react accordingly. When the question of change was posed to an older middle-aged couple, the woman replied that their thoughts on tattoos won't change, but that their children's generation will start to see tattoos differently. They were not opposed to the inevitable shift in ideology in younger generations, which I believe shows that even the older generations will come to accept

that tattoo culture is not what it used to be, especially as *yakuza* are moving away from the body-suit tattoos and ordinary salarymen are adopting the tattoo trend (ibid.).

Change is indeed on the horizon, and I believe it to be a good thing. I discussed the ways tattoos can benefit people, its cultural value, and its association with identity, so I think that Japanese society will greatly benefit from removing the stigma around tattoos. To me, Japanese tattoos are more than just fashion, but more than just tradition. They are a way to bridge the traditional culture with the modern, narrowing this two-hundred year gap. In Japanese tattoos, the old collides with the new. As in centuries past, they are a means of proclaiming identity, and the meanings and imagery haven't changed. But they also carry the added connotation of internationalism and individuality. It is a way of living boldly and true to oneself in the face of oftentimes conformist standards, and it is something I respect. The fact that life is so short and uncertain, and yet people choose to risk their place in society for the sake of decorating their body also speaks to me as an embodiment of *mono no aware*, even if that is not the conscious intent. To become a living piece of artwork that has a finite lifespan makes it all the more beautiful, and all the more worthy of appreciation. All of these reasons have influenced my dream of establishing a tattoo shop in Tokyo. Everything from the art to the boldness inspires me and gives me a deeper understanding of what it means to have tattoos, and for that reason, I believe that Japanese tattoos are truly the epitome of living life as one's authentic self and not just as someone who has to follow someone else's rules of life.

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