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The Art of Crime

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The Art of Crime

A Senior Thesis Presented

By

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Reader:
Professor Jeffrey Bayliss

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Abstract:

Studies of the yakuza generally agree that full body tattoos would be one of the hallmarks of the criminal bands, simply another intimidation tactic. This mindset most likely comes from the idea that centuries ago, criminals tattooed as punishment would often seek out tattoo artists to convert their punitive markings into decorative ones. In attempting to hide the perhaps shameful proof of their misdeeds and their exclusion from society, criminals unconsciously used tattoos as a way to prove that they were still included in the group that rejected them. Still, with the negative view of tattooing that remains to this day, authors and scholars could argue that tattooing is a self inflicted stigma, a declaration to the general public that the bearer is choosing to reject what is acceptable in an attempt to express some deeper meaning: their own individuality. This is usually the way that tattooing is understood in the Western context; however, we could argue that because of the constant incorporation of Japanese iconography and national symbols in yakuza tattoos, the tattoos are meant to show that yakuza maintain a strong connection to Japanese national identity—they do not reject society but show themselves as embedded in its traditions and values, ideas of which are literally engraved into their skins. The use of the tattoo to show this identification is the unique way in which yakuza choose to present their understanding and appreciation of the values that shape their country.
Acknowledgments:
I would like to extend my thanks and appreciation to all of the professors whose time, dedication, and persistence helped me to assemble this project. I am especially grateful for the latitude and trust given to me by my Reader, Professor Bayliss. Finally, I give thanks to my friends and family, whose ears are filled with my complaints, doubts, and triumphs.
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**Introduction**

Your skin is being stretched to make it completely taut. Thirty-six stainless steel needles, coated in jet black ink, are poised above the tight skin, ready to puncture your flesh at a constant rate: 90 to 120 strokes per minute.\(^1\) Every time the needles dip below your skin, the black ink seeps into your body and takes on a blue green hue. Perhaps the needles draw blood once or twice; the dark blood mixes with any excess ink on the canvas of your skin but is quickly wiped away by a deft hand. By now your discomfort has become pain, but you have to understand: it has only been one hour. This is only the beginning of the process of making a Japanese body suit tattoo; the stunning designs with which we are familiar often take years to complete. The tattoos and those that bear them are a testament not only to the human ability to endure pain, but also to the intense desire for self expression. To what lengths are people willing to go in order to communicate something greater about themselves? Quite often, this need for self expression is realized through apparel and accessories, through fashion. How a person dresses, however, often reveals more than their personal tastes; style can reflect national and cultural norms and practices as well.

In the summer of 2011, I was fortunate enough to travel to Japan and conduct a study of fashion as culture. Understanding that style reflects national and cultural customs, I sought out the answers to several different questions: what defines fashion and influences style? Are there prominent traditional Japanese influences in everyday fashion? And finally, is fashion a way to stand out in a seemingly homogenous culture, or even rebelling against societal norms? These questions and the responses collected from surveys of and conversations with students tie into a topic that caught my attention at the very end of my trip: tattooing.

As I wrote in my final report, tattoos are seen as a part of fashion and style; however, according to the majority of the students with whom I spoke, they would not consider getting a tattoo. After I returned to the States, I did some light reading on tattoos in Japanese culture—and the stigmas against them. When I paused to think, I realized that during my entire trip, despite the hundreds of people I saw on their daily commutes in the height of summer, I recall seeing only one young woman flaunting a tattoo. Considering that tattoos have developed from a form of punishing criminals into an art form with connections to the yakuza and organized crime, it seems logical that people might avoid the physical and societal pain of being tattooed. Still, looking at tattoos and tattooing from an outsider’s perspective, much can be said about the place of this practice in contemporary Japanese society.

Tattoos are certainly a very striking way of making a non-verbal statement. Tattooing in Japanese society comes with connections to the yakuza and societal stigmas against body art. Tattoos themselves could be seen as on the periphery of Japan, linked to a marginalized population (the criminal class); however, in the eyes of the yakuza, and anyone else that bears them, these works of art are very traditionally Japanese. In its painful and painstaking creation and in the images etched into the bearer’s skin, a tattoo is arguably a representation of historically and culturally relevant Japanese themes and figures; for a yakuza, a full body tattoo could even be a very public way of demonstrating their understanding of national identity. What are the connections between the taboo of tattoo and the appropriation of traditional Japanese themes in body art?
Origins of Tattooing

Criminalizing Art

Beginning in the 18th century, during the Edo period, Japanese tattooing began to develop into the form we recognize today. For centuries before this era, however, tattooing had been employed for various purposes. Poysden and Bratt point out that even as early as 400 AD, tattoos were used as a form of punishment for multiple crimes and even as an alternative to the death penalty.² A distinct facial or other type of tattoo would then become a marker that would easily identify a criminal for the rest of his life, leading to possibly many instances of exclusion from proper society. In 645, however, tattoos were no longer used as a castigatory measure. Poysden and Bratt claim that the importation of Buddhist and Confucian ideals from China and Korea starting in the sixth century helped to discourage the punitive use.³ Nevertheless, there seems to have been a revival of the practice, or at least a slight alteration of it, starting in 1720. At this time, according to reformations in the legal code, punitive tattoos substituted for the amputation of noses and ears as punishment and even included symbols that would specify the location and type of crime.⁴ Additionally, instead of being a substitute for capital punishment, tattooing became the specific punishment for minor crimes such as: “flattery with ulterior motives, extortion, fraud and dealing in substandard goods;” any marked man foolish enough to commit a second offense would be sentenced to death.⁵

It was also during the Edo period that distinctions in the nomenclature of tattooing arose, in order to dissociate the art form from the punitive measure. Traditionally, tattoos were known

² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Ibid.
as *irezumi*, or “insertion of ink;” "irezumi became the general term associated with punishing tattoos. Another term, *horimono*, the “engraved thing,” came from master tattoo artists (known as *horishi*) as a way of separating their craft from its negative history. (In general, for this study, “traditional Japanese tattoo” will refer to the extensive body suit tattoos that emerged during the Edo period and continue to be associated with the yakuza.)

With an increasing demand for their handiwork, tattoo artists of the 1700s were more willing to share their designs with paying customers. This period witnessed an increase in the popularity of ornamental tattoos and at the same time a decrease in the effectiveness of penal tattoos. Poysden and Bratt suggest that already tattooed criminals sought out ornamental tattoos as a way of covering their identifying marks.8 Realizing the steadily increasing uselessness of tattooing as punishment in an era of decorative tattooing, the government eradicated the practice in 1870.9 Decorative tattooing continued to gain popularity among city dwellers, particularly artisans and unskilled laborers, in Edo Japan. Two groups that were especially known for their tattoos were the firemen and the *otokodate*, or the “chivalrous commoners”10 Firefighters performed a public service, saving lives sometimes at the expense of their own, and were idolized both for their daring and for their tattoos, prominently displayed as they rushed into a burning building. Ironically, the *otokodate*, though referred to as “chivalrous commoners,” were in the opinion of some sources, the precursor to the yakuza. Commonly seen throughout the pleasure quarter, these heavily tattooed men were romanticized in Kabuki Theater, becoming

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7 The prefix “hori” is usually placed in front of a name to create the pseudonyms of tattoo artists after they complete their apprenticeships (e.g. Horiyoshi III), to indicate their new status as tattoo masters.
8 Poysden and Bratt 123.
9 Ibid.
dashing heroes who opposed samurai that abused their power and status over the lower classes.\textsuperscript{11}

In these stories, the \textit{otokodate}, familiar with swordplay and martial arts, would often clash with samurai in the streets, instating their own justice and stirring up rebellion against the established societal order in Japan.\textsuperscript{12}

Other types of tattoos also flourished up to the Edo period; for example, vow tattoos and “love dots” (known as \textit{irebokuro})\textsuperscript{13} were often shared between lovers, many times prostitutes or geisha and their patrons. In response to the proliferation of tattooing, the Japanese government enacted a series of bans on the practice starting in 1789. In the early decades of the 1800s, a decree was passed criticizing tattooed men for adversely impacting public morals by disfiguring their bodies.\textsuperscript{14} In 1811, another edict went forth that marked both tattoo artists and their clients as in violation of the law and subject to legal proceedings.\textsuperscript{15}

These legal measures were most likely part of the series of sumptuary laws issued under the Tokugawa government. Donald H. Shively, author of “Sumptuary Regulation and Status in Early Tokugawa Japan,” defines the sumptuary laws as rules which “regulate the consumption of articles of a style of entertaining considered to be luxurious, specifying what is appropriate to the different social or political levels.”\textsuperscript{16} The laws seemed to be directed towards the rising merchant class, who manifested their surplus wealth in ostentatious clothing. The government seemed to take particular offense that the quality of their clothing did not immediately reflect their social standing. Shively asserts that not only were sumptuary regulations meant to “…encourage

\textsuperscript{11} Kitamura, 27.
\textsuperscript{12} Kitamura, 28.
\textsuperscript{13} Poysden and Bratt, 125.
\textsuperscript{14} Kitamura, 17.
\textsuperscript{15} Poysden and Bratt, 125.
frugality, to preserve the socio-political order, and to satisfy the ethical-religious system[.].”¹⁷ But they were also meant to reinforce class distinctions based on appearance.¹⁸ We could argue that tattoos, neatly hidden by one’s clothes, were meant to challenge the governmental restriction on the ways that people adorned their bodies.

On top of the criminalization of tattooing, raids on numerous parlors and the subsequent destruction of design manuals forced the practice to the outskirts of society, largely taking refuge in Japan’s red light district.¹⁹ In her 2009 article, “Westernization and cultural resistance in tattooing practices in contemporary Japan,” Mieko Yamada suggests that as the authorities increasingly regulated tattooing and other aspects of dress and lifestyles, the lower classes more actively expressed themselves through tattoos as a way of promoting their “stylishness,” or *iki*.²⁰ As one aspect of *iki*, tattooing became part of a rebellion against the elite classes and part of a “spirit of competition among commoners;”²¹ for those who could afford the lavish designs, it was a way to flaunt their own wealth and to snub the mandates of the government.

In 1872, as Japan opened its doors to the West during the Meiji Restoration, the Japanese government again issued a formal ban on tattooing as a means of improving their image in the eyes of their Western contemporaries.²² The proclamation also outlawed the tribal tattoos of the indigenous Ainu of Hokkaido and the Ryūkyū people of the southern islands of Japan. It is ironic, nonetheless, that when Europeans and Americans came to Japan, they were so entranced by the stunning tattoos that they sought out artists who would be willing to similarly tattoo them. Kitamura mentions that as European royalty and opulent Americans paid for tattoos and even

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¹⁷ Shively, 125.
¹⁸ Ibid.
²¹ Ibid.
²² Kitamura, 17.
employed Japanese tattoo artists to work abroad, the government legalized tattooing for foreigners, even going so far as to reserve a special district in Yokohama for foreigners seeking tattoos, but still maintained the ban on tattooing for Japanese citizens, creating a somewhat paradoxical image of tattooing in Japan that would last until the mid 20th century.

\textit{(Ink )Wells of Inspiration}

Looking at the figures commonly seen in traditional Japanese tattoos, we have to wonder: where do these images come from? Researchers generally point to the prominence of woodblock printing, specifically the woodblock series known as \textit{The 108 Heroes of the Suikoden}, and the spread of Kabuki theater. In combination with the lifestyles encouraged in Edo Japan’s pleasure district, romantically referred to as \textit{ukiyo} “[the] ‘floating world—a world full of transitory pleasures and free from care,’” these factors helped to inspire tattoo artists living on the margins of Japanese society. In a world separated from the stringent class structures of society, where the emerging merchant class could use its steadily accruing wealth to shape the spectrum of entertainment offered, these differing art forms—theater, printing, and tattooing—fed off of and popularized one another.

Imported from China, woodblock printing steadily gained popularity as household decorations and as advertisements for brothels and Kabuki theaters because the prints were not expensive to make. Woodblock printing quite literally captured the images of the floating world, with its depictions of courtesans, Kabuki actors, and “middle class life,” giving rise to a specific type of woodblock print known as \textit{ukiyo-e}, literally, “images of the floating world.”

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Kitamura, 23.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Kitamura, 25.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Kitamura, 217.
\end{itemize}
Many times, woodblock prints would include drawings of tattooed men and women. As the images became more complex, took on more hues, lines, and patterns, tattoo artists tried to adopt the blossoming style into their craft, especially the use of color and gradation. Some tattooists even directly copied ukiyo-e designs, a technique that continues even today. At the same time, as Kabuki actors took greater notice of the ukiyo-e prints and of the imagery of tattoos, they began to incorporate body art into their costuming and even into the story lines of their plays. A number of Kabuki stories of otokodate often involved plot twists that hinged on the revelation of a character’s tattoos.

As previously mentioned, the woodblock series, *Tsurōku Suikoden gōketsu hyakuhachin no hitori—The 108 Heroes of the Suikoden, All Told*—had a profound impact on tattooing. The *Suikoden* series itself is based on a Chinese historical fiction novel, *Shuihu zhuan (Outlaws of the Marsh)*, wherein a group of 108 noble outlaws lived on the outskirts of society, righting wrongs, purging vice, and defending the poor and oppressed in a similar fashion to the otokodate of Edo. Throughout the stories, references are made to the extensive tattoos covering the bodies of some of these vigilantes. In 1827, when the woodblock artist Utagawa Kuniyoshi began to create single sheet color prints based on the *Suikoden*, not only did he gain immense popularity, but he also directly contributed to the growing interest in tattooing at the time. Although in the original tale only 5 of the outlaws are tattooed, Kuniyoshi bestows tattoos on fifteen different members of the gang, showing his personal interest in and appreciation of body adornment. As many of his designs were intentionally meant to be tattoos, tattoo artists gradually began to stencil Kuniyoshi’s entire prints onto the bodies of their clients instead of rendering only the tattoos.

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27 Kitamura, 41.
28 Kitamura, 35.
29 Poysden and Bratt, 131.
30 Poysden and Bratt, 134.
seen on the *Suikoden* heroes. The roguish heroes clearly inspired the people; by creating these images and wearing them, they too perhaps could gain some of the strength and freedom of expression found among the *Suikoden* bandits.

**Skin Stories**

Another group of rogues living on the outskirts of Japanese society also popularized tattoos and all but claimed them as one of their unique identifying characteristics: the yakuza, Japan’s organized crime. Given the long shared history of tattooing and crime, when we think of Japanese tattoos, images of yakuza are usually not far from our thoughts. In their book, *Yakuza: Japan’s Criminal Underworld*, authors David E. Kaplan and Alec Dubro remark, “…tattoos and missing fingers comprised the most striking, immediate features [of the yakuza]. They were not ordinary tattoos, but magnificent, full-color designs of samurai warriors, flowers, and dragons that stretched across the body from neck to calf.”\(^{31}\) For this group of organized criminals, extensive tattooing had multiple effects. As previously mentioned, decorative tattooing helped to cover punitive tattoos, giving criminals some reprieve from disparaging looks of the more respectable elements of society. At the same time, these tattoos would separate the yakuza from the rest of society, making them “misfits, forever unable or unwilling to adapt themselves to Japanese society.”\(^{32}\) This self imposed exile, however, also showed an unwavering commitment to the yakuza family above all else; Reflecting on recent changes in yakuza style, Horitoku, a *tebori* (hand tattoo) artist from Shinjuku, remarks, “…the yakuza used to have their bosses pay for the tattoos and sometimes they would get their tattoos decided for them so they would have to stay with the clan. If they ran off, they would be told ‘Peel your skin off and leave it...

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\(^{32}\) Kaplan and Dubro, 15.
behind!”…” 33 Within the yakuza groups themselves, tattooing was also a testament to an individual’s willpower and strength. If a yakuza could withstand over one hundred hours of having his skin repeatedly punctured, surely this would demonstrate his masculinity, courage, and toughness. 34 Similarly to Kaplan and Dubro, Bratt and Poysden describe yakuza tattoos as “‘symbolic costumes’” that while simultaneously identifying yakuza and highlighting their masculinity, perseverance, and ability to endure pain, also attest to their rejection of mainstream society. 35 This attitude continues even today; arguably, the yakuza are actively defying societal standards by transforming a formerly punitive practice into one of their identifying markers. Even in prison, tattoos aid in ostentation and intimidation efforts; respect and fear from jailers and fellow inmates alike can make a yakuza’s stay more pleasant; it is rumored that tattooists have even visited jails to complete their artwork. 36 By showing a bit of skin, a yakuza can almost instantly receive preferential treatment in almost any setting, even among other outlaws. Joachim Kersten, author of “Street Youths, Bosozoku, and Yakuza: Subculture Formation and Societal Reactions in Japan,” jokingly remarks, “A self-employed criminal would probably much prefer to have the police on his back than the tattooed gangsters with their dark sunglasses, white moccasins, and missing parts of fingers.” 37 With a physically intimidating presence come their impressive numbers and their connections with various public, financial, and political sectors of society. These factors, combined with their romanticized image in television and films, give the

34 Ibid.
35 Poysden and Bratt, 153.
36 Poysden and Bratt, 153.
yakuza their latitude in Japan; however, given the enactment of the 1991 organized crime countermeasures law, it is seems that this fanciful image of the yakuza is disappearing.\textsuperscript{38}

\textbf{Inside the Outsiders’ Perspective}

As the yakuza draw on a centuries old Japanese tradition to create and promote their widely recognized image, we must wonder whether their tattoos (and their posturing) is a petition to be recognized and accepted by Japanese society or is simply one facet of a culture that does not care whether it is understood or not. Clearly during the Edo period, the extensive tattoos that hid punitive markings were a cry for acceptance and an attempt to avoid exclusion from society. On the part of the tattoo artists, even the renaming of their trade as \textit{horimono} suggests a similar desire for inclusion with (or at least respect from) others. Although authors such and Kaplan and Bratt would agree that the yakuza willingly and entirely reject a society that acutely alienates them, Jacob Raz, professor of East Asian Studies at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, argues that yakuza simultaneously present themselves as part of the mainstream of Japan and outside of it. In this paradoxical state, the yakuza constantly switch between displaying their inclusion and exclusion. Raz claims, nonetheless, “Eager expression of inclusiveness…often denote the opposite: that the actor is a marginal element or an outsider. On the other hand, violent expressions of exclusiveness…often emphasize the wish to be recognized by the mainstream.”\textsuperscript{39} While Raz’s statement may oversimplify the understanding of inclusion and exclusion, he does bring up a unique perspective on the yakuza. The majority of studies on the yakuza immediately analyze them as outsiders (a tendency that is only natural, given the fact that

\textsuperscript{38}Ibid.

yakuza are still ultimately organized crime) instead of as a group fully incorporated into society. Raz, however, sees them as equally filling the roles of insider and outsider in everything from their language and organization to their signboards and fashion sense. Like Poysden and Bratt, Raz recognizes traditional Japanese tattoos both as a symbolic costume and as a “self-inflicted stigma;” he goes so far as to say, “[A tattoo] is one of the most exclusive signs one can wear in modern Japan.” Those who choose to be tattooed run the risk of being ostracized but also have the opportunity to cloak themselves in the history, culture, and values of Japan as a whole.

Although we tend to understand tattoos as a means of the bearer’s expressing individuality, the use of repeated motifs and iconography in yakuza tattoos challenges this perception. Indeed, the tattoos are clearly unique works of art, fit to the specific curvature of each body, but they seem to indicate that there is a unique canon of images with understood meanings that can be continually drawn upon to shape an identity. Like the yakuza, their tattoos “…are constantly active in signifying and transmitting their individual but mostly group-self…” Focusing on the concept of “group-self,” Raz points out that another reason that yakuza receive tattoos is to proudly display affiliation with the group as a whole. However, there is affiliation on another level, on the national level, expressed in the “Japanese spirit” of the design themes.

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40 Raz, 219.
41 Raz, 213.
42 Raz, 219.
43 Raz, 220.
The Body as Living Text

More than Skin Deep

Tattoos reflect the dreams and ideals of the people that bear them. When a person chooses to get a full body tattoo, that in and of itself is already a statement of their desire to communicate some greater meaning. For the yakuza that bear traditional Japanese tattoos, their skin is a testament to centuries of Japanese custom. There are many studies about the yakuza, but far fewer about the tattoos commonly linked to them. Even if tattooing is mentioned in connection to the yakuza, it comes as a tangential point, simply another “trademark” of the yakuza, in the words of Kaplan and Dubro, much like severed fingers as a result of yubitsume, a penitential ritual in which the top joint of the little finger is cut off for breaking yakuza family rules. In his study of self expression through body-adornment, American anthropologist and author Ted Polhemus argues, “Tattooing is typically highly informative…” “What says the right thing (‘I am a member of this tribe,’ ‘I am in tune with the spirit world’) also looks right.” Considering this non-verbal form of communication, a key factor in filling in the gaps in our understanding of other people and other cultures, what do yakuza tattoos reveal? Reading a few tattoos may provide more insight into the mindset of their bearers.

44 Kaplan and Dubro, 14.
**Horiyoshi III, Dragon and Warrior Suit**

Looking at the first tattoo (Figure 1) for this study, our eyes are greeted with a stunning image. Not only is the photograph itself gorgeous, but the monochrome scheme is breathtaking. It is hard to believe that the entire image was literally punctured into the body over months, perhaps even years. In the image, the two principal figures, the warrior poised mid-bellow and the coiled dragon, seem prepared to leap from the man’s back and into our world. Although both figures quite literally take center stage, the dragon seems to overwhelm the canvas and dominates the tattoo as a whole. In a close-up shot of the warrior, we see that even his arm is similarly tattooed with a dragon inching up his forearm into his flowing robes. The dragon resting on the man’s back seems to have no end in the tattoo; it snakes around the body almost endlessly. We are not sure, based on the photograph, whether or not this is even one dragon. As our eyes trace the scales and bends in the dragon’s body we long for the man in the photo to fully turn around to let us see the front of the image.

In Japan, dragons are generally seen as intimidating yet benevolent beings that offer wisdom and demonstrate strength. Dragons often act as gods of the sea, bringing water and rain to their believers. Kitamura points out that during the Edo period, the dragon was akin to patron deity for firemen who believed that having a dragon tattoo would function much like a talisman to protect them from the flames that had to be doused. Although the majority of tattoo bearers now would not be charging into a burning building, perhaps those who opt to have dragons emblazoned on their bodies are hoping to channel the wisdom and strength attributed to dragons. If we assume that a similar suit would be worn by a yakuza, the tattoo might be outward display

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46 Unless otherwise specified, all images in this text come from Manami Okazaki’s Tattoo in Japan: Traditional and Modern Styles. (Artist: Horiyoshi III, Parlor/Studio: Horiyoshi III Studio, Location: Yokohama. Photo Credit: Martin Hladik)
47 Kitamura, 78.
of an inner strength. For tattoo artists such as Horikazuwaka, an artist from Asakusa who creates tattoos by hand, the tattoo is meant to compensate for or strengthen a quality that is lacking in the bearer. In an interview with Manami Okazaki, author of *Tattoo in Japan: Traditional and Modern Styles*, Horikazuwaka said, “‘I choose the motif according to the client’s personality. If the guys is excessively hard and nasty looking, I insert a soft design…If the client doesn’t look all that convincing, a more aggressive or stronger design will be used.’” 48 Whether tattooing is truly compensating for a missing characteristic or is an indirect way of conforming the body to an understood standard of beauty and public presentation depends upon both the tattoo artist and the client.

Returning to the tattoo for a moment, we notice that it seems to be more like a skin tight shirt than a work of body art; the abrupt ending of the tattoo on his right arm makes us wonder if he will return to his horishi to have the image completed. The straightness of the tattoo’s end is a sharp contrast with the myriad curves in the image which give the tattoo its feeling of fluidity, of motion: the dragon is actively wrapping itself around the body. What is especially remarkable about the tattoo is the lack of white space in the image. Rather than leaving the man’s skin blank in areas not covered by the dragon or the warrior, the tattoo artist has completely filled those areas with what seem to be stylized clouds and endless spiral; the man has, like a real canvas, been completely painted over. The background carries as much importance as the protagonists themselves in this story told on skin. This is a sentiment with which many traditional tattoo artists would agree; one such artist, Horiyasu, a traditional artist with contemporary influences whose work fills the pages of Okazaki’s text, has said, “‘As the whole body is a canvas, it’s a tale, ukiyo-e is the basis, and the background is important.’” 49

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48 Okazaki, n.p.
49 Okazaki, n.p.
As a commonly used motif, dragons also became extremely popular because of the success of the *108 Tales of the Suikoden* woodblock series. In his prints, Kuniyoshi has depicted many of the characters with dragon tattoos scaling their backs, tattoos that are fully bared while the hero struggles against an enemy or prepares for battle. Even to this day, dragons retain their popularity as a tattoo motif. Of the various characters in the series, the character Kumonryu in the *108 Tales* greatly contributed to the popularization of dragon tattoos. Admired not only for his bravery and fighting skills, Kumonryu was also renowned for his impressive full body tattoo of nine dragons, a reference to his name literally translated as “the nine-dragoned.”

Kitamura claims that his popularity largely comes from his romanticized *otokodate* lifestyle; he gives up his riches, privilege, and social position in order to join a group of vigilantes fighting for justice for the common man. Tattoo artists often look to this character and his story for inspiration for their full body suits; in some instances, they render Kumonryu’s form onto the backs of their clients, turning them into the parchment that conveys his story, as we see in Figure 4. We can easily see how the image of Kumonryu, bearing his own dragon tattoos and prepared to strike, has been inked into the man’s back. In other moments, artists such as Horiyoshi III (one of the most famous tattoo artists in Japan) are further inspired to transform their clients into the legendary hero by adorning their bodies with the same tattoos that Kumonryu bears, promoting more directly the connection between ukiyo-e and tattooing.

Considering the romantic view the yakuza as a “chivalrous” group, a yakuza with this tattoo may be trying to communicate a connection with Kumonryu’s commendable life.

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50 Kitamura, 52.
51 Kitamura, 52.
52 See Appendix.
53 See Figure 5 in Appendix.
Traces of an aspiration towards a commendable life can also be found in the ways that the yakuza describe themselves. In the words of Kakuji Inagawa, former head of the Inagawa-kai yakuza faction, “the yakuza are trying to pursue the road of chivalry and patriotism….The yakuza try to take care of all society if possible, even if it takes one million yen to help a single person.”54 However true this statement may or may not be, it still echoes the concept of *giri-ninjo* thought to be at the heart of yakuza actions. According to Bruce A. Gragert, author of “Yakuza: The Warlords of Japanese Organized Crime,” the idea of *giri-ninjo* can be broken down into two parts. The first part, *giri*, stands for “obligation or a strong sense of duty [linked to] Japanese values involving loyalty, gratitude, and moral debt,” while the second part, *ninjo*, suggests “‘human feeling’ or ‘emotion.’ [It conveys a sense of] generosity or sympathy toward the weak and disadvantages, and empathy toward others.”55 Gragert asserts that not only do these values play a crucial role in the relationship between yakuza leaders and their subordinates but they also served to somewhat improve the public image of the yakuza during the Edo period. He writes, “…like the samurai, [yakuza] could combine compassion and kindness with their martial skills.”56 Although this could possibly be a very idealized perception of the yakuza’s actions, Gragert’s viewpoint contributes to the idea that the yakuza sought, and may still seek, some degree of recognition and even acceptance from society.

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55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
Horiyasu, *Goldfish Swimming among the Peonies*

Figure 2, the next tattoo in this collection brings us into an underwater world; the ripples spreading over the image give the impression that we are looking into a pool of water inhabited by brightly colored goldfish. According to Okazaki, goldfish in Chinese culture are auspicious signs, indicative of success. Though they were introduced to Japan first as pets for the nobility, during the Edo era, goldfish became popular among all classes, turning into a sight commonly seen at summer festivals.\(^{58}\) Again, the curved lines of the tattoo add a sense of fluidity to the image, as if the swimming fish or some other unidentified force has gently disturbed the surface. Weaving its way up towards the man’s lower back is a golden braid, most likely part of the costume of another warrior (not pictured here) who bears tattoos himself, as evidenced by the peony tattoo on the visible leg. In Japan, not only does the peony symbolize wealth and nobility, but some sources even claim that because peonies are featured in the *hanafuda* card game,\(^{59}\) the flowers are linked with gambling and the yakuza lifestyle. Though this is plausible, it seems somewhat more likely that this association between peonies and yakuza comes from the fact that they feature prominently in their tattoos. Kitamura, also known as Horitaka, a pupil of Horiyoshi III, suggests that the peony represents “regal power. It also had obscure symbolism as a wartime fighting symbol…the red peony was linked to the colour of fresh blood as well as the red sun of the Japanese flag.”\(^{60}\)

In a sense, it is ironic to think that tattoos such as these, inundated with delicate figures from the natural world, were meant to intimidate anyone that saw so much as a sliver of the

\(^{57}\) Horiyasu, Horiyasu Studio, Tokyo (Asakusa). Photo Credit: Martin Hladik.  
\(^{58}\) Okazaki, n.p.  
\(^{60}\) Kitamura, 65
entire image. Granted, the intimidation may have stemmed more from the immediate association between tattoos and yakuza; however, looking at these tattoos, arguably we see something that is more impressive than intimidating. We do not see only warped or intentionally disfigured images meant to frighten the viewer; instead even the most aggressive images are softened by the presence of scattered flowers, falling leaves, and rolling waves. Perhaps what is most striking about this tattoo are the vivid colors that radiate from the skin, even more so because of the stark black background of the photograph and the swirling black mass of the background. Artists such as Horikazuwaka might remark, “the beauty of Japanese tattooing is that the colors and vibrancy improve over time goes on. It doesn’t degrade, but simply becomes more beautiful as time passes.”

The passage of time is another fascinating aspect of tattooing; for many tattoo artists, the way the tattoo changes in hue and vibrancy only lends to the idea that their creations are living beings. The colors inserted into the skin during the first session may not be the ones a customer is left with years later; Horikazuwaka points out that as the needle marks fade, “…the colors take on a certain characteristic hue that gets better as the months go by, as if the tattoo were alive and subject to metamorphosis.”

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61 Okazaki, n.p.
The next image (Figure 3)\textsuperscript{62} brings into the world of fairytales; as cherry blossoms and their petals spiral and fall across the back of the unidentified man, a large, bulky child grapples with an enormous koi, or carp. His red skin and his bulging muscles indicate that this child is Kintaro, the Golden Boy, whose prodigious strength, according to legend, earned him a commanding position in the army, great wealth, and the respect of people and animals alike. As with tattoos of Kumonryu, the bearer attempts to either channel either the strength of Kintaro or get protection from the amulet like tattoo. Here, we see the way in which a children’s story is transmuted into a symbol of strength and adopted by adults. What is interesting about Kintaro’s tale in relation to tattooing is that although he is usually featured as wrestling with the massive koi, the fish is not mentioned in his fairy tale; this commonly seen event does not occur in his legend.\textsuperscript{63}

Pointing to the work of Donald Richie and Ian Buruma’s \textit{The Japanese Tattoo}, Kitamura argues that the image of Kintaro wrestling a koi most likely originated from a Kuniyoshi original print where he united the legends of Kintaro and of the koi into a design that symbolized great strength. A symbol of perseverance and of courage, a creature that eventually wins an uphill battle, the koi battles its way upstream in according to legend to pass through the Dragon Gate and becomes a dragon.\textsuperscript{64} The depiction of a carp swimming upwards is reminiscent of this struggle from folklore. Here, we could argue that a yakuza would identify with the trials of the koi in his own attempt to reach a higher standing in a society that works against his lifestyle.

\textsuperscript{62} Various Tattooers, Tattoo Summit, Toyohashi. Photo Credit: Martin Hladik.
\textsuperscript{64} Kitamura, 97.
As a whole, the tattoo radiates a spirit of masculinity wrapped in soft reminders of nature. Kintaro battles the koi, perhaps a symbolic attempt to subdue nature, while delicate sakura and golden koi frame the conflict. At the center of the action, there is manliness and strength, much like in the yakuza existence. What may seem out of place here is the presence of the sakura petals themselves. The national flower of Japan, the sakura represents beauty, transience, and the cycle of nature.\textsuperscript{65} Beloved by the Japanese, the cherry blossoms and their trees are easily the most iconic flower of the nation and are native only to Japan, a fact which indirectly reinforces the “uniquely Japanese” quality of the flower. Instead of taking the national icon and distorting or inverting it in some way, yakuza, through their tattoo artists, embrace the symbol also as part of their own identity, showing as much pride in the national flower as any Japanese non yakuza would.

There are dozens of other motifs that Japanese tattoos explore and develop, from folklore and nature, to religion and mythology; gods and goddesses do battle with demons while phoenixes race to the skies in some tattoos whereas in others, geisha stand in a swirl of falling flower petals and Buddhist guardians offer protection and harmony. Every aspect of life serves as inspiration for a tattoo, and the idea that tattoo artist and yakuza return to an established canon of images is a reflection of the importance of these concepts to every member of Japanese society. Whether intentionally or not, traditional Japanese tattoos are part of an effort to incorporate national values into a carefully constructed identity, one that simultaneously communicates a respected shared history and a rejection of societal norms. The images used in a full body tattoo draw upon tradition themes, symbolizing “uniquely Japanese” cultural values; the act of wearing a tattoo, however, rejects the “mainstream normative values” in postwar Japanese society. For the yakuza, tattoos are one of the ways in which they show their

\textsuperscript{65} Kitamura, 91 and Okazaki n.p.
participation in the overarching culture that defines Japan—but on their own terms. In a more extreme, ironic sense, traditional tattooing is a unique way of showing conformity. Considering the emphasis placed on expressing manly spirit through tattooing in the majority of research done for this project, however, we can imagine that with prominent masculinity comes a certain cavalier attitude. We can almost imagine a yakuza saying that he could care less about his perception in society; however, he is still ultimately a part of it. Not completely excluded from this tradition, these values, a yakuza shows his national identity by quite literally engraving it into his skin. In their appeal to their chivalrous character, known as jinngi (仁義, “humanity and justice), the yakuza might even go so far as to say their tattoos more thoroughly embody the definition of a “real Japanese man” than the unadorned skin of an average Japanese white-collar worker. For tattoo artists, the practice allows them to take a cues and inspiration from already established forms and articulate their own understanding of the world around them; they capture the images that run rampant in their imaginations and bore them into a breathing canvas. Both tattoo artist and the client are saying that they value their common identity but are making their own names, their own lifestyles, in a society that doesn’t offer every person equal opportunities.

Based on the reaction of the Japanese government and society, however, we can infer that there is something “un-Japanese” about marking the body; the images themselves seem to be of little importance. Perhaps this stems from a concerted effort to dissociate Japan from “primitive” or even “barbaric” indigenous groups such as the Ainu of Hokkaido in northern Japan, a group that indeed practiced tribal tattooing. In Ainu culture, tattooing is more obviously a symbolic practice, meant to act as a repository of knowledge about the norms and values of the tribe. The body becomes a living text; the various markings not only delineate differences in role and status,
but also chronicle the developmental history of each individual bearer. Victoria Ebin, anthropologist and author of The Body Decorated, points out that Ainu tattooing was also a means of distinguishing themselves from the Japanese; she comments, “[Body decoration] may be one of the last manifestations of their difference which they abandon and its demise usually signals the end of their special ethnicity.” Throughout Japanese history, there have been multiple attempts made to essentially erase Ainu existence by promoting a doctrine of assimilation into the larger web of society, a valorization of “them” becoming “us.” One of the most notable pieces of assimilation legislation was the 1899 Ainu Protection Act, formally known as the “Hokkaido Former Aboriginal Protection Act (HFAPA).” Filled with “paternalistic social-welfare measures” meant to bring the Ainu into Japanese society, the Act simultaneously set aside land for Ainu agriculture but gave the governor of Hokkaido administrative power over this territory. For decades after the passage of this act, the Ainu have lobbied for the preservation of their culture as distinct from the Japanese.

Related to the indigenous question, issues of class and class tensions also play into the stigmatization of tattoos in official discourse but its acceptance and prevalence among the lower, marginalized classes. Considering that tattoos largely developed amid criminal activity and the decadence found in the pleasure quarters of Edo Japan, tattooing as a practice has been entrenched in the world of the lower class. Even in drawing on ukiyo-e woodblock prints and Kabuki theater, the popular forms of art and theater that appealed to the common audience, tattoo

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66 Polhemus, 40.
69 Ibid.
artists linked their craft to lower classes to whom elevated forms of art such as ink painting and Noh theater might not have been appealing.

Tattooing and class also come together when examining the transformative powers of traditional horimono within the yakuza. With the completion of a full body suit, the bearer loses his old identity and is subsumed into his particular syndicate; old affiliations are replaced with a new family. In groups traditionally discriminated against, tattooing could be a symbolic way of eliminating both their class and ethnic differences; it no longer matters where they came from or what they look like as they are now part of a larger unit. For groups marginalized from a nation-state that defined legitimate membership in terms of fictive constructs of Japanese ethnicity (i.e. the burakumin, Chinese immigrants, and Korean immigrants), the yakuza, with all of its rituals, traditions, and appearance, offer an escape from their status as secondary citizens. According to Manabu Miyazaki, Japanese author, sociopolitical critic, and son of a yakuza, the burakumin, the “people of the hamlet” are “descendants of outcasts under the feudal class system who were allowed to work only in occupations seen as unclean, such as slaughtering animals, and forced to live in designated areas.” These areas often lacked access to the same resources as the common people. Although legalized discrimination of burakumin ended in 1871, prejudice against them still exists, driving many towards crime as a way of escaping a life of poverty and intolerance. After a conversation with a young yakuza “liberated” from the discrimination against his buraku status, Miyazaki writes, “For a person at the bottom of the social scale, becoming a yakuza was one route to liberation. In fact, it was the shortest and most radical one.” Although official data is hard to come by, the National Police Agency of Japan has “suggested” that within the Yamaguchi-gumi, the largest and oldest of the three most famous yakuza syndicates, burakumin

71 Miyazaki, 75.
fill 70 percent of the ranks and Koreans fill 10 percent.\textsuperscript{72} Citing the testimony of an FBI agent, Kaplan and Dubro also point out that Koreans account for 15 percent of all yakuza.\textsuperscript{73} The authors acknowledge that the involvement of minority groups in the yakuza is a delicate issue not openly discussed by the police or the media; however, the amount of Koreans, Chinese, and burakumin with yakuza membership is markedly higher than the groups’ ratio to the general population.\textsuperscript{74} There is an undeniable place for these minorities in the criminal underworld, a place where they are almost overrepresented, given their low population numbers nationwide. We have to wonder if by joining a yakuza family, males from ethnic minority groups are attempting to appropriate both the masculinity and the “pure” Japanese identity inherent to the yakuza; in another study, it would be fascinating to discover how ethnic minorities within the yakuza resolve their dual identities.

\textit{Show Some Skin}

By now, we must ask: if these tattoos are so important in the communication of these ideals, why do the yakuza choose to hide them? As Ebin points out in her studying of body modification in cultures around the world, tattooing is a type of ritual behavior, a “signaling system [with] a culturally defined communication code.”\textsuperscript{75} How are others meant to receive this information if it is hidden beneath the billowing sleeves of a kimono or a crisp linen suit? Even tattooists themselves agree that their creations should be hidden most of the time; in a 2012 article for the \textit{Economist}, Horiyoshi III explains that “the simple act of revealing those

\textsuperscript{72} Kaplan and Dubro, 133.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{75} Ebin, 10.
tattoos…is meant to intimidate.” 76 With this in mind, we can assume that either the general populace would be terrified most of the time, or what is more likely, that the power intimidation would diminish everyday that a tattoo was plainly exposed. Something that is seen everyday gradually becomes commonplace and loses its intended shock value. Unlike other tattooed gangs such as the Latin American based Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), yakuza do not intend for their body art to immediately garner attention and explicitly highlight the group. 77 (This may also be a practical issue; any obvious affiliation with certain proscribed yakuza syndicates after the passage of the 1991 countermeasures act could be grounds for investigation and subsequent arrest by the police.) In fact, shielding horimono is just as important as having it; not only does it allow yakuza to operate without drawing even more attention to themselves in public, but hiding tattoos again transforms them into something akin to a concealed weapon, the full force of which is unleashed when a yakuza chooses to brandish his body.

Ink in the Present

In the Sea of Confluence

The tattoo scene on the streets of today’s Japan shows the clear impact of cultural contact between the East and West. Ironically, though tattooing was formally banned in 1872 largely to make the Japanese seem better in the eyes of its Western visitors, an American driven effort would lift the ban on tattooing nearly 75 years later. Tattooing remained officially prohibited until 1945; after two World Wars and in the middle of the reconstruction, the Japanese government, presumably at the behest of the officers staffing General MacArthur’s occupational forces rescinded the tattoo ban. Though the practice had naturally continued in secret, tattoo artists now had the freedom to practice—and the demand for—their artwork. As previously mentioned, foreigners were impressed and fascinated by the intricate designs, flashy displays that would make perfect souvenirs. Not until the 1960s, however, would westerners who had never visited Japan have an opportunity to see traditional Japanese tattooing. Through the work of Norman Keith Collins, more commonly known as Sailor Jerry, centuries old motifs and practices found their way across the Pacific; as Collins visited various ports throughout Asia, he assembled eastern tattoo designs into his own tattoo books. He simultaneously incorporated common Japanese techniques and imagery while introducing western style tattooing to master tattoo artists whom he befriended in Japan. At the same time that Americans were seeking the heavily stylized tattoos inspired by Japanese full body suits, Japanese youth were swept up by the appeal of the “new” wan pointo tattoos coming from the US. These small tattoos of roses, Disney characters, and anchors, among other common icons, do not cover the body, but only a

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78 Hendry, 25. Also, Poysden and Bratt 147.
79 Poysden and Bratt, 150.
80 Ibid.
small area, or “one point.” One of the most interesting aspects of this naming system is that today, tattoos made in the Western style (meaning those typically found in the United States or in Europe) are never referred to as horimono, a word intended for use by the masters of the art. Intentionally or not, the naming of tattoos shows a certain degree of pride that horishi take in their work: it is something that is uniquely a part of Japanese culture, as well as their own culture of artistry. Nonetheless, it is ironic to think that tattoos that many Americans find “overdone” today were and continue to be at the cutting edge of fashion in Japan.

On the streets of Tokyo, it is clear that there are myriad ways to communicate style and to participate in the latest fashion trends. Whether a girl bleaches her hair from black to white or a boy drapes himself in chains and eyeliner, fashion choices are clearly an outlet for vibrant self expression. Among youth in Japan today, tattooing also comprises one aspect of fashion, albeit for many, something to be admired from afar; during my visit to Japan, the majority of college students to whom I spoke admitted that they would not consider getting a tattoo. For those who dare to be inked, however, tattooing is more than a simple fashion statement; it is a means of rebellion in two senses. First, to receive a tattoo is a conscious rejection of the centuries old stigma against the practice in favor of grasping a “new” medium of expression. Second, in the designs that the youth choose, they are showing preference for the Western styles of tattooing, ignoring their nation’s own rich history of tattooing in favor of the foreign. Polhemus writes, “...in today’s world, it is the language of personal, individual identity—rather than the languages of social commitment and shared values—that the tattoo is most often called upon to express.”

Instead of continuing the Japanese tradition of full body suits, many youth seeking tattoos turn to their Western counterparts and cover their skin with hearts, stars, and sometimes trite sayings.

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81 Tattoos in the Japanese style are also known as wabori, whereas Western style tattoos are also known as yobori. For the sake of this work, these terms will not be used.
82 Polhemus, 40.
With this change in public tastes and with the introduction of electric tattooing machines in Japan during the mid 1900s, an invention first patented in 1891 by New York tattooist Samuel O’Reilly, tattooing in Japan has been irrevocably changed; as the practice progresses, however, we must wonder: at what cost?

In some respects, the transformation of tattooing has been a positive one; Kitamura points out that because of the spread of communicable diseases in Japan, hygiene standards in tattooing have increased. Instead of reusing the same brush and ink, tattooists now take advantage of disposable single use ink caps, and latex gloves protect both the artist and the client. Alterations in the structure of the hand needle have made the process more sterile; stainless steel and soldered needles have replaced the bamboo rod and thread respectively, according to Kitamura. Because of the convenience and precision of electric tattooing machines, which in their near perfection allow tattoo artists to more effectively pen the outlines of their ukiyo-e inspired designs, many tattooists now incorporate the mechanical into their traditional world. Outlines will generally be done with the machine, but so as to not completely abandon centuries of traditional practice, shading, coloration, and other detail work may be done by hand. Very few artists today do entire works by hand alone; these traditionalists like Horitoku see themselves as more grounded in the practice that emerged in the Edo period. With 35 years of experience, Horitoku proudly says, “To be in a ‘family’ like mine is to protect Japan’s culture and tradition all the way back to the Edo period. Most young tattoo artists opt for the machine method, which is easier and less laborious.” Nonetheless, Horitoku does recognize the value in machine tattooing and sporadically uses it for an outline; there are artists who are even stricter than he is and refuse to utilize the technology at all. To purists such as these, artists like Horiyoshi III

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83 Polhemus, 39 and Kitamura, 50.
84 Kitamura, 20.
85 Okazaki, n.p.
would say, “Preservation hinders evolution. To evolve, you must break away from what you’ve learned. This isn’t betrayal.”\textsuperscript{86} In this line of thinking, in order to keep traditional tattooing relevant and up to date, certain changes must be allowed.

In other dimensions, however, change comes at the expense of the historic practice of tattooing. As previously stated, despite the renewed interest in tattooing, youth groups generally do not select the Japanese traditional style; ironically, it is the \textit{bosōzoku}, or “speed tribes” (essentially motorcycle/customized car gangs) and other youth gangs that prefer to be adorned with skulls, roses, and crosses.\textsuperscript{87} Adopting a style akin to American punks, these gang members use their style and attitudes to differentiate themselves from their peers and rebel against the way of life prescribed for their age group. From smoking cigarettes to getting tattoos, these youth have distinct intentions that they are attempting to communicate. In his article, Kersten boils these intentions down into three main purposes: “First…as a statement against the ingrained and taken-for-granted rule of conformity during adolescence. Second…[as a primarily attention grabbing] device to boost a feeling of identity. And third…[because youth style comes with its own rules] as a denominator for group cohesiveness and for the essential sense of belonging to a group.”\textsuperscript{88} Kersten argues that this third purpose of youth style, because of its understood rules, makes the flashy appearance acceptable in the mainstream culture.\textsuperscript{89} Flashy is certainly an apt adjective for present day tattoos in Japan. The more ostentatious a tattoo is, the more a rebellious youth can communicate his or her anti-establishment attitude. Perhaps much like the yakuza, this new generation of tattoo clients finds some appeal in the unavoidable pain and bloodletting that

\textsuperscript{86} Horiyoshi III, “和彫師 三代目彫よし—Life with Shisei,” YouTube video, 14:54, posted by “VICEjpch,” December 14, 2012, \url{http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZOGWaVCrCsA}.
\textsuperscript{87} See Figure 6 in Appendix.
\textsuperscript{88} Kersten, 282.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid.
comes with tattooing; others may see it as a type of initiation into a larger group. However, in their attitude towards revealing their tattoos, the yakuza are far more conservative, whereas the youth gangs are more open, perhaps craving the attention from their body art. Tattooed youths most likely seek to intimidate their more obedient peers; however, it seems to be more important to constantly and openly portray an image of defiance and toughness (even if the true personality underneath the tattoos does not exactly match).

**Life at the Edge**

Yamada suggests that “the marginality of Japanese tattooing gives it vitality and a sense of authenticity, which keeps the Japanese tattoo tradition alive in contemporary society.” In a rather ironic way, by its very underground nature, traditional tattooing remains real and relevant in today’s Japan. However, considering the economics of the practice (a full body suit tattoo can cost well over 30,000 USD), the changing meaning of tattoos, and the impact of foreign influences has threatened to eliminate traditional tattooing as we have come to understand it. After legalizing tattooing in Japan once again, the Japanese government has done little if anything to support the practice and prevent its disappearance; a concrete example of this is seen in the government’s refusal to designate horishi as “Living National Treasures,” or “men and women in the fields of traditional and performing arts who the government has designated as ‘Bearers of Intangible Cultural Assets.’” Though no longer official, there is still a good measure of discrimination against tattoos and tattoo artists from Japanese authorities; in the words of a tebori artist, Hormiyo of Saitama, “…the only way to change the situation is to make people understand that tattooing equals art.”

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90 Polhemus, 40.
91 Yamada, 320.
92 Poysden and Bratt, 150.
It seems that the opinion towards tattooing in Japan is still in flux; in the documentary, *Life with Shisei*, Horiyoshi III points out, “Initially, young people preferred small American tattoos. But soon they got bored and started paying attention to Japanese shisei. They wanted to have a background like a shisei so they could connect their smaller tattoos in a Japanese style.” Looking at the tattoos on the young man in Figure 7, we cannot tell whether the smaller figures were joined by the cloud background during or after the initial tattoo process. Given the clear difference between the style of the chest tattoo and the sleeves, we might assume that the sleeves would have been easier to complete after the chest tattoo. The only tattoo that seems quite out of place is the fan cutting across his bleeding stomach. From the perspective of a removed onlooker, it seems as if this fan is either out of place, almost an afterthought, or (in its isolation) a focal point for the “whole” tattoo. The young man, who seems as if he would be at home on the back of a motorcycle, screams “loud,” “radical,” and “dramatic” with his body art. Though he clearly sports Japanese-inspired themes along the length of his arms, the images are given a uniquely, almost inexplicable Western flair; the artist embraces a more cartoonish feel in the execution of his figures without sacrificing attention to detail. In a close up of the geisha tiptoeing across his upper arm, her body is similarly covered with tattoos: pink sakura against a blue background.

*On the Straight and Narrow*

From the tattoo images alone used for this study, we cannot firmly classify every tattoo as belonging to a yakuza or a non-yakuza. Not only would we be broadly stereotyping, but we would also be ignoring the fact that non-yakuza also choose to get full body tattoos. According to Yamada, “Tattooed bodies may be less negatively perceived or stereotyped than they used to

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93 Horiyoshi III, “Life with Shisei.”
94 See Appendix.
95 See Figure 8 in Appendix.
be because the social meanings and relations to which tattoos were attached are becoming weaker and more rationalized.” As more people from different sectors of society come into contact with tattooing, the former immediate associations with the criminal and working class slowly begin to fade away, though there are still numerous spas, pools, and hot springs that prohibit tattooed customers from entering.

Recognizing the multiple reasons that yakuza and similar criminal gangs seek out tattoos, we similarly must recognize that regular, law abiding citizens also have manifold reasons for being tattooed in the Japanese style, some of which may overlap with the yakuza’s own. In an interview with Yamada, Horimitsu, a horishi living in Osaka, indicated that many customers use tattoos to symbolize strong emotions such as pride, hope, grief, and eternal love; others use tattoos as outward pledges to avoid wrong behavior and poor decisions, a tendency that hearkens back to the vow tattoos, or kishibori, of the Edo era. Tattoos are tools to inspire confidence, to “create external motivation to avoid shame,” to prove one’s strength and bravery (as seen among the yakuza), to do penance and seek forgiveness for crimes, and to ultimately “…reflect a sense of solidarity within social groups.” Yamada seems more positive on the idea that traditional tattooing, at the very least, can promote social cohesion. In Japan just as in the US however, there are certainly people who get tattoos simply for the sake of assuming a “badass” image from the body art. Looking tough, even for people not affiliated with gangs and criminal activity, is a profound concern for many people. Some ink enthusiasts, however, would disapprove of obtaining a “tough” or “badass” tattoo simply to create the illusion of corresponding traits in the bearer. Not only would such a tattoo misrepresent its owner, but, according to Jennifer Baker, author, philosopher, and tattoo aficionado, it would also introduce the wearer to an unexpected

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96 Yamada, 325.
97 Yamada, 328.
98 Yamada, 328-329.
range of violence. Baker argues, “Wanting that type of tattoo is a way to appropriate tough guy or tough gal imagery from a subculture that already exists, and a good person should want no part of this subculture.” Here, intention plays as much importance as does the selected imagery; if you seek a badass tattoo only to gain the reputation associated with it, you may be unexpectedly called to live up to that identity, no matter how gruesome.

**Gangster Girls**

In the majority of the sources used for this project, there is a noticeable lack of information that analyzes women, whether yakuza or not, and their relationship to tattooing. Despite the fact that their book is filled with black and white photo of tattooed women, Poysden and Bratt simply comment, “The wives of most yakuza men are also tattooed, although they usually have smaller, more feminine designs.” Though it is not the purpose of this project to examine this relationship, the idea of women in tattooing itself could be another project that explores not only how women appropriate symbols of masculinity to create their own identity but also concepts of beauty and body image. What makes a woman beautiful and does she lose that beauty as she mars her skin? We can assume that man women choose to get tattoos for reasons similar to those of men: to express pride and perseverance, to be uniquely identified within a group, and for their aesthetic appeal. In *Life with Shisei*, Horiyoshi comments, “I don’t mean to exclude women here, but I don’t think women get shisei to flaunt their femininity. Women get it because they think it’s beautiful or cool. I guess it gives them the image of a

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100 Poysden and Bratt, 155.
female outlaw.”101 Women are not impervious to the desire to look “cool.” Still, looking at the
tattoos that adorn the backs and arms of the photographed young women, we see similar motifs
and the influence of history that characterize the tattoos of yakuza men; perhaps they too are
driven by a desire to participate in the common culture.102

**Brilliance in Shadow**

Despite her positive view on traditional tattooing, Yamada also argues that because social
linkages are no longer as important in the present society, personalization and individuality have
largely replaced the social and collective meanings of tattoos (such as criminality and tribal
customs).103 In a sense, the new meanings of tattooing reflect the ever increasing distance
between people in our globalized society. For Yamada, there is something special about the
margin that gives tattooing its unique value; she echoes the sentiments felt by Horiyoshi III.
Citing Osamu Matsuda, a deceased professor from Hosei University and expert in shisei,
Horiyoshi says, “Shisei should be reserved for the special few in order to preserve its
value…making them commonplace would be an insult to tattoos…it will jeopardize the aesthetic
appreciation of shisei.”104 Again, as contact with tattooing increases, the practice loses some of
its value and meaning; it becomes simply another commodity to be consumed in the (now
globalized) market. Horiyoshi is particularly perturbed by people who flaunt their tattoos in
public spaces or on television; he believes that it is “disrespectful.”105 Because of the very nature
of the traditional tattoo, usually ending at the wrists and ankles with a blank strip of skin running
down the length of the torso, they are meant to be covered. Even more bluntly, Horiyoshi states,

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102 See Figures 9-11 in Appendix.
103 Yamada, 325.
104 Horiyoshi III, “Life with Shisei.”
105 Ibid.
“Shisei won’t genuinely shine unless there’s an element of shadow...The real attraction of shisei cannot come through if it’s exposed too much in the light. You need a feeling of the underground to truly convey the beauty and history that’s behind them.”

This personal belief also leads Horiyoshi to side with the right wing mayor of Osaka, Toru Hashimoto, in his crackdown on tattooed civil servants. Without the black background of the photographs used for this work, the colors of each tattoo would not radiate quite as brilliantly on the page and without the billowing folds of a kimono, an uncovered tattoo becomes ordinary. In a more metaphoric sense, we could even say that without the “shadows” of the yakuza, tattooing would not have had its chance to shine.

Aside from lifting the ban on tattooing, the American occupation also indirectly allowed the yakuza to flourish and gain even more ground in post war Japan. Kaplan and Dubro point out that during this time, not only was the black market thriving because of American rationing policies, but the forcibly disarmed civil police could not check criminal activity. What is most startling is that the occupation forces at times even willingly assisted the gangs and their leaders, most likely because of their anti-Communist leanings. As fights broke out across Japan between Japanese nationals and foreign minorities for control over the black market and limited supplies, the yakuza often swept onto the battlefield to clash with “evil foreigners” (i.e. the Koreans, Chinese, and Taiwanese in Japan) who were taking advantage of a “prostrate Japan;” reaffirming the already romanticized image of the yakuza, stories of these “champion[s] of the common people” readily spread across Japan.

This depiction of the yakuza creates a paradox; how do we explain the overrepresentation of foreigners in yakuza syndicates if they were the

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106 Ibid.
107 N.a, “Shogun of Osaka.”
108 Kaplan and Dubro, 32.
109 Ibid. and Kaplan and Dubro, 40.
110 Kaplan and Dubro, 36.
ones against whom the yakuza were protecting Japan? (Once again, how would these minorities in the yakuza resolve their double consciousness as they presumably clashed against their own people?) This heroic portrayal of the yakuza could possibly be an exaggeration of regular gang wars and fights to control the black market. It seems likely that the yakuza in post war Japan were capitalizing on an economic opportunity; to control the markets and make profits in a weakened nation, they needed to eliminate competition from foreign gangs. It might have only been incidental that they were “helping” Japanese citizens by doing so.

As they steadily added unemployed and recently discharged young men to their ranks, the yakuza also began to strengthen their ties with right wing politicians in Japan’s slowly recuperating government and advanced key political careers with their power and wealth. When Japan seemed to be well on the path of reconstruction, the yakuza began to branch out in their illegal activities, focusing less on black market necessities and taking more control of luxury goods and entertainment (both legal and illegal).111 After some time, the sheer size and influence of the gangs prompted the government to take more direct action to regulate their activities.

In 1991, Japan issued the Boryokudan Countermeasures Act, a law against organized crime, meant to address criminal activities that the police had had difficulty controlling. By setting up a system of prefectural public safety commissions, the government could officially mark specific yakuza groups as “boryokudan groups” (“violence groups”) and allow law enforcement officials to more assertively intervene in yakuza fund raising schemes and to order punishment.112 Any group designated as such based on the number its members with criminal records could not “…engage in land speculation, settle and accident out of court, solicit

111 Kaplan and Dubro, 61.
donations or demand loans, work as a subcontractor, or request delivery of goods.”\textsuperscript{113} The law also prohibits the designated syndicates from recruiting juveniles and even prohibits yakuza from certain legal activities.\textsuperscript{114} Added to this legal pressure was the 1999 collapse of the economic bubble of Japan’s real estate and equities market\textsuperscript{115}; this severely impacted yakuza financial operations and put pressure on individual yakuza to stay afloat during the economic crisis. Events such as these greatly took a toll on the public image of the yakuza and their willingness to ostentatiously display their syndicate affiliations, a gesture which has made it much harder for the police to monitor gang activity. No longer do gangs display membership details and syndicate crests on the walls of their offices; instead, access to gang offices has been further restricted while the number of hidden members has grown.\textsuperscript{116} By pushing the yakuza even further underground, the law is actually creating a more international, mafia like organization. Miyazaki points out that the main purpose of the law is not only to target yakuza membership and sources of income but to exterminate the yakuza entirely; it is an effort to “…destroy the environment that allows yakuza to survive.”\textsuperscript{117} One of the most alarming implications of this law in Miyazaki’s opinion is that certain groups can be designated as non-citizens—and therefore deprived of their constitutional rights and even their human rights. Miyazaki writes,

“…the law drew a clear distinction between yakuza and citizens. One lawyer commented, ‘It’s a sophisticated version of the wartime concept of hikokumin (unpatriotic citizen) applied in a contemporary setting.’

‘So yakuza aren’t Japanese citizens, according to the law?’ I asked.

‘In a word, no,’ he replied.\textsuperscript{118}

\textsuperscript{113} Miyazaki, 404.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{115} Peter Hill, “The Changing Face of the Yakuza,” Global Crime 6, no. 1 (Sep. 8, 2010), 19 http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/174405704200297007, 103.
\textsuperscript{116} Hill, 106.
\textsuperscript{117} Miyazaki, 404.
\textsuperscript{118} Miyazaki, 405.
Considering that yakuza have existed side by side with Japanese society for centuries and that through their mannerisms, structure, and symbolic practices they show themselves to be undeniably Japanese, this law calls into question the definition of “Japanese” itself and reserves it for those who conform to the expectations of the government and public opinion. Miyazaki sees the enactment of this law as a result of ignorance about the conditions and discrimination that give rise to the yakuza; it seems as if this law may unintentionally provoke a demand for social reform, instead of wiping away the issue of organized crime.

Hoping to move more clandestinely, yakuza today drive more subdued cars, dress differently, and some even go so far as to have their traditional tattoos removed. Generally, since the tattoo boom began, the number of yakuza receiving their trademark full body suits has decreased;\textsuperscript{119} Yamada asserts that the decline in yakuza clientele is a direct result of the economic recession and the Countermeasures Act.\textsuperscript{120} In Okazaki’s opinion, a full body suit was the “ultimate label” for the yakuza; now, “It’s even rumored that syndicates such as Yamaguchi [the largest syndicate, particularly targeted by the police after the enactment of the law] even discourage conspicuous irezumi so their members can better assimilate into normal society.” It seems as if in an attempt at self preservation in economically trying times, the yakuza are abandoning tradition, sacrificing parts of their unique identity to continue functioning. In another sense, this could be interpreted as a move by the yakuza to further conform to society (without sacrificing their principal way of life).\textsuperscript{121} Returning to the economics of tattooing, considering that a full body suit tattoo has been estimated at anywhere between $5000 to $30,000 (or more) USD, the financial burden may be too much for a modern yakuza to bear. Other medical problems, may arise in conjunction with tattooing, particularly liver problems such as hepatitis,\textsuperscript{119}\textsuperscript{120}\textsuperscript{121}

\textsuperscript{119} Okazaki, n.p.
\textsuperscript{120} Yamada, 327-328.
\textsuperscript{121} Yamada, 323.
compounded because of alcohol abuse. Kaplan and Dubro put it bluntly, “…the younger yakuza…opt instead for a simple line drawing or phrase on their upper arm, more similar to the tattoos of Western youths. The reason…is not a change in aesthetics: the old style tattoos cost a fortune, and are simply no longer worth either the pain or the financial stress.”

On top of these practical concerns, some would argue that the symbolism of tattoos has changed as more non yakuza get traditional tattoos; Horitoku posits that as tattoos become more mainstream, “regular people want tattoos and walk around with them showing because it looks cool. So it eradicates the meaning for the yakuza, who were doing it to scare people.” It is interesting to consider the possibility that tattooing has lost some degree of meaning for the yakuza while mainstream society still holds a stigma against body art.

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122 Poysden and Bratt, 155.
123 Kaplan and Dubro, 327-328.
124 Okazaki, n.p.
Conclusion

Let the needle of curiosity pierce the skin and sink through the flesh. Drive it deeper and deeper into the layers until the hidden meaning is found. This project began as an exploration of the history of Japanese body suit tattooing and why the yakuza, a criminal organization with undoubtedly clandestine operations, would choose to identify themselves with such ostentatious decoration. What was the appeal? As the reasoning for most people, Horiyoshi III points to the long history of tattooing, its striking visuals, and its appreciation for and beautification of the body.\footnote{Horiyoshi III, “Life with Shisei.”} For the yakuza, however, the main purpose, “…the real appeal is being able to flaunt your manliness. Your pride as a man. Flaunt it. Maintain it.” Traditional tattooing is an examination of manhood, and a challenge to surpass “physical pain with mental strength.”\footnote{Horiyoshi III, “Life with Shisei.”} It is a display of individual courage and dedication to the group. Still, meaning does not end there; by absorbing markers of national identity through the ink in their skin, the yakuza create a social commitment to two groups: their individual syndicate and to Japan as a whole. Tattoos are the means by which the yakuza identify themselves, their “brothers and sisters” and symbolically communicate their understanding and appreciation of their common culture. Before I could fully understand a yakuza’s concept of identity, I would have to interview him or her myself, but perhaps in reading what they show on their skin, I have unearthed some clues. In their expression of a dual identity, the yakuza could be seen as almost conformist as they adopt a specific, mainstream canon of culture. What makes them break out of this mold, however, is the simple act of placing these images onto their skin. The artwork (i.e. the figures, colors, motifs of the tattoos) itself is not the determining factor of their exclusion from society; it is the art of
tattooing, of violating the sanctity of one’s skin and body, that prompts this exclusion. In a broader sense, we have to wonder: what are Japanese values and expectations regarding the body? Horitoku remarked, “I never thought [tattooing] would become this popular, but that’s okay. Fashion is fashion, and this is fashion that doesn’t go away.” Tattooing clearly has a place in Japanese society today, but it is not as a significant marker of culture for those outside of the underground world of tattoo artists and their clients. As popular culture continues to co-opt symbols of the tattooed subculture and tattooing becomes more mainstream, perhaps some of this tension is lost alongside the meaning of tattoos.

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127 Okazaki, n.p.
Appendix

Captions include: Artist’s Name (if known), Tattoo Parlor/Studio, and Location (Titles in parenthesis are my own).

Figure 4: Horitoku, Horitoku Studio, Tokyo (Shinjuku). Photo credit: Geoff Johnson.
Figure 5: (Suit of Nine Dragons) Horiyoshi III, Horiyoshi III Studio, Yokohama. Photo Credit: Geoff Johnson.
Figure 6: Various Tattooers, Tattoo Summit, Toyohashi. Photo Credit: Martin Hladik.
Figure 7: Madoka, Catclaw Studio, Kyoto. Photo Credit: John Harte.
Figure 8: Close-Up of Left Arm of Previous Young Man.
Figure 9: Various Tattooers, Tattoo Summit, Toyohashi. Photo Credit: Martin Hladik.
Figure 10: Mutsuo or Three Tides Tattoo, TTT, Osaka. Photo Credit: John Harte.
Figure 11: Various Tattooers, Tattoo Summit, Toyohashi. Photo Credit: Martin Hladik.
Bibliography


