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Tattoos in East Asia: Conforming to Individualism

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Abstract

Although Japan, South Korea, and China share a similar history of tattoo criminality spanning thousands of years, in modern times they all hold different legal policies concerning the practice of tattooing. South Korea has the strictest laws, requiring a medical doctorate to legally tattoo, while Japan has only recently reaffirmed the legality of the practice outside of health professionals. China, on the other hand, has few restrictions on body art. This paper explores this interesting difference via observational fieldwork in the major cities of Tokyo, Seoul, Shanghai and Beijing as well as interviews with local people within and outside the tattoo scene. In doing so, this paper hopes to explain the connection between a new tattoo culture supported by a younger generation and the level of democracy and development of each country.

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

Key Words: Japan, South Korea, China, Tattoos, Gangs, Youth, Modernization, Development

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 most special to them.¹ Traversing the streets of Shibuya in Japan, the busy plazas of Hongdae, or the night clubs of Shanghai tells an interesting 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 of tattooing. 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 This has curious implications given their 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 self-expression, which could be threatening to an authoritarian governmental system, but are instead symbols of a modern society rising alongside a younger middle class, one unburdened by

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.

previous decades of poverty or struggle. The rising prevalence of a tattooed population may be less of an indicator of a strong counter-culture then, 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 long standing social stigma in all three countries towards body art relating it with 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,

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.

“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 seeing 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-e*.¹¹ As Andreas Johansson mentions in his book, “many contemporary *irezumi* artists have an alias that begins with ‘Hori’, which means to carve just like the masters of woodblock printing,” showing the longstanding connection between Japanese tattoo art and wood-block prints.¹² 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.¹³

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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ During the socially oppressive feudal era, *iki* or stylishness developed as a form of rebellion against the upper classes, with tattoos being a

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

¹³ Yamada, “Westernization and Cultural Resistance,” 321.

¹⁴ Ibid., 321.

¹⁵ Johansson, *Yakuza Tattoo*, 8.

popular symbol for laborers.¹⁶ The *yakuza*, a large crime syndicate in Japan, began adopting *irezumi* style tattoos in this same era; many members of the *yakuza* have a history of being some of the most impoverished or outcast groups in Japan. Members' tattoos were not only signals of loyalty and commitment to the crime syndicate given the level of pain, time and permanence of the art, but could have also been tattoos previously received by the government to mark them as criminals. Popular designs include cherry blossoms, peonies, koi fish, dragons, as well as samurai, ninjas and other historical or spiritual warriors that the *yakuza* believe themselves to emblemize.¹⁷ Ethnic groups such as the indigenous Ainu group of Hokkaido or the people of Ryukyu practiced tattooing for religious and ceremonial reasons. Tattoos on the lips, cheeks, and knuckles could signify sexual maturity, marriage, or simply body adornment.¹⁸ 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, or 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).¹⁹ 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.²⁰ Unlike Japan's history of tattoos, Korea does not necessarily have a specific traditional style that developed, however current artists draw from

¹⁶ Yamada, "Westernization and Cultural Resistance," 322.

¹⁷ Johansson, *Yakuza Tattoo*, 41-42.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 321-322.

¹⁹ Park, "Signs of Social Change," 74.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

traditional Korean religious symbology²¹ or dress²² 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.²³

Under Japanese occupation, the social stigma towards tattoos in South Korea may have been reinforced due to the Japanese experience with *yakuza* gang affiliation in their own country.²⁴ During this same time period, modern Korean gangs began to develop as a way initially to protect merchants from Japanese criminal gangs supported by the colonial government.²⁵ As South Korea began to rapidly modernize and develop, Korean gangs, referred to as *kkangpae*, took on similar characteristics to the Japanese *yakuza* with tattoos developing into a sign of membership for gangsters, or *geondal*.²⁶ As Bill Kte'pi discusses, the tattoos of these *kkangpae* typically “identify the pa, or individual group (analogous to a Mafia crime family), to which they belong.”²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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.²⁹ The ethnic

²¹ Paulina Cachero, “The Outlaw Buddhist Art of a Korean Tattooist,” (Tricycle, 2018).

²² Ellen Freeman, “How Norigae Evolved From Fashion Accessory to Tattoo in South Korea,” (Inside Out, 2019).

²³ Kaitlin Brodsky, “Tattoo Subculture in Korea,” (BU Global Studies).

²⁴ Sung. Interviewed by Morgan MacFarlane. Personal interview. Seoul, South Korea, July 12, 2019.

²⁵ Seungmug Lee. “Organized Crime in South Korea.” (Trends in Organized Crime, 2006). 64.

²⁶ Park, “Signs of Social Change,” 74.

²⁷ Bill Kte'pi, “Gangs,” (Asian American Society: An Encyclopedia, 2014).

²⁸ Park, “Signs of Social Change,” 76.

²⁹ Carrie, E. Reed, “Tattoo in Early China,” (Journal of the American Oriental Society, 2000), 361.

groups of the Dulong, the Dai, and the Li in China used tattooing to represent rights of passage, strength, and medicinal purposes.³⁰ Just as in Japan and Korea, indigenous groups also used tattoos to ward off harmful creatures like *jiao*, 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.”³¹

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, however the Song, Yuan, and Qing dynasties have many records of employing the punishment.³² Furthering the idea that those with tattoos were deviant outcasts, exile was a popular punishment coupled with tattoos with over 200 possible crimes punishable by banishment and tattoo. Depending on the crime itself and whether it was the culprit’s first, second, or third crime, different symbols such as a line, circle or square would be tattooed behind the ear or on the face. 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.³³ Along with Japan and South Korea, slaves and concubines were tattooed either to ensure they would be unable to runaway or as punishment.³⁴ Tattoos were even used in the Chinese military as a means of identification with a specific unit to

³⁰ “A history of Chinese Tattoos and Chinese Tattooing Traditions,” China Culture. 2014.

³¹ Reed, “Tattoo in Early China,” 362-363.

³² *Ibid.*, 365.

³³ *Ibid.*, 365-366.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 366-368.

prevent desertion, or voluntarily as a symbol of honor and commitment to one's nation.³⁵

Interestingly, nowadays tattoos are not allowed in the military and young men will be turned away from service if a tattoo is found during their physical examinations.³⁶ Chinese gangs such as the Triads have adopted similar practices as Korean and Japanese gangs, using them as tokens of the individual branches they belong to within the gang.³⁷ Chinese people therefore still associate tattoo culture with that of criminality, stemming from both past punishments as well as active Triad gangs.³⁸

Confucian culture has played a major part in the stigma against tattoo culture historically and currently especially in both South Korea³⁹ and China. Tattoos were used as punishment for the shame and humiliation a permanent mark, mutilating one's body, would bring once a criminal re-entered society.⁴⁰ Reed explains that "in the beginning of the *Xiao jing*, Confucius tells his disciple Zengzi that filial piety is the thing most necessary for civilized society, and that the basis of filial piety lies in avoiding injury to the skin, hair, and body that is received from one's parents."⁴¹ 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 beyond just committing a crime. Older generations that still maintain more traditional Confucian

³⁵ Ibid., 369.

³⁶ Hui Ying, Duyi, Wenyan, and Xueyou. Interviewed by Morgan MacFarlane. Personal interview. Beijing, China, 20, July 2019.

³⁷ Kte'pi, "Gangs."

³⁸ Interview with Duyi. Beijing, 2019.

³⁹ 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.

⁴⁰ Reed, "Tattoo in Early China," 364.

⁴¹ Ibid., 364.

beliefs⁴² therefore look down on younger people for tattoos not only for the historical connection to criminality but also for shaming one's family.⁴³

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, the capital of South Korea, were surveyed such as Hongdae, known for the college youth life and fashion, Itaewon which has heavy expatriot 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 as well as active nightlives. Observational fieldwork was utilized to get a sense of how prevalent tattoo culture was in a natural setting while interviews were concluded 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 inside conditions of the shop.

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.

⁴² Wang & Tan, "The Conundrum of Authoritarian Resiliency," 214.

⁴³ Interview with Hui Ying, Duiyi, Wenyan, and Xueyou. Beijing, 2019.

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 placed on their arms or legs. Although koi fish, dragons and cherry blossoms were still popular designs with flat colors and strong lines, unlike the yakuza full-body *irezumi*, they were instead singular pieces on the body, with the occasional full sleeve. 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.

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, however 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. At night, there appeared to be little difference in the tattoo scene as most patrons at the bars were white-collar businessmen off from work rather than counterculture youth. Visiting the so-called red-light district of Shinjuku in the evening, which is controlled and actively monitored by the *yakuza*, tattoos of any sort were practically invisible most likely due to their obvious relation to gang activity. Although Japan has a long, well-known history of the art of tattooing, even leading to a specific Japanese style permeating the international tattoo community, 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. Arms and legs had multiple small tattoos but unlike full-coverage sleeve tattoos that fill the space between designs with shading and color, these tattoos remained entirely separate from one another, maintaining a light, delicate appearance. 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 the more subtle, smaller designs while men had darker tattoos. Flowers, lettering, animals and abstract designs were very popular for all people, with people 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 as it was so normal to have body art along with many flashy ear and face piercings.

Other parts of Seoul had less of an obvious tattoo culture in comparison to Hongdae. Gangnam contrastly, being 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. Unlike Hongdae which had Hongik University centered near many of the popular streets bringing in a young populace, Gangnam had wealthy white-collar office workers that may have less of a chance to sport their individuality via tattoos, fashion and jewelry. Itaewon, although an area frequented by foreigners, had less people with tattoos than Hongdae but interestingly the researcher did spot a new tattoo shop being built in the winding streets of the town center advertising, in both English and Korean, tattoo schooling as well as a studio. Practicing tattoos is illegal in South Korea without a medical doctorate making the presence of walk-in tattoo studios, let alone a tattoo school very rare. 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. A late 30-year-old woman near a food mall on Nanjing Road had flowers tattooed on her ankle, reminiscent of those seen frequently in the U.S. 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 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 even. China's tattoo culture appears to just 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 seemed more nonchalant given the 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 on the street, markets, nightclubs, parks, cafes or tattoo studios in each country. A snowball sampling method was used to gather further subjects via the initial participants. Given the unpredictable nature of this sampling method, the number of participants varies in each country. All of the interviewees have been assigned pseudonyms as to protect their identities. In Japan, six semi-structured interviews were conducted with two women and four men, none of which had tattoos. In South Korea, six semi-structured interviews were conducted with three women and two men, all of which had tattoos. Finally, in China, seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with two women and five men, with both one woman and one man having 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 either 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. Many people still associate the body art with the infamous *yakuza* gangs which are still active in Japan. Akira, a mid-20s woman showing us around Shinjuku mentioned to me as we walked into the 'red-light district,' an area still controlled by the gang: "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 "with people partying and people doing drugs."

⁴⁴ Tattoos are symbols of social deviance then 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,⁴⁵ much different from the traditional *irezumi*. Though it's unlikely the average Japanese student will be flashing a tattoo as Jane, a foreign teacher told me: "Japanese society is also very strict when it comes to your physical appearance ... For example, all students must wear uniforms, my junior high school students aren't allowed to dye their hair or wear any makeup, etc." This is similar to schools in both South Korea and China as well. It's highly unlikely to see white collar middle-aged or older Japanese people sporting tattoos of any sort either.⁴⁶

Even with the prevailing social stigma, many subjects were open to the body art in general and did not mind it for others, however 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 interview: "I think tattoos are cool, but just because I'm Japanese and I love being able to go to

⁴⁴ Haru. Interviewed by Morgan MacFarlane. Personal interview. Portland, Oregon, May 27, 2019.

⁴⁵ Ren. Interviewed by Morgan MacFarlane. Personal interview. Tokyo, Japan, July 6, 2019.

⁴⁶ Interviews with Ren and Yuu. Japan, 2019.

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* and the fear it may bring to locals or older patrons bathing. 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, however it may be difficult to cover large pieces or multiple tattoos.

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, now, 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] Septemeber, 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.⁴⁷ Yuu, a young male in his early 20s going to medical school in Japan told me: "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." It is clear however that there is still a heavy social stigma surrounding tattoo art in Japan spanning back to the historical practice of punishing criminals and the later adoption of the art by the *yakuza*.

South Korea

⁴⁷ Interviews with Akira, Makoto, Ren, and Yuu. Japan, 2019.

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 pretty⁴⁸ or interesting, something they pursued because their friends had them as well - but not an impulsive or pointless choice. The beauty in the art itself is what drove most of the interviewees to choose their tattoos.⁴⁹ When asked what the reason was for her tattoo, Mi Sun, a young college student studying business had 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.⁵⁰ Their tattoos weren’t about a rebellious underground counter-culture, but simply went against the older generation’s stigmas and ideas of beauty. Current popular beauty trends in South Korea spread via Western-media and K-pop idols or rappers include multiple piercings, colorfully dyed hair, streetwear, and multiple tattoos - a trend already antithetical to what the older generation would be accustomed to.⁵¹ 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, vaguely mentioning Seoul or Busan as possibilities.⁵²

⁴⁸ Interviews with Mi Sun and Eun. South Korea, 2019.

⁴⁹ Interviews with Mi Sun, Eun, Iseul and Dae-Ho. South Korea, 2019.

⁵⁰ Interview with Eun. Gangnam, 2019.

⁵¹ Park, “Signs of Social Change,” 76 & 80.

⁵² Interviews with Mi Sun, Eun, and Hyukjin Ko. South Korea, 2019.

Both women interviewed did feel the necessity to hide their tattoos from their parents for several months before revealing the body art. Mi Sun shared that she strategically placed her tattoos in areas like her bicep that would be easy to conceal for career purposes. Given that she is pursuing a career in business, Mi Sun is concerned that her tattoos will influence her job opportunities in the field, especially in comparison to her male counterparts: “Men are more likely to get tattoos because it's more acceptable for them at the workplace because they can cover up with a shirt ... People who think that women with a tattoo are lower, socially, are old, closed minded people.” All of the interviewees agreed that typically the careers accepting of tattoos were more entertainment and design oriented with the music industry, fashion, and industrial design offered as typical examples. Even with this fear, Mi Sun still plans to cover her entire body in tattoos once she has a job secured, emphasizing that she believes with this younger generation, feelings towards tattoos will change drastically.

The men interviewed in South Korea did have more daring tattoos, with dark grayscale designs of daggers or roses lining their entire arm, hands, and necks while the female subjects had more delicate floral or abstract designs that could be hidden by most clothing if they chose.

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, not because there were obvious

tattoo shops lining the streets, but because social media apps allowed them to quickly find artists; Eun finds artists via a tattoo sharing app. Most Korean tattoo artists the researcher found on Instagram, for example, all had at least five thousand followers, with the typical tattoo 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, at least for now. 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 “kind of 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 because you know when you put something on your skin, it’s kind of weird. But yeah, I will get 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 should protect it.⁵³ 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 such global trends due to the media restrictions in China. Recently, the Chinese government has banned rappers and entertainers from showing their tattoos on TV, 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.” Tattoos share a similar social stigma as in Japan and South Korea stemming from the historical use of the practice⁵⁴ along with ties to violent gangs like the Triads in China. However, customers still use the internet to find tattoo artists, with studio websites being easily accessible via Baidu or WeChat apps. The researcher’s artist in China even taught himself how to tattoo back in 2017 by watching videos online.⁵⁵

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.⁵⁶ 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,

⁵³ Interviews with Hui Ying, Duyi, Wenyan, and Xueyou. Beijing, 2019.

⁵⁴ Interview with Duyi. Beijing, 2019.

⁵⁵ Interview with Zhang Wei. Shanghai, 2019.

⁵⁶ Caine, “老外看福州， 第三部”纹身文化.” QQ, 2018.

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.” The trend is gaining popularity in large cities with more well-off youth and foreigners while more rural communities lack the same tattoo scene in China.

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 including a large chest, arm and neck piece that is entirely black with accents of red, emphasizes that her tattoo means nothing: “for me, I like it ... Sometimes, someone will ask me “yeah 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.” Her companion, who sports arm sleeves of traditional koi and Chinese monsters, nods his head in agreement. The studio is known for its realist tattoos, however Chang says that it depends on the person, with some getting traditional designs while others request small line work pieces. It is clear however that tattoo culture is growing at a steady pace in China even given the remaining Confucian stigma towards the practice, with studios and artists popping up every day to support the growing desire for body art.

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.⁵⁷ 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 violence and disgrace. According to a 2008 study of tattoo perceptions in Korea by Song and Park, Most young Koreans prefer to use the term “tattoo” rather than “*munshin*” as the latter holds negative connotations of “threatening, violent, scary, negative, anti-social, masculine or grotesque images” while tattoos are related with individuality, freedom, attractiveness and fashion.⁵⁸ 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 the art. 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.⁵⁹ Japanese schools also regulate students’ appearances in order to create a harmonized community, prohibiting dyed hair or other fashion statements.⁶⁰ 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

⁵⁷ Interviews in Japan, South Korea, and China. 2019.

⁵⁸ Park, “Signs of Social Change,” 74.

⁵⁹ Interviews in Japan, 2019.

⁶⁰ Jane. Interviewed by Morgan MacFarlane. Personal interview. Email, July 22, 2019.

family.⁶¹ 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.⁶²

As younger generations develop less traditional values alongside the country's growing development and access to globalized media,⁶³ so too does their desire to express their personal identity in new, more distinct ways such as tattoo art.⁶⁴ 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."⁶⁵ As Japan, South Korea, and China have developed and modernized there has been a gradual emphasis on self-expressive and secular values as Inglehart's World Values survey has indicated, allowing forms of body art to become more popularized as traditional values lessen.⁶⁶

The younger generation in East Asia however is redefining tattoo culture, adopting the art as a symbol of modernity and fashion rather than 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 that 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.⁶⁷ For years before and following this short

⁶¹ Interviews in China, 2019.

⁶² Interviews in South Korea, 2019.

⁶³ Wang & Tan, "The Conundrum of Authoritarian Resiliency," 214.

⁶⁴ Ji Soo Ha and Judy Park, "Significance of Changing Korean Youth Subculture Styles" (International Review of Social Sciences and Humanities, 2011).

⁶⁵ Yamada, "Westernization and Cultural Resistance," 323.

⁶⁶ Ronald Inglehart and Chris Welzel. "The WVS Cultural Map of the World." (World Values Survey, waves 1981-2014).

⁶⁷ Jill A. Fisher, "Tattooing the Body, Marking Culture," (Body & Society, 2002). 94-95.

body art trend among the upper classes, lower class laborers and rebellious subcultures like hippies and punk rockers were the people traditionally with tattoos, gaining the art a stigma of rebellion and social deviance in the U.S. and Europe.⁶⁸ However, in the 1960s, as Sanders and Vail describe in their book, *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing*, tattoos performed by younger university students became a “form of artistic expression and emphasized creativity and custom images for their clients.”⁶⁹ 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 one of gang membership to an image of modernity and wealth.

Traditional Japanese *irezumi* artists emblemize this evolution of tattoo culture in East Asia 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; even “the number of *yakuza* clients, who were once the majority of tattoos, has declined since the tattoo boom.”⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹ 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.⁷² As tattoos move from membership in a community like that of the *yakuza* and towards a statement of individualism, they become part of the global consumer market according to Bryan S. Turner: “globalization had produced a melange of tattoos which are ironically self-referential and repetitive, and the

⁶⁸ Park, “Signs of Social Change,” 74.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 74.

⁷⁰ Yamada, “Westernization and Cultural Resistance,” 323.

⁷¹ Johansson, *Yakuza Tattoo*, 31.

⁷² Yamada, “Westernization and Cultural Resistance,” 323-324.

very hybridity of tattoo genres playfully questions the authenticity of these commercial marks.”⁷³

Tattoos have moved from the deep connection to a historical tradition in Japan that relates to both criminal punishment, woodblock printing, and the *yakuza* to a fashion statement in a global market for young Japanese.

However, although these tattoos have the appearance of individualism and pure self-expression, tattooed bodies still represent a meaning “tied to the expression of [one’s] relationship as selves to the social whole.”⁷⁴ Seen in the interviews with young people in South Korea, most of the tattoos lacked a deeper meaning typical of Western tattoos⁷⁵ 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. Researcher Judy Park describes the phenomenon of “conforming to the individualization trend” in which young people look to pursue to self-expression and individuality of Western populaces while also following the latest international trends.

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 and neighboring Japan and China, 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

⁷³ Bryan S. Turner, “The Possibility of Primitiveness: Towards a Sociology of Body Marks in Cool Societies,” (Body & Society, 1999). 40.

⁷⁴ Maurice Patterson & Jonathan Schroeder, “Borderlines: Skin, tattoos and consumer culture theory,” (Marketing Theory, 2010). 260.

⁷⁵ Park, “Signs of Social Change,” 72-74 & 88.

a new virtue for the young.”⁷⁶ 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 are therefore more willing to embrace aspects of historical Japanese traditions than Korea may be.⁷⁷ 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 truly unique expressions of self; they are antithetical to that of a rebellious desire to go against the popular trends of a society.

As tattoos have become a fashionable accessory for the younger generations, those in the middle class have the greatest access to the body art. Given that tattoos are a luxury good, those with tattoos have to be able to afford the art while maintaining a social class that allows some forms of self-expression.⁷⁸ Most people interviewed stated that their tattoos were at least a hundred US dollars if not several hundred, with the researcher’s tattoos in each country also being in the 200 USD range and above.⁷⁹ Young students attending college in each country typically had tattoos in places where they could both express themselves as young individuals while also maintaining the ability to cover them up for their future careers in business or design fields.⁸⁰ Middle class individuals would 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, entertainers and Western influences provide inspiration; tattoo artists can easily be found online as well.

⁷⁶ Park, “Signs of Social Change,” 88.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 88.

⁷⁸ Karupiah, “Modification of the Body,” 1-2. Park, “Signs of Social Change,” 89.

⁷⁹ Interviews in Japan, South Korea, and China. 2019.

⁸⁰ Interviews in South Korea. 2019.

The explosion of social media in Japan, South Korea, and China has contributed to the changing tattoo culture in each country. The use and greater access to the internet and international social media, which has grown alongside greater development,⁸¹ has allowed the younger generations to see popular trends from Western nations. Tattooed entertainers and K-Pop idols can be seen all over social media, influencing the younger generations' perceptions of the 'cool' global trends.⁸² 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.⁸³ In turn, social media has popularized Western-style 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. In each country, according to Inglehart's World Values Survey well over 65% of people see the growing emphasis on technology as a good thing, with nearly 50% of Korean respondents in particular using the internet and mobile phones to get information daily.⁸⁴

The greater presence of foreigners in more international cities like Tokyo, Seoul, and Shanghai may help to normalize the body art outside of the traditional stigmas. Several interviewees mentioned that people do not mind foreigners with tattoos as they're unthreatening as the body art is more accepted on Westerners.⁸⁵ In Japan, as the Olympics and other sporting events bring in foreign athletes, and cities like Seoul and Shanghai continue to grow in international popularity, a greater amount of foreigners means traditional social taboos surrounding tattoos may have to change as tourism grows. As one interviewee mentioned in

⁸¹ Carol Lancaster, "The New Face of Development," (Current History, 2008) 38.

⁸² Yamada, "Westernization and Cultural Resistance," 331. Park, "Signs of Social Change," 89.

⁸³ Interviews in South Korea. 2019.

⁸⁴ Inglehart, "All Rounds," Wave 6: 2010-2014.

⁸⁵ Interviews in Japan and South Korea. 2019.

Japan, *onsens* may have to change their tattoo policies⁸⁶ to accommodate the Olympic athletes and foreign tourists that come for the games.⁸⁷

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 tattoo artists mentioned in Shanghai,⁸⁸ there has been a recent explosion of tattoo studios and new artists all over the city as well as in Beijing, 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 new⁸⁹ given the country's rapid development since Deng's Reform and Opening policies in the late 1970s, they have developed in a more globalized society. If tattoos in East Asia have taken on a symbol of modernity and fashion for the middle class, then young Chinese growing up in a more modern China will seek out the body art, explaining the recent growth in the tattoo scene. As Wang and Tan have found in their study, the younger generation making up the growing Chinese middle class hold more liberal attitudes as they are far less attached to more traditional values like reverence to authority and filial piety.⁹⁰ These can be seen as the result of the modernization and rapid socioeconomic growth occurring in China in recent decades. As the younger generations feel less connected to traditional beliefs, like the Confucian idea of filial piety which several interviewees cited for their apprehension towards the body art, tattoos have become more and more a symbol of a modern youth. As in South Korea, the Confucian value of social harmony

⁸⁶ "Tattooed foreigners are putting Japanese bath houses in a quandary," (The Economist, 2018).

⁸⁷ Interview with Makoto. Tokyo, 2019.

⁸⁸ Interviews with Zhang Wei and Chang. Shanghai, 2019.

⁸⁹ Andrew J. Nathan, "The Puzzle of the Chinese Middle Class," (Journal of Democracy, 2016).

⁹⁰ Wang and Tan, "The Conundrum of Authoritarian Resiliency," 214.

and conformity may simply transition from conformity to no tattoos, to conforming to consumer trends of seemingly individualistic practices like body art.

Over 800 million Chinese people use the internet, with 98% of which accessing it via their mobile phones.⁹¹ Even with the infamous Golden Shield, or “Great Firewall” which bans Western media sites like Google, Yahoo, Facebook and Twitter, young Chinese are still able to find artists online via Chinese versions of these platforms such as Baidu, Weibo and Douyin.⁹² China has little to no regulations on the practice, however as of 2018 the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of the People’s Republic of China, “specifically requires that programs should not feature actors with tattoos [or depict] hip hop culture, subculture (non-mainstream culture) and dispirited culture (decadent culture).”⁹³ In years past, the strong social stigma against the body art kept tattoos underground, while 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 *shehui* culture, or those who are poorly educated and unemployed.⁹⁴

However, young middle class Chinese have a way around these bans, using VPNs to access Western media sites. A predicted 14% of Chinese internet users utilize illegal VPNs if they are able to afford the service.⁹⁵ During the researcher’s time in China in January of 2019 performing field research on social media use among the youth in China, many interviewees mentioned they use their VPNs not necessarily to read international news but instead to keep up

⁹¹ Niall McCarthy, “China Now Boasts More Than 800 Million Internet Users And 98% Of Them Are Mobile,” (Forbes, 2018).

⁹² Interview with Chang. Shanghai, 2019.

⁹³ Quackenbush and Chen, “Tasteless, Vulgar and Obscene.”

⁹⁴ Thuy Ong. “Peppa Pig blocked on popular Chinese video app for association with counterculture.” (The Verge, 2018).

⁹⁵ Asha Barbaschow, “VPNs can still be used in China despite March 31 ban,” (ZDNet, 2018).

with their favorite K-Pop idols on Twitter and Instagram. Young Chinese with the financial ability to keep up with the trends of international entertainers and media influencers are also exposed to tattoo culture and the global fashion trends that surround it, especially in East Asia and Western nations.

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, with many of its members co-opted by the ruling party to allow them greater economic opportunities, making it unlikely middle class Chinese would take on a rebellious stance given the precarity of their newfound social status in China.⁹⁶ Tattoos in China instead take on a meaning of wealth and global modernity, less threatening to the CCP in maintaining control of its citizens and rather a way to tout the triumphs of Chinese modernization. If tattoos truly have undergone the transition from a counterculture significance to one similar to South Korea, lacking a meaningful depth and instead just a globalized consumer product, the middle class adoption of the art won't be used to create a democratic transition in the country. Any sort of rebellion would threaten the newly acquired wealth and security of many Chinese, meaning the explosion of the art is for aesthetic reasons 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.

⁹⁶ Nathan, "The Puzzle," 9.

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 international fashion trends and styles including that of body art. Rather than maintaining tattoos as a counterculture, rebellious symbol, the younger generations have happily adopted the art as a way to participate in a globalized, developed world. Although each country regulates the practice differently, social stigma remains as 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. 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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