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Cover Page Footnote

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Traditional Japanese tattoo masters referred to their art as “a flower in the shade,” a hidden tattoo specially designed for the wearer whose beauty would only be revealed to those closest to them.¹ Traversing the streets of Shibuya in Japan, the busy plazas of Hongdae, or the nightclubs of Shanghai tells a new story of what tattoos have become in East Asia. Although Japan, South Korea, and China share a similar history of tattoo criminality spanning thousands of years, in current times they all hold different legal policies concerning the practice. South Korea has the strictest laws, requiring a medical doctorate to legally tattoo,² while Japan has only recently reaffirmed the legality of the practice outside of health professionals;³ China, on the other hand, has few restrictions on the practice.⁴ These differences have curious implications given these states’ differing levels of development and democracy—the two modern democracies have the most regulations on an art traditionally connected to counter-culture⁵ and criminality, while the authoritarian nation has but a few.

Although a strong social stigma towards the art remains salient in all three nations, due to the historical connection to criminality as well as Confucian values, a new, younger generation with greater access to the internet and the outside world has been able to adopt a tattoo culture largely unrelated to previous trends. Tattoos in East Asia are becoming less about rebellious action, which could be threatening to an authoritarian government, but are instead symbols of a modern society rising alongside a younger middle class, one unburdened by previous decades of poverty. The rising prevalence of a tattooed population may be less of an indicator of a strong counter-culture, but instead a notifier of a globalized, developed society.

This article argues that although tattoos are typically emblems of individuality, the body art’s transition to a popular item in East Asian consumer markets are more about conforming to and supporting the ideas of modernity rather than truly a unique expression of self. This is presented by first exploring the historical context of tattoos in each country to establish a base for both the legal and social restrictions on tattoo culture that still remain present today. The next section presents the researcher’s fieldwork abroad, including both observational and interview-based material that will focus on current tattoo culture, especially in the youth of each nation. Finally, the article concludes with an analysis of tattoo trends to present a possible new factor, body art culture, in determining the development and social liberalism of a society.

A Criminal Past

Japan, South Korea and China all share long histories of tattooing, with each nation using the practice as a way to permanently mark and ostracize criminals. These similar histories have fostered a longstanding social stigma in all three countries towards body art, relating it with

¹ Mieko Yamada, “Westernization & Cultural Resistance In Tattooing Practices In Contemporary Japan,” (*International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2009), 330.

² Constance Williams, “Legal Tattoos, Illegal Tattooists,” (*Korea Biomedical Review*, 2017).

³ Sayuri Umeda, “Japan: High Court Rules Tattooing Is Not a Medical Act,” (*Library of Congress*, 2018).

⁴ Casey Quackenbush, and Aria Hangyu Chen, “‘Tasteless, Vulgar and Obscene.’ China Just Banned Hip-Hop Culture and Tattoos From Television,” (*Time*, 2018).

⁵ Judy Park, “Signs of Social Change on the Bodies of Youth: Tattoos in Korea,” (*Visual Communications*, 2015), 73-74.

gangs, criminals, or social outcasts. The older generations who maintain more traditional beliefs⁶ continue to look down upon those with tattoos, especially young people.⁷

Japan—Japan has an extensive history with tattooing tracing as far back as 5,000 BCE, with the earliest written mention of the practice found in a third-century Chinese chronical stating that “men young and old [in Japan], all tattoo their faces and decorate their bodies with designs.”⁸ By 720 CE⁹, however, tattoos were used as punishment for criminal activity rather than an art form, with Japan adopting similar attitudes to the Chinese which saw tattoos as barbaric.¹⁰ It wasn’t until the Edo period (1603-1868) that the well-known ‘full-body’ pieces known as *irezumi* became popular with the greater society. These tattoos covered the entire body from head to toe except for a clean strip down one’s chest so that a kimono could be worn, with designs inspired by popular wood-blocking art, or *ukiyo*.¹¹ Traditionally, tattoos were done via hand-poking, or *tebori*, “which required the tattooee to spend time and endure pain in order to complete the full body tattoo,” proving one’s dedication to the permanent art.¹²

Other popular styles at the time included tattooing the name of a lover on one’s inner arm, typical of young lovers, geisha, or prostitutes.¹³ Working class laborers would get designs tattooed that they believed would either aid or protect them during their jobs; firefighters opted for dragons due to the creature’s connection to water.¹⁴ During the socially oppressive feudal era, *iki*, or stylishness, developed as a form of rebellion against the upper classes, with tattoos being a popular symbol for laborers.¹⁵ The *yakuza*, a large crime syndicate in Japan, began adopting *irezumi* style tattoos in this same era. Members’ tattoos were not only signals of loyalty and commitment to the crime syndicate, but could have also been tattoos previously received by the government to mark them as criminals. As Japan opened itself to the world during the Meiji Restoration, tattoo practices became seen as barbaric and were made illegal until the end of the Second World War in 1945, which coincided with the rise in power and influence of the *yakuza*.

South Korea—Tattoos, or *munshin*, in Korea first appeared during the Samhan, (Three Kingdoms Age), from 57 BC to 668 CE. Like in Japan, *munshin* were used as a form of punishment starting during the Goryeo era (918 CE - 1392 CE) up into the Joseon Dynasty (1392 CE - 1910 CE).¹⁶ Tattoos were also commonly used as a way for the wealthy nobles, or *yangban*, to permanently mark their servants so they could not run away.¹⁷ Unlike Japan’s history of tattoos, Korea does not have a specific traditional style that developed. However, current artists

⁶ Zhengxu Wang and Ern Se Tan, “The Conundrum of Authoritarian Resiliency: Hybrid and Nondemocratic Regimes,” (Taiwan Journal of Democracy, 2013), 214.

⁷ Mi Sun. Interviewed by Morgan MacFarlane. Personal Interview. Seoul, South Korea, July 10, 2019.

⁸ Kelly Richman-Abdou, “Irezumi: Exploring the Ancient Techniques and Evolution of Traditional Japanese Tattoos,” (My Modern Met, 2019).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Victoria Frecentese., “Tattooing Identity: An analysis of historical and contemporary tattooing practices among members of the military community,” (Colorado College, 2013), 8-10.

¹¹ Yamada, “Westernization and Cultural Resistance,” 321.

¹² Yamada, “Westernization and Cultural Resistance,” 321.

¹³ Ibid., 321.

¹⁴ Andreas Johansson, *Yakuza Tattoo*, (Dokument Press, 2019), 8.

¹⁵ Yamada, “Westernization and Cultural Resistance,” 322.

¹⁶ Park, “Signs of Social Change,” 74.

¹⁷ Ibid., 74.

draw from traditional Korean religious symbology¹⁸ or dress¹⁹ to create designs that harken back to Korean history. Fishermen and other laborers may have also used tattoos as good luck charms or symbols to ward off creatures while out at sea, similarly to their Japanese counterparts.²⁰

Under Japanese occupation, the social stigma towards tattoos in South Korea may have been reinforced due to the Japanese experience with *yakuza* in their own country.²¹ As South Korea began to rapidly modernize and develop, Korean gangs,²² referred to as *kkangpae*, took on similar characteristics to the Japanese *yakuza*, with tattoos developing into a sign of membership for gangsters, or *geondal*.²³ The tattoos of these *kkangpae* typically “identify the pa, or individual group (analogous to a Mafia crime family), to which they belong.”²⁴ Large tattoos on one’s back and arms are typical and, up until recently, would strike fear in average Koreans just by the sight of them.²⁵ Tattoos were used to intimidate the populace and signify membership in the *kkangpae*, feeding a social stigma towards the art similar to that of Japan.

China—Tattooing, although practiced for thousands of years in China, was uncommon and looked down upon as a practice of the barbaric tribes south of the Yangzi river.²⁶ The ethnic groups of the Dulong, the Dai, and the Li used tattooing to represent rights of passage, strength, and medicinal purposes.²⁷ Just as in Japan and Korea, indigenous groups also used tattoos to ward off harmful creatures like *jaio*, or dragons, by disguising themselves. As scholar Carrie Reed emphasizes, Chinese people may have viewed these tattoos as animalistic at the time: “tattoo is in fact the epitome of uncivilized practice, since it patterns the human body like the skin of an animal or water creature.”²⁸

In the past, as with the other two countries, tattoos were used to mark criminals and to symbolize the severity of the crime committed. There were thousands of recorded possible crimes punishable by tattoo in China with the use of it fluctuating in popularity over time—the Song, Yuan, and Qing dynasties have many records of employing the punishment.²⁹ If banishment was paired with the tattoo, the permanent mark ensured that it would be virtually impossible for the criminal to return home as the community would easily be alerted by the tattoo—creating literal social outcasts.³⁰ Along with Japan and South Korea, slaves and concubines were tattooed, either to ensure they would be unable to runaway or as punishment.³¹ Tattoos were even used in the Chinese military as a means of identification with a specific unit to prevent desertion, or voluntarily as a symbol of honor and commitment to one’s nation.³² Chinese gangs such as the Triads have adopted similar practices as Korean and Japanese gangs,

¹⁸ Paulina Cachero, “The Outlaw Buddhist Art of a Korean Tattooist,” (Tricycle, 2018).

¹⁹ Ellen Freeman, “How Norigae Evolved From Fashion Accessory to Tattoo in South Korea,” (Inside Out, 2019).

²⁰ Kaitlin Brodsky, “Tattoo Subculture in Korea,” (BU Global Studies).

²¹ Sung. Interviewed by Morgan MacFarlane. Personal interview. Seoul, South Korea, July 12, 2019.

²² Seungmug Lee. “Organized Crime in South Korea.” (Trends in Organized Crime, 2006). 64.

²³ Park, “Signs of Social Change,” 74.

²⁴ Bill Kte’pi, “Gangs,” (Asian American Society: An Encyclopedia, 2014).

²⁵ Park, “Signs of Social Change,” 76.

²⁶ Carrie, E. Reed, “Tattoo in Early China,” (Journal of the American Oriental Society, 2000), 361.

²⁷ “A history of Chinese Tattoos and Chinese Tattooing Traditions,” China Culture. 2014.

²⁸ Reed, “Tattoo in Early China,” 362-363.

²⁹ Ibid., 365.

³⁰ Ibid., 365-366.

³¹ Ibid., 366-368.

³² Ibid., 369.

using them as tokens of the individual branches they belong to within the gang.³³ Chinese people therefore still associate tattoo culture with that of criminality, stemming from both past punishments as well as active Triad gangs.³⁴

Confucian culture has played a major part in the stigma against tattoo culture historically and currently, especially in both South Korea³⁵ and China. In *Xiao jing*, Confucius contends “that filial piety is the thing most necessary for civilized society, and that the basis of filial piety lies in avoiding injury to the... body that is received from one’s parents.”³⁶ Tattoos then are seen as an offense to one’s parents who granted the child that body to preserve and protect, adding an even greater lasting element of strong social stigma. Older generations that still maintain more traditional Confucian beliefs³⁷ therefore look down on younger people for tattoos, not only for the historical connection to criminality but also for shaming one’s family.³⁸

Data & Research Methods

Both observational fieldwork and interviews were conducted in July 2019 for this research project. In collecting data for Japan, areas of Tokyo including Shibuya and Shinjuku were utilized for their high concentrations of young people, as well as their notoriety for fashion and nightlife. Parts of Seoul were surveyed such as Hongdae, known for the college youth life and fashion, Itaewon, which has heavy expatriate influences, and the wealthy business-oriented neighborhood of Gangnam. Finally, Shanghai and Beijing were chosen for China, as both cities are large centers for foreigners and metropolitan Chinese, and both cities have active nightlives. Observational fieldwork was utilized to get a sense of how prevalent tattoo culture was in a natural setting, while interviews were conducted to get a more in-depth understanding of tattoo culture and what drives those who participate in the art form in each country. The researcher received tattoos in each country in order to assess the locations of tattoo studios, interact with artists and other customers, as well as compare the conditions of the shops.

Field Research

Observational work was carried out in Tokyo, Seoul, Shanghai and Beijing. Data concerning who had tattoos, where the art was placed and whether it was easily seen or concealed, the design and style, and how the person acted in their environment was recorded.

Japan—In Japan, although centers like Shibuya and Shinjuku are known for their population of young, fashionable city-dwellers, tattoos were not commonly seen on the streets; it was easier to spot foreigners with the body art. If tattoos were spotted while traversing the streets and shops, the subjects were typically young men with small to medium tattoos, usually on their arms or legs. Most recorded subjects sported perhaps one traditional Japanese style tattoo (if they had multiple), while the rest were either words, animals, or flowers in various styles. Word tattoos could be found in multiple different languages, with English being the most popular.

³³ Kte’pi, “Gangs.”

³⁴ Interview with Duyi. Beijing, 2019.

³⁵ Premalatha Karupiah. “Modification of the body: a comparative analysis of the views of youths in Penang, Malaysia and Seoul, South Korea.” (Journal of Youth Studies, 2013). 11-13.

³⁶ Reed, “Tattoo in Early China,” 364.

³⁷ Wang & Tan, “The Conundrum of Authoritarian Resiliency,” 214.

³⁸ Interview with Hui Ying, Duyi, Wenyan, and Xueyou. Beijing, 2019.

Large metropolitan areas like Shibuya or Harajuku had the most people, typically young men with the occasional woman, sporting tattoos, while in the more rural areas outside of the heart of Tokyo tattoos, if present, were well hidden. Many more people could have tattoos; however, the ability and the desire to cover them or hide them was prevalent. One woman wearing a short-sleeved shirt was spotted with multiple tattoos on her arm, obscured by a cloth sleeve reaching from her wrist almost to her armpit. At the tattoo studio the researcher visited, all of the artists had multiple tattoos, but they were easily hidden. For example, one artist had tattoos only on their upper arms, which stopped abruptly a few inches above their elbows, allowing most shirts to cover the art. Fake, temporary tattoos or even henna were seen in Shibuya, typically placed in more obvious areas like the upper arm, cheeks or collar bone. These types were seen on fashionable, young people, especially women, potentially due to their impermanence. Although Japan has a long, well-known history of the art of tattooing, Japanese people themselves are still wary of the art, which is evident on the streets of Tokyo.

South Korea—South Korea presents an entirely different tattoo culture than Japan, with seemingly well over half of observed young adults in Hongdae displaying tattoos. Although there were people with full sleeves (typically men), the bigger trend appeared to be multiple small- to medium-sized tattoos in almost arbitrary places around the body. Both men and women had tattoos, with the typical person on the streets on Hongdae having multiple black or greyscale tattoos on their arms, hands, legs, and even neck. Most tattoos appeared to have only black and grey, or very light colors due to the delicate designs frequently seen. Women usually had more subtle, smaller designs while men had darker tattoos. Flowers, lettering, animals and abstract designs were very popular for all people, with most sporting a mixture of those designs all over their body.

Hongdae, a hip neighborhood in Seoul where many college students and youth go, had people dressed very fashionably in street wear with tattoos and jewelry as accessories to their style. Shop workers at clothing stores, servers at restaurants, and bouncers at clubs all proudly showed their multiple tattoos, some sporting rather intimidating designs. For example, one male standing outside advertising for a nightclub had the Joker smile tattooed on his hand, dark roses covering his neck and chest, and multiple tear-drops under his eye, while a male server at a fried chicken restaurant had two criss-crossed daggers on the lower inside of his arm. People seemed unafraid and uninhibited in showing off their tattoos in Hongdae.

Other parts of Seoul had less of an obvious tattoo culture in comparison to Hongdae. Gangnam, a well-known upscale business center, had far less people showing off tattoos, especially since most people were dressed in formal business wear that would have covered any extant tattoos. Itaewon, though an area frequented by foreigners, had less people with tattoos than Hongdae, but a new tattoo shop and school was found advertising in both English and Korean. Practicing tattoos is illegal in South Korea without a medical doctorate, making the presence of walk-in tattoo studios, let alone a tattoo school, unusual. Most well-known illegal Korean tattoo artists instead have built an international following via social media platforms like Instagram, and utilize private studios to maintain their underground practice. Even with the underground nature of the practice, many young Koreans proudly show off their illegal body art on the streets, actively challenging the stigmas and prejudices of older generations, in contrast to Japan's well hidden tattoo culture.

China—China appeared to have a growing mainstream tattoo culture in large cities such as Shanghai and Beijing. A cursory search of the internet for tattoo shops will show numerous new studios opening in the big cities, all walk-in oriented, unlike Japan and South Korea. Here

was the first country middle-aged people were seen with fading tattoos, mainly on their forearms, perhaps remnants of the punk rock-scene a few decades ago. Young people sported all sorts of tattoo designs, ranging from abstract or tribal designs to Japanese koi. The quality of tattoo work was different from Japan, which has had hundreds of years to define and perfect a style, or South Korea's popular fine line detailed work difficult to find in such quality and popularity elsewhere in the world. Instead, several tattoos spotted on the streets in China had sections partially faded or bleeding out, with no clear design. China's tattoo scene appears to be burgeoning alongside its development, while Japan and South Korea have had time to develop distinct tattoo cultures.

Although the tattoo culture in Shanghai and Beijing had fewer restrictions on the practice, studios were still difficult to find just walking down the streets. One tiny tattoo shop was found only after traversing the back alleys of a rich shopping district, tucked away with signs posted on the adjacent cement wall. Given the lack of regulations on tattooing along with different health requirements, sanitary practices are a concern when getting tattooed in China, with the possibility of dirty needles, reuse of ink, and improper sterilization of tools. The tattoo studio the researcher went to was one open to foreigners and was well-known within the Chinese and international tattoo community. However, it was still rather hidden, four floors up without any street signage. As China continues to develop and connect with the global world, tattoo culture will continue to grow alongside it, and may come in greater conflict with the Confucian ideologies of the general populace.

Interviews

Subjects in each country were chosen via a convenience sample, with the initial subjects being willing participants found in public spaces in each country. A snowball sampling method was used to gather further subjects via the initial participants. All of the interviewees have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities. Roughly six people in each country were interviewed, including both people with and without tattoos. For all of the interviews conducted, the subjects were in their 20s and 30s with at least a high-school level education or higher, meaning my conclusions are limited to this cohort. Most were students with a few subjects working small jobs, or were tattoo artists themselves. A translator was used in both Korea and China to help facilitate some of the interviews.

Japan—In Japan, every interviewee discussed the connection between Japanese tattoo culture and *yakuza* criminality, referring to it immediately when asked if they'd consider getting a tattoo. Akira, a mid-20s woman showing us around Shinjuku mentioned: "Tattoo is a symbol of *yakuza*. So, here in Japan, if we see someone who [has] a tattoo, we automatically think that that person belongs to some *yakuza*. So we don't like tattoos." Interviewees mentioned that not only were tattoos associated with crime syndicates, but also "people partying and doing drugs."³⁹ Tattoos are still symbols of social deviance, especially in the youth, even as they adopt more Western-style tattoos that lack the direct connection to the *yakuza*. Those with tattoos now tend to be young, trendy Japanese who get small, fashion-oriented body art,⁴⁰ much different from the traditional *irezumi*.

Even with the prevailing social stigma, many subjects were open to the body art in general and did not mind it for others, but were less open to getting a tattoo themselves. As Ren, a young Japanese male who has spent time studying abroad in London, stated during our

³⁹ Haru. Interviewed by Morgan MacFarlane. Personal interview. Portland, Oregon, May 27, 2019.

⁴⁰ Ren. Interviewed by Morgan MacFarlane. Personal interview. Tokyo, Japan, July 6, 2019.

interview: “I think tattoos are cool, but just because I’m Japanese and I love being able to go to *onsen* and hot springs, I’d rather not just because it makes my life a lot easier.” Public baths and hot springs are popular locations for Japanese people. However, most do not allow those with ink to enter the bathhouses due to the connection with the infamous *yakuza*. Akira highlighted that some *onsen* may allow people to cover their tattoos with a band-aid or water-proof sticker in order to enter the bathhouses, but it may be difficult to cover large pieces.

With the influx of foreigners expected for the 2020 Olympic games in Tokyo, as well as a younger generation more open to fashionable tattoos, *onsens* and older Japanese people may need to change their views of tattoos to accommodate. Makoto, a mid 20s male in Akihabara, felt strongly about this, stating: “[the] new generation [is] more like ‘who cares?’ Now, even the government is in discussion since we are getting to 2020 next year, now everyone is talking, expecting all these people with tattoos ... Like we have the rugby world cup coming up [in] September, and all of those players from New Zealand all have the tribal tattoos. And after they’re done playing games, of course they have to take a bath.” The younger generation may be more open to tattoo culture as foreigners continue to visit the country and people become more accustomed to seeing body art.⁴¹ Yuu, a young male in his early 20s going to medical school in Japan, added “we do have the *yakuza* so there is that kind of bad image, but I think that we should be more open about it, there should be more shops, we shouldn’t be hiding it.”

South Korea—Although nearly every one of the interviewees in South Korea had multiple tattoos, the specific art pieces did not typically have a special meaning to them as most Americans would expect, but still held some sort of significance to the wearer. Instead, subjects usually referred to their body art as pretty⁴² or interesting, something they pursued because their friends had them as well—but not an impulsive or pointless choice. When asked what the reason was for her tattoo, Mi Sun, a young college student studying business, stated that it had aesthetic merit and went against Korean social norms, continuing to explain that, “basically, I want to express myself against this older generation’s conservative minds and prejudices against the young generation and tattoos.” Eun, another young female college student studying industrial design, shared similar sentiments, stating that her tattoos did not have a specific meaning but instead combatted stereotypes of beauty for Korean women.⁴³ Their tattoos weren’t about a rebellious underground counter-culture, but simply went against the older generation’s stigmas and ideas of beauty. Many of the interviewees mentioned that older people typically assumed tattoos were related to gangs or *kkangpae*, though the subjects themselves were unsure of where this criminal activity even took place.⁴⁴

None of the interviewees had their tattoos done by medically licensed tattoo artists. However, the fact that they are walking around with illegally performed body art seems inconsequential to them. Eun had multiple tattoos done by her friend, who sees the art as a mere hobby, unworried by the legality of the practice. However, for more popular career tattoo artists, the concern for fines and jail time is still prevalent; one artist interviewed stated that she was moving to London in order to freely expand her practice without legal restrictions. All of the interviewees said that artists in South Korea were easy to find because social media apps allowed them to quickly find artists—Eun finds artists via a tattoo sharing app. Most Korean tattoo artists found on Instagram, for example, all had at least five thousand followers, with the typical tattoo

⁴¹ “Tattooed foreigners are putting Japanese bath houses in a quandary,” (The Economist, 2018).

⁴² Interviews with Mi Sun and Eun. South Korea, 2019.

⁴³ Interview with Eun. Gangnam, 2019.

⁴⁴ Interviews with Mi Sun, Eun, and Hyukjin Ko. South Korea, 2019.

account hosting well over thirty thousand. Mi Sun felt the recent explosion in tattoo culture in South Korea could have to do with the growing prevalence of social network systems, or SNS, as well as TV programs that constantly show not only Korean pop stars but Western celebrities and trends. Global style trends, then, find a heavy influence in Korean tattoo culture as social media connects young Koreans to the entire world. Unlike the young Japanese interviewed, Korean youths were both willing and excited to participate in tattoo culture seeing it as a way to participate in a broader international community of young, fashionable people.

China—Confucianism stood as a major factor in the interviews with young Chinese students about their decision not to get a tattoo. Here, there seemed to be the most resistance to the body art by average students, with only one of the four interviewed seriously desiring a tattoo while the others seemed apprehensive or against the art for themselves. Interestingly, the female student was the one most excited to get a small tattoo, either on her ankle or back, because she felt the body art was “beautiful and cool.” The male students, in contrast, were less sure of the art, as Wenyan, a mid 20s English student, stated: “For now, I don’t want a tattoo because I’m not quite used to it... maybe in the future [if] I become more liberal, progressive.” For the students interviewed, their apprehension came from the concern of their family. Each one referenced the Confucian ideal that one should not harm or mark their body as it was given to them by their parents, and therefore they should protect it.⁴⁵ They felt their elders would look down on them, as well as view the tattoo as a symbol of social deviance or gang criminality.

For these students, public figures and entertainment idols do not flaunt tattoos like in Japan and South Korea, or more Westernized countries, and young people have less of an opportunity to see global trends due to the media restrictions in China. Recently, the Chinese government has banned rappers and entertainers from showing their tattoos on TV,⁴⁶ which Duyi, a young English translation, student tried to explain: “if you’ve got tattoos, when you are a singer or a dancer, you may have a bad influence on teenagers.” However, customers still use the internet to find tattoo artists, with studio websites easily accessible via Baidu or WeChat apps; the researcher’s artist in China taught himself how to tattoo in 2017 by watching videos online.⁴⁷

Even with the social stigma, tattoo culture is slowly growing alongside an internet-savvy young population accustomed to a more modern China, with tattoo shops popping up in Shanghai, Beijing and smaller cities like Fuzhou.⁴⁸ During interviews with two active tattoo artists in Shanghai, they mentioned the recent explosion of tattoo culture, calling right now a “good time” to have a tattoo as in the past people would assume you’ve been in jail or are part of a gang if you have body art. Chang, a young tattoo artist who acts as a translator for the studio, added that old people may still look down on people with tattoos but, “for young people, everybody, at least, has one tattoo. Lots of people have tattoos in Shanghai. I don’t know about Beijing but in my home town it’s not really popular.”

Although the tattoo culture in China has been more recently reinvigorated, people with the body art share similar sentiments to those in South Korea, with their tattoos lacking a specific meaning but more a love for the art and design of the piece itself. Chang, who has tattoos covering her entire body, emphasizes that her tattoo means nothing: “for me, I like it ... Sometimes, someone will ask me ‘what’s this mean, what’s that mean’ and they have no meaning, just I like it. You don’t have to do anything [as if] you need a reason to do it.” It is

⁴⁵ Interviews with Hui Ying, Duyi, Wenyan, and Xueyou. Beijing, 2019.

⁴⁶ Quackenbush and Chen, “Tasteless, Vulgar and Obscene.”

⁴⁷ Interview with Zhang Wei. Shanghai, 2019.

⁴⁸ Caine, “老外看福州，第三部”纹身文化.” QQ, 2018.

clear, however, that tattoo culture is growing at a steady pace in China even given the remaining Confucian stigma, with studios and artists popping up every day to support the growing market.

Analysis

A strong social stigma surrounding tattoos remains in Japan, South Korea, and China, with the *yakuza* in Japan preserving an air of criminal activity in connection with the body art, while Confucian ideology advises young Chinese from changing the bodies their parents gave them. This social stigma has been fostered through the historical use of tattooing as punishment in each country, directly relating the body art to a sign of criminality and social deviance.⁴⁹ The later adoption of tattoo art by gangs in each country has served to perpetuate the idea that tattoos are a sign of dangerous members of an active underground. Older generations who maintain more traditional values may continue to view tattoos as symbols of that violence and disgrace. According to a 2008 study of tattoo perceptions in Korea, most young Koreans prefer the term “tattoo” rather than “*munshin*” as the latter holds negative connotations of “threatening, violent, negative, anti-social, masculine or grotesque images” while tattoos are related with individuality, freedom, attractiveness and fashion.⁵⁰ The younger generation then associates the art with self-expression rather than the traditional *munshin* with its history of criminal punishment.

The social perception of the art appears to hold greater weight than any legal restrictions and regulations a country may apply to the practice of tattooing. Although the practice of the art is technically legal in both Japan and China, the strong relationship to *yakuza* and Confucian ideology prevents people from seeking out tattoos. In Japan, most people, including young Japanese, saw the art as inhibitory, a symbol that would only harm them in society by preventing them from proper careers or even simple things like enjoying public baths.⁵¹ Japanese schools also regulate students’ appearances in order to create a harmonized community, prohibiting dyed hair or other fashion statements.⁵² Young Chinese appear apprehensive to the art as strong Confucian values suggest getting a tattoo to be an offense to the harmony of one’s family.⁵³ This is in stark contrast to South Korea where the practice of tattooing is illegal without a medical doctorate yet with the younger generation’s happy adoption of the body art as a symbol of globalized fashion rather than criminality, tattoos are actively desired.⁵⁴

As younger generations develop less traditional values alongside their countries’ growing development and access to globalized media,⁵⁵ so do they desire to express their personal identity in new, more distinct ways such as tattoo art.⁵⁶ Younger generations in Japan see tattoos now as a “means to assert self-determination, self-expression and identity... as a form of art, fashion, and lifestyle choice.”⁵⁷ As Japan, South Korea, and China have developed and modernized, there has been a gradual emphasis on self-expressive and secular values as

⁴⁹ Interviews in Japan, South Korea, and China. 2019.

⁵⁰ Park, “Signs of Social Change,” 74.

⁵¹ Interviews in Japan, 2019.

⁵² Jane. Interviewed by Morgan MacFarlane. Personal interview. Email, July 22, 2019.

⁵³ Interviews in China, 2019.

⁵⁴ Interviews in South Korea, 2019.

⁵⁵ Wang & Tan, “The Conundrum of Authoritarian Resiliency,” 214.

⁵⁶ Ji Soo Ha and Judy Park, “Significance of Changing Korean Youth Subculture Styles” (International Review of Social Sciences and Humanities, 2011).

⁵⁷ Yamada, “Westernization and Cultural Resistance,” 323.

Inglehart's World Values survey has indicated, allowing forms of body art to become more popularized as traditional values lessen.⁵⁸

The younger generation in East Asia is redefining tattoo culture, adopting the art as a symbol of modernity and fashion rather than of rebellion and criminality. As in the United States and Europe, tattoos in Japan, South Korea, and China are beginning to move from symbols of the underground to those of a globalized, cosmopolitan prosperity. Tattoos, sporting designs similar to that of traditional Japanese *irezumi*, became fashionable among the upper classes in Western countries towards the end of the 1880s, illustrating the wearer as an internationally traveled and well cultured patrician.⁵⁹ For years before and following this short body art trend among the upper classes, lower class laborers and rebellious subcultures like hippies and punk rockers traditionally had tattoos, gaining the art a stigma of rebellion and social deviance in the U.S. and Europe.⁶⁰ However, in the 1960s, tattoos by younger university students became a "form of artistic expression and emphasized creativity and custom images for their clients."⁶¹ The art took on the presence of a fashionable accessory, rather than one of a rebellious subculture. Tattoos in East Asia are experiencing a similar transition, from an image of gang membership to one of modernity and wealth.

Traditional Japanese *irezumi* artists emblemize this evolution of tattoo culture in East Asia as being fueled by greater globalization. Contemporary Japanese tattoo art now includes Western-influenced one-point, or singular, tattoos, rather than the traditional full-body art, which fewer and fewer customers desire.⁶² Japanese artists who offer Western style tattoos freely advertise for their studios on social media and the streets, while traditional *irezumi* masters allow a small clientele list and maintain the underground nature of the art.⁶³ In turn, this has contributed to the greater popularity of less traditional tattoos in Japan, which lack the same negative connotation that stemmed from gang activity.⁶⁴ As tattoos move away from membership in a community like that of the *yakuza* and towards a statement of individualism, they become part of the global consumer market: "globalization had produced a melange of tattoos which are ironically self-referential and repetitive, and the very hybridity of tattoo genres playfully questions the authenticity of these commercial marks."⁶⁵

Although these tattoos have the appearance of individualism and self-expression, tattooed bodies still represent a meaning "tied to the expression of [one's] relationship as selves to the social whole."⁶⁶ Seen in the interviews with young people in South Korea, most of the tattoos lacked a deeper personal significance typical of Western tattoos⁶⁷ beyond aesthetic merit and the desire to challenge older generations' perceptions of young people; they are symbols of a fashionable young society with access to the internet and the means to follow the latest trends.

⁵⁸ Ronald Inglehart and Chris Welzel. "The WVS Cultural Map of the World." (World Values Survey, waves 1981-2014).

⁵⁹ Jill A. Fisher, "Tattooing the Body, Marking Culture," (Body & Society, 2002). 94-95.

⁶⁰ Park, "Signs of Social Change," 74.

⁶¹ Ibid., 74.

⁶² Yamada, "Westernization and Cultural Resistance," 323.

⁶³ Johansson, *Yakuza Tattoo*, 31.

⁶⁴ Yamada, "Westernization and Cultural Resistance," 323-324.

⁶⁵ Bryan S. Turner, "The Possibility of Primitiveness: Towards a Sociology of Body Marks in Cool Societies," (Body & Society, 1999). 40.

⁶⁶ Maurice Patterson & Jonathan Schroeder, "Borderlines: Skin, tattoos and consumer culture theory," (Marketing Theory, 2010). 260.

⁶⁷ Park, "Signs of Social Change," 72-74 & 88.

Researcher Judy Park describes the phenomenon of “conforming to the individualization trend” in which young people look to pursue self-expression and individuality while also following the latest international trends. This is not to say the tattoos are not chosen uniquely to suit one’s preferences, but instead that the site of one’s body and skin is also affected by consumer preferences, becoming “contested terrain: a site wherein agency, freedom of choice and individual empowerment conflate with the pressures of cultural power and tensions of socialized/personalized control.”⁶⁸

South Korea serves as an example here, with the country recently experiencing rapid development and modernization. For decades, previous generations were accustomed to a closed society heavily influenced by Confucian values. However, in the 1960s, under dictator Park Chung Hee, South Korea began to undergo massive economic development and modernization. This younger generation of Koreans is growing up in the fruits of this labor, which Judy Park comments on: “the desire to keep up with global trends is linked to the attitudes of Korean people about modernity. Being modern and up to date is important and a new virtue for the young.”⁶⁹ This may be why tattoos have seen such an impressive explosion in South Korea in comparison to Japan, which experienced such rapid development earlier on, and is therefore more willing to embrace aspects of historical Japanese traditions than Korea may be.⁷⁰ Although tattoos are typically emblems of individual spirit, as they have become popular items in a consumer market. East Asian tattoos are more about conforming to and supporting the ideas of modernity via tattoo art than a rebellious desire to go against the popular trends of a society.

The explosion of social media in Japan, South Korea, and China has contributed to the changing tattoo culture in each country. The use of and greater access to the internet and international social media, which has grown alongside greater development,⁷¹ has allowed the younger generations to see popular trends around the world. Tattooed entertainers and K-Pop idols can be seen all over social media, influencing the younger generations’ perceptions of the ‘cool’ global trends.⁷² People even use social media like Instagram as a tool to find tattoo artists and designs, especially in South Korea, where advertising for one’s practice could be dangerous if not properly licensed.⁷³ In turn, social media has popularized one-point tattoos that lack the connection to criminal gangs and are instead symbols of a fashionable, modern youth participating in trends from the rest of the world.⁷⁴

China’s emerging tattoo culture serves to show just how body art has become a consumer product rather than a symbol of criminality or rebellion, as the art grows in popularity alongside the country’s development. As the tattoo artists mentioned in Shanghai,⁷⁵ there has been a recent explosion of tattoo studios and new artists all over modern metropolises, where middle and upper class Chinese typically reside, while in more rural areas tattoos are not as popular. Although China’s middle class is relatively small and new⁷⁶, given the country’s rapid development since Deng’s Reform and Opening policies in the late 1970s, they have developed in a more globalized

⁶⁸ Leora Farber, “Skin Aesthetics,” (Theory, Culture, & Society, 2006). 249.

⁶⁹ Park, “Signs of Social Change,” 88.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 88.

⁷¹ Carol Lancaster, “The New Face of Development,” (Current History, 2008) 38.

⁷² Yamada, “Westernization and Cultural Resistance,” 331. Park, “Signs of Social Change,” 89.

⁷³ Interviews in South Korea. 2019.

⁷⁴ Inglehart, “All Rounds,” Wave 6: 2010-2014.

⁷⁵ Interviews with Zhang Wei and Chang. Shanghai, 2019.

⁷⁶ Andrew J. Nathan, “The Puzzle of the Chinese Middle Class,” (Journal of Democracy, 2016).

society. Middle class individuals have the means to actively support and conform to the latest fashion trends, while also having access to phones, social media and the internet where popular media and entertainers provide inspiration. The younger generation making up the growing middle class also hold more liberal attitudes, as they are far less attached to more traditional values like reverence to authority and filial piety.⁷⁷ As the younger generations feel less connected to traditional beliefs, tattoos have become more of a symbol of a modern youth.

Over 800 million Chinese people use the internet, 98% of which accessing it via their mobile phones.⁷⁸ Even with the infamous Golden Shield, or “Great Firewall,” which bans Western media young Chinese are still able to find artists online via Chinese versions of these platforms such as Baidu, Weibo and Douyin.⁷⁹ Young middle class Chinese have a way around these bans as well, using VPNs to access international media sites. A predicted 14% of Chinese internet users utilize illegal VPNs if they are able to afford the service.⁸⁰ In years past, the strong social stigma against body art kept tattoos underground. Now a new middle class with modern tastes has brought the art towards the mainstream, forcing the government to start regulating the appearance of what they deem as *shehuiren* culture, or those who are poorly educated and unemployed.⁸¹

If tattoos continue to shed their historical connection to counterculture criminal activity and become symbols of a modern society and conformity to consumer trends, they are more likely to appear less threatening to the ruling authoritarian government of China. The small middle class in China has only just begun to grow and develop, making it unlikely they would take on a rebellious stance given the precarity of their newfound social status in China.⁸² If tattoos truly have undergone the transition from a counterculture significance to one similar to South Korea, becoming just a globalized consumer product indicating wealth and global modernity, the middle class adoption of the art won't instigate a disruption of Chinese society. Any sort of rebellion would threaten the newly acquired wealth and security of many Chinese, meaning the explosion of the art indicates more aesthetic preferences rather than social dissidence. Instead, as the middle class grows and China continues to develop, tattoos will become more popular and prevalent as they become commodities of a modern middle class, exposed to global trends and wealth to express via fashion, rather than counterculture rebellious symbols of a criminal underground.

Conclusion

From criminal punishment, to a marker of gang membership, to a symbol of a modern, globalized youth, tattoos in East Asia have undergone a transition. As Japan, South Korea, and China have continued to develop and participate in the world markets, their populations have adopted unique fashion trends and styles including that of body art. Rather than maintaining tattoos as a countercultural, rebellious symbol, the younger generations have happily adopted the

⁷⁷ Wang and Tan, “The Conundrum of Authoritarian Resiliency,” 214.

⁷⁸ Niall McCarthy, “China Now Boasts More Than 800 Million Internet Users And 98% Of Them Are Mobile,” (Forbes, 2018).

⁷⁹ Interview with Chang. Shanghai, 2019.

⁸⁰ Asha Barbaschow, “VPNs can still be used in China despite March 31 ban,” (ZDNet, 2018).

⁸¹ Thuy Ong. “Peppa Pig blocked on popular Chinese video app for association with counterculture.” (The Verge, 2018).

⁸² Nathan, “The Puzzle,” 9.

art as a way to participate in a globalized, developed world. Although each country regulates the practice differently, social stigma remains the strongest restriction on the art. However, younger generations have moved farther away from the traditional values that limited the art in decades past as they grow up in a more interconnected, technology focused society. As we have seen, tattoos in East Asia have begun to undergo a transition from counterculture statements of social outcasts, that would typically threaten social norms and authoritarian governments, to markers of development and globalization in a country. There is still much to be investigated as tattoos' rise in prevalence in East Asia challenges traditional understandings of oneself and their place in society, as well as what other new symbols of development will arise from art and fashion. Body art, the prevalence and acceptance of it, then can be used to help understand the levels of modernization and growth in a country, crafting a picture of what the internal politics of the country look like: one of rebellious crimes in a traditional society, or that of a young middle class participating in a globalized community.

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