



## **Fashioning Tattooed Bodies: An Exploration of Japan's Tattoo Stigma**

*By John Skutlin, Chinese University of Hong Kong*

### **Abstract:**

This article uses a cultural anthropological approach to examine tattooing stigma in contemporary Japan, particularly in terms of how the stigma has developed and how tattooed individuals engage in various legitimization maneuvers to cope with it. Tattooing has a long history in Japan, and tattoo culture saw a major efflorescence in the Edo period (1603-1868). However, unlike many Western countries, where most tattoos are widely accepted as expressions of individual style and aesthetics, a confluence of historical and cultural factors have resulted in a general antipathy to the practice in Japan, particularly due to its association with yakuza organized crime groups. As increasing numbers of young people go under the needle for what they see as artistic “fashion tattoos,” reconciliatory strategies must be deployed in order to maintain social cohesion and assure adherence to group norms even while violating them. Through historical accounts and ethnographic data, this paper thus elucidates the complicated nature of stigma in Japan and the specific ways in which individuals fashion both their bodies and their strategies to legitimize themselves, showing how efforts to conceal tattoos – even when only partially successful – can be an effective means of reconciling themselves with the general society around them.

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# Fashioning Tattooed Bodies: An Exploration of Japan's Tattoo Stigma

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## Introduction

The words “Japanese tattoo” may, for those outside of Japan who possess even a passing familiarity with the country, conjure up images of fierce dragons, leaping carp, or sword-wielding heroes against a backdrop of roiling waves and swirling clouds. In the popular imagination, such images are likely to adorn the hulking bodies of intimidating men with hidden pasts darker than the sunglasses that they sport even indoors. Some of those less familiar with the history of tattooing in Japan may even casually call the style “yakuza tattooing” with reference to the organized crime members so infamous for acquiring this particular form of decorative body modification. Due in large part to the explosive proliferation of yakuza films in Japan since the 1960s and, more recently, popular video game series depicting the crime groups, *wabori* 和彫 (Japanese-style tattooing) has had its image as an antisocial “mark of disaffiliation”<sup>1</sup> (and, paradoxically, “affiliation” with less desirable social elements) firmly cemented in the public mindset. To put it plainly, tattoos in Japan have something of an image problem.

Since at least the 1970s, the U.S. is said to have undergone a “tattoo renaissance”<sup>2</sup> that normalized tattoos (for the most part) as fashion, eventually reaching the point where a 2015 survey found that three in ten American adults now have tattoos.<sup>3</sup> Japan has also witnessed a comparative rise in the number of individuals going under the needle, yet without any concomitant increase in acceptability of the practice among the general



**Figure 1.** Example of Japanese style tattooing by Horitsuna (Tattoo Studio Desperado).

1. Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963), 143-47.

2. Arnold Rubin, *Marks of Civilization: Artistic Transformations of the Human Body* (Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, University of California, 1988).

3. The Harris Poll, “Tattoo Takeover: Three in Ten Americans Have Tattoos, and Most Don’t Stop at Just One,” accessed January 9, 2017, [http://www.theharrispoll.com/health-and-life/Tattoo\\_Takeover.html](http://www.theharrispoll.com/health-and-life/Tattoo_Takeover.html).

public. Due to the negative attitudes toward tattooing and institutionalized discrimination against those with tattoos in Japan, the concept of stigma becomes particularly relevant. Erving Goffman has described stigma as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting”<sup>4</sup> and that causes the person possessing such an attribute to be relegated to a less desirable category of social identity. In Japan, having a tattoo can certainly be “deeply discrediting,” since tattooed skin may be viewed as an intentional mark of affiliation with antisocial or criminal elements (and thus disaffiliation with conventional society), often resulting in fright and discomfort among those who are not tattooed when visible. Having a tattoo in Japan makes one an *irezumi*<sup>5</sup> *no kata* 入れ墨の方 (tattooed person), a term often seen on signs prohibiting tattooed individuals from entering hot springs (onsen 温泉),<sup>6</sup> public baths, pools, beaches, gyms, golf courses, and some restaurants, and can even limit employment, housing, and insurance options. A tattoo can therefore serve as a visible sign indicating that the person should be avoided, which will then cause discomfort and fear in those viewing it. While the same can be said about tattoos at many points in the history of the U.S. and Europe, it is clear that, particularly in the U.S., tattooing has become increasingly acceptable. It has even been reported that 71% of parents in the U.S. are comfortable with visible tattoos on their children’s primary school teachers or pediatricians.<sup>7</sup> In comparison, in 2012, the mayor of Osaka at the time instituted a survey of tattoos among public workers in the city and threatened those who had them with dismissal from their jobs, regardless of their visibility.<sup>8</sup> While it has recently been ruled that tattooing is not a medical act and thus may be legally practiced by those who are not licensed physicians, the prosecution in the case has made a final appeal to Japan’s Supreme Court to challenge the ruling.<sup>9</sup> In spite of the legal gray area

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4. Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, 3.

5. The Japanese characters used for *irezumi* (tattoo) can vary, and can refer to any style of tattooing (although it is most often associated with Japanese-style tattooing). In many cases, 入れ墨 (or 入墨) is used, which carries a particularly negative connotation because it is the standard rendering of the term for punitive tattooing practiced on criminals during the Edo period. (See the following section.)

6. Hot springs are popular tourist destinations and bathing in them (in the nude) is a form of relaxation in Japan that is generally considered to be imbued with aspects of Japanese culture. The banning of tattoos and the simultaneous desire to increase foreign tourism to such facilities have, in light of the higher percentage of tattooed non-Japanese, led to some efforts to address the issue by Japanese Tourism Agency. For more, see John M. Skutlin, “Japan, Ink(ed): Tattooing as Decorative Body Modification in Japan” (PhD diss., The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2017).

7. The Harris Poll, “Tattoo Takeover: Three in Ten Americans Have Tattoos, and Most Don’t Stop at Just One.”

8. “Hashimoto Clashes with Osaka Officials Over Tattoo Survey,” *Japan Today*, May 23, 2012, <http://www.japantoday.com/category/politics/view/hashimoto-clashes-with-osaka-officials-over-tattoo-survey>.

9. Nichitere News24, “Tatū saiban muzai hanketsu de jōkoku タトゥー裁判 無罪判決で上告” (Tattoo Court Case: Challenging the Innocent Ruling in the Supreme Court), November 28, 2018. <http://www.news24.jp/nnn/news16222311.html?fbclid=IwAR1K2EzU4lr5FrS9o9Gmx0ktokLEdo5si7-NdCdNAHY-zL2oVwaU1fnwj8YE>. For more on the issue of tattooing’s legality in Japan, see John M. Skutlin, “Japan,

tattooing occupies, the number of tattooists and (by extension) their clients continues to rise in Japan.

In light of the proliferation of tattooed individuals despite such antipathy, this paper will briefly trace the history of tattooing in Japan together with the development of its associated stigma, and then shed light on the ways in which individuals seek to manage that stigma through various legitimization maneuvers and reconciliatory strategies. This includes the positioning of non-wabori tattoos as “fashion tattoos” performed by “tattoo artists” (rather than the Japanese term *horishi* 彫師) in order to fit into discourses of self-expression and self-determination, as well as normative gendered behavior and consumption patterns. *Yōbori* 洋彫 (“Western” or non-Japanese-style tattooing) and *wan-pointo* ワンポイント (“one-point,” i.e., an individual tattooed image applied without connection to a larger design) tattoos allow a linguistic and stylistic distinction between the widely vilified *wabori* style of *irezumi* and the more neutral designs of *tatū* タトゥー (the loan word for tattoo, used almost exclusively for non-Japanese-style tattoos) that can be viewed as forms of self-accessorizing. While not devoid of stigmatization, such *fasshon tatū* ファッションタトゥー (“fashion tattoos”) allow the tattooed individuals to deploy stigma management strategies and legitimization maneuvers that would be unavailable to those tattooed in the *wabori* style, particularly in the case of women. Furthermore, it will be shown how tattooed individuals in Japan often make strategic efforts to conceal their body modifications not only in the workplace, but also in public spaces in general. Such reconciliatory strategies are a two-way street, involving (usually) reciprocal bilateral exchanges to maintain social cohesion. Through an analysis of historical accounts and the author’s ethnographic data gleaned from interviews with fifty-eight individuals and extensive participant observation conducted in Tokyo, Osaka, and other cities in Japan from 2014 to 2017,<sup>10</sup> it is revealed how legitimization strategies in Japan are both similar to and substantially different from those often employed in the U.S. and other Western countries, with “fashion” being used to position tattoos as marks of fashionable self-expression rather than (dis)affiliation, but nonetheless remaining hidden as appropriate in order to adhere to dominant group standards and social norms.

## The Complicated Position of Tattoos as “Art” and “Fashion”

Margo DeMello has drawn on extensive ethnographic accounts of tattooists and enthusiasts to delineate the historical vicissitudes of tattooing and its status in U.S. society, tracing its development from the purview of sailors and circus freaks to a generally positive

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Ink(ed): Tattooing as Decorative Body Modification in Japan.”

10. This research was conducted at The Chinese University of Hong Kong’s Department of Japanese Studies under the auspices of the Hong Kong PhD Fellowship Scheme and with the support of the Nissin Scholarship and Haruna Scholarship. Informants were discovered using existing networks from previous in-depth research on Goth subculture in Japan and snowball sampling. The researcher’s BA in Japanese language and culture and MPhil in the anthropology of Japan, combined with his own experience with tattoos and body modification, allowed access to individuals and spaces that would otherwise be closed off to “outsiders.”



symbol of masculine bravado and patriotism when tattooed on soldiers and blue-collar workers, and then its later use among bikers and rebels.<sup>11</sup> She then points out its more recent appropriation as a widely legitimized form of artistic and spiritual self-expression by a middle-to-upper-class demographic that has systematically attempted to distance itself from and efface the lower-class origins of the practice, making the tattoo “in a sense, sanitized or stripped of its working class roots, in order to ensure that the tattoo is now fit for middle-class consumption...[through] a new set of meanings, derived primarily from non-Western cultures, giving the tattoo an exotic, primitive flavor.” It should be noted, however, that this process began much earlier and has much to do with the obsession with Japanese tattooing among travelers and European nobility.<sup>12</sup> The cultural construction of tattooing as something to be viewed as “art” (and thus palatable to middle-class consumers) is further examined in Mary Kosut’s research on tattooing and the art of asylum inmates, both of which are practices that have been generally viewed in psychological literature as pathological and deviant but were later redrawn as aesthetically and artistically legitimate or significant as a result of structural changes and shifting institutional discourses.<sup>13</sup> She explicates how the adoption of the “skin-as-canvas” metaphor by news media, as well as the deployment of terms like “tattoo artist” and “tattoo studio” by those in the industry, contributed to a rising discourse of tattoos as an art form, a discourse that was further substantiated by an increasing number of university-trained artists taking up the needle from the 1970s to 1980s.<sup>14</sup> Kosut states that tattooing thereby achieved a “quasi-legitimacy,” whereby the practice “has been granted a degree of academic legitimacy through recent scholarship, and tattoo artifacts have attained aesthetic-cultural legitimacy via exhibitions in the highly influential New York City art world.”<sup>15</sup>

It should be noted, however, that the widely accepted narrative of tattoo’s movement from the fringes of society to the “mainstream” must be viewed with a certain grain of salt, as astutely pointed out by tattoo historian Matt Lodder, who has discovered numerous examples, dating from as far back as the second half of the nineteenth century, of sensationalist headlines declaring tattoos to be on the rise.<sup>16</sup> While scholarly works on the development of tattoos in a “Western” context have often constructed a perhaps

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11. Margo DeMello, *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

12. See, for example, Koyama Noboru, *Nihon no irezumi to Eikoku ōshitsu* (Meiji ki kara Daichiji Sekai Taisen made) (The Japanese Tattoo and the British Royal Family: From the Meiji Period to WWI) (Tokyo: Fujiwara Shoten, 2010) and Christine Guth, *Longfellow’s Tattoos: Tourism, Collecting, and Japan*. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004).

13. Mary Kosut, “Mad Artists and Tattooed Perverts: Deviant Discourse and the Social Construction of Cultural Categories,” *Deviant Behavior* 27, no. 1 (2006): 73-95.

14. *Ibid.*, 87.

15. *Ibid.*, 75.

16. Quoted in Laurence Cawley, “People Always Say the Same Thing about Tattoos,” BBC News, February 3, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-25330947>.

illusory history of tattooing's transformation from a marginalized practice to an artistically legitimized and decidedly middle-class body project, there has been a dearth of academic explorations into how tattoos have evolved throughout Japan's history, and this paper represents a limited attempt to address this lacuna in the literature. It must be remembered that tattoos have been a part of the history of what is now the Japan's archipelago's since time immemorial. By the late 1700s, when the word "tattoo" (from the Tahitian *tatau*) was first introduced into the English lexicon (although it had long existed in the Western world in various forms)<sup>17</sup> to describe the tribal practices encountered among Pacific islanders, the inhabitants of Edo (now Tokyo) were already honing the practice of decorative tattooing on the level of a popular art form in an urban setting. Traces of tribal tattooing could be found only in the far north and south of the Japanese islands, in areas that were not even yet a part of "Japan" at the time.

Tattoos were thus not always marks of deviance or fashionable accoutrements on the Japanese archipelago, and archaeological findings from the Jōmon period (approx. 14,000~300 BCE) would seem to indicate that ritualistic decorative body modification was not uncommon among the islands' inhabitants. While Japan's humid climate has prevented the formation of any naturally mummified human remains, archaeological evidence shows that the Jōmon people wore numerous forms of jewelry and accessories, had pierced ears (among both men and women), and practiced ritual tooth ablation and extraction.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, highly stylized figurines created from clay (*dogū*) from the period portray human figures adorned with various decorative marks that are believed to represent ritual scarification or tattooing.<sup>19</sup> Additional evidence is provided by Chinese written records from around the second and third centuries CE. For example, the *Wei Zhi* 魏志 (*Records of Wei* [c. 297 CE]) indicates that, in the ancient state of Wa on the Japanese archipelago, tattoos were common among women and men of all ages and are thought to have originally served as amulets for fishermen and shell collectors who hoped to ward off attacks by sharks.<sup>20</sup> The continued contact with China, however, represented a turning point for Japan's inhabitants and for its tattoos as well. As Chinese cultural, religious, and political influence shaped Japan's development, negative attitudes toward tattooing took hold as well. As a result, any tribal tattooing practices on the main islands were either obliterated or pushed to the northern and southern territories that are now known as Hokkaido and the islands of Okinawa, where they continued on until at least the nineteenth century.

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17. See Anna Felicity Friedman, "The Cook Myth: Common Tattoo History Debunked," *Tattoohistorian*. com, April 5, 2014, <https://tattoohistorian.com/2014/04/05/the-cook-myth-common-tattoo-history-debunked>.

18. Masami Takenaka, Kazuharu Mine, Kazuhiko Tsuchimochi, and Kazuyuki Shimada, "[Foragers and Farmers in the Japanese Islands] Tooth Removal during Ritual Tooth Ablation in the Jomon Period." *Bulletin of the Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association* 21:0 (2001): 49.

19. Jun Takayama, *Jōmonjin no irezumi – Kodai no shūzoku wo saguru* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1969).

20. Yoshimi Yamamoto, "From Early Times to the Tattoo Boom During the Edo Period," in *Tattoo*, ed. Aude Gros de Beler (Paris: musée du quai Branly, 2014), 88.

Tattooing had not completely disappeared, however, instead taking what might be called a rather Kafkaesque turn: in the earliest accounts in the *Kojiki* 古事記 (*Records of Ancient Matters*, 712) and *Nihon Shoki* 日本書紀 (*Chronicles of Ancient Japan*, 720) it is described how tattooing was mostly a punitive practice used for marking criminals.<sup>21</sup> Tattooing as punishment for various crimes was a practice most likely introduced from China, and it was primarily in this form that tattooing continued up until the Edo period (1603-1868), although there is evidence that some priests of the Pure Land sect of Amida Buddhism tattooed the figures of Bosatsu Kannon or Shakyamuni on their bodies prior to that period.<sup>22</sup> As can be seen from the historical accounts above, Japan has had its own history of tribal, punitive, and decorative tattooing since the Jōmon period, but there is relatively little awareness of such practices among those not interested in tattoo trivia, and thus the Edo period is generally considered the start of Japan's tattoo history in the public imagination.

### *Tattooing as "Art" from the Edo period to the Meiji period*

The Edo period (1603-1868) brought with it a plethora of epoch-making changes in Japan's society, as the various domains of the archipelago's main islands were unified under a central government. Castle towns had appeared prior to the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600 and the ascendance of the Tokugawa shogunate to power. Under the peace of unification these towns turned into thriving centers of commerce that brought considerable affluence to the townspeople, which then allowed them to engage more fully in popular entertainment, including art forms that would become symbols of Japan's traditional culture such as kabuki and woodblock printmaking. As townspeople, particularly the merchant class, became increasingly powerful economically, the Edo government was prompted to enforce stricter rules, both to ensure that those in the lower economic classes did not rise too far above their stations, at least visibly, and also to maintain a moral social order in line with the neo-Confucian ideals they espoused. Such rules included sumptuary regulations that defined the types of clothing that those of particular classes were allowed to wear. However, these rules were routinely flouted and largely ignored,<sup>23</sup> and colorful figurative tattoos became just one of many ways for those in lower social classes to indulge in deviant behavior in the face of a restrictive government.

The sources of many of these images can be found in the works of *ukiyo-e* 浮世絵 – "pictures of the floating world" – intricately engraved woodblock prints that depicted the vibrant city life of Edo and its popular culture, including scenes from famous novels and Kabuki plays. Initially depicting the mutability and impermanence (*mujō* 無常) of human life, such images came to embody the hedonistic pursuit of worldly delights in the pleasure

21. Yoshimi Yamamoto, "'Irezumi': The Japanese Tattoo Unveiled," *Nippon.com*, January 30, 2017, <http://www.nippon.com/en/views/b06701/>.

22. Willem van Gulik, "Japan Tattoo, A Brief History of Its Origins and Development," in *Japan Tattoo: Tattoos in Japanese Prints*, ed. Henk Herwig (Leiden, The Netherlands: Society for Japanese Arts, 2009), 9.

23. Donald H. Shively, "Sumptuary Regulation and Status in Early Tokugawa Japan," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 25 (1964): 123-64.

quarters and theaters of Edo. Those who carved such images were known as *horishi* 彫師 (master engravers), and it is believed that these artists were responsible for the designs of many of the larger tattoos, until this work was eventually taken over by the tattooists themselves (also known as *horishi*). While, there are no historical records explicitly linking the two professions beyond their shared titles,<sup>24</sup> at least one famous woodblock print artist is said to have been tattooed across his back, and the influence of his works on tattooing in the Edo period is indisputable.<sup>25</sup> The artist in question was Utagawa Kuniyoshi 歌川国芳 (1797-1861), who released a series of prints based on a famous Chinese tale that simultaneously launched a tattoo boom and helped to elevate the artistry of tattooing in the Edo period to previously unseen levels.<sup>26</sup>

The Chinese story in question was *Shuihu Zhuan* 水滸傳 (*Water Margin*), known in Japan as *Suikoden* and translated into Japanese as early as 1757 by Okajima Kanzan 岡島冠山 (d. 1727), which tells the pseudo-historical account of 108 righteous outlaws and their exploits during the Song Dynasty (960-1279) in the face of a corrupt government.<sup>27</sup> Among the many “heroes” in the saga, six are tattooed in the original novel, while Kuniyoshi’s sixty-nine-print series *Tsūzoku Suikoden gōketsu hyakuhachi-nin no hitori* 通俗水滸傳濠傑百八人一個 (*The 108 Heroes of the Popular Suikoden – All Told*, 1827-30) incorporated fifteen tattooed characters, including Shi Jin 史進 (Japanese: Shishin; marked with nine dragons across his body) and Yan Qing 燕青 (Japanese: Ensei; adorned with peonies and a temple lion).<sup>28</sup> Kabuki actors were also sometimes portrayed in popular prints with intricate makeup made to imitate the tattoo work of the *Water Margin* heroes.<sup>29</sup> Accuracy to the original tale aside, many in the *shitamachi* 下町 (literally “lower city”) downtown areas of Edo, including artisans and manual labors, recreated these works on their bodies, sporting colorful representations similar to those of the fierce heroes of the *Water Margin*. Their general dissatisfaction with the ruling class led to a sense of solidarity with such heroes and formed a distinct undercurrent beneath tattooing’s rising wave of popularity.<sup>30</sup> In Japan’s Edo period, the relationship between tattoos and print art became clearly established, effectively overshadowing its use as a punitive measure.

Nonetheless, tattoos were still associated with the lower working classes – manual laborers, palanquin bearers, mail runners, and firefighters. Further complicating the status of tattooing in Japan was the eventual ban that accompanied the country’s transformation

24. Yamamoto, “From Early Times to the Tattoo Boom During the Edo Period,” 89.

25. van Gulik, “Japan Tattoo, A Brief History of Its Origins and Development,” 14.

26. Donald Richie and Ian Buruma, *The Japanese Tattoo* (New York: Weatherhill, 1980), 21.

27. Inge Klompmakers, “Kuniyoshi’s Tattooed Heroes of the Suikoden: Righteous Rebels from China in Japanese Prints,” in *Japan Tattoo: Tattoos in Japanese Prints*, ed. by Henk Herwig (Leiden, The Netherlands: Society for Japanese Arts, 2009), 18-19.

28. Ibid., 21-23.

29. Herwig, Henk, ed., *Japan Tattoo: Tattoos in Japanese Prints* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Society for Japanese Arts, 2009), 79.

30. Manami Okazaki, *Wabori: Traditional Japanese Tattoo* (Hong Kong: Kingyo Books, 2013), 11.



into a modern nation during the nineteenth century. While the Edo period witnessed a veritable golden age of tattooing in Japan, it quickly gave way to a new era of repression of the practice. The Meiji period (1868-1912) was tumultuous and turbulent, as Japan's former government under the shogunate was uprooted and replaced with a new regime under the Meiji emperor. At the same time, the nation struggled to modernize and industrialize in the face of increasing encroachment by Western powers, particularly since Commodore Matthew Perry's "black ships" had forced the country to open its ports to international trade in 1854. Japan found itself engaged in a game of "catch up" with the imperialist Western nations, a game that it engaged in with much gusto by rapidly assimilating not only Western technologies, but also Western fashions and eating habits. Appearing "civilized" to the powerful nations that arrived on their shores thus assumed high priority. The Meiji government determined that tattooing was likely to be seen as "barbaric" if left unchecked, since rickshaw pullers and porters, many of whom worked nearly naked in the sweltering heat and humidity of Tokyo summers, were often colorfully adorned with highly visible tattoos.<sup>31</sup> Thus, in 1872, the Meiji government enacted a stricter law that banned both the act of tattooing and the public display of tattoos. Violations of this law could result in the imprisonment of the tattooists and confiscation or destruction of their equipment.<sup>32</sup>

The legislation in question, namely, the Misdemeanor Law (*Ishiki kaitō jōrei* 違式註違条例), was not related exclusively to tattoos. As Kawano has pointed out, the law prohibited commoners (especially women) from appearing in public in varying stages of undress or partial dress, and also outlawed mixed bathing. As a result, "ordinary people's bodies became the objects of intense sartorial surveillance as new rules for displaying bodies, in and out of clothing, came into effect."<sup>33</sup> Thus, tattooing was just one of the deviant bodily practices being targeted, and a tattooed body exposed in public would thus pose a double transgression: first by being in a state of undress, and second by being adorned with a bodily marking thought to be barbaric in the eyes of Westerners. Kawano points out that, like the sumptuary regulations mentioned above, the law was not entirely effective and merely encouraged many individuals of the period to be strategic about their states of (un)dress, such as making sure to be "properly" clothed only when police forces were likely to pass by. Such strategies of covering the body are relevant in the case of contemporary tattoos as well, as will be seen below. Kawano's point, however, is that the efforts of the Meiji government to modernize so as to appear civilized in the eyes of Western observers, while not entirely altering the practices and perceptions of Meiji Japanese, nonetheless "impoverished rich

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31. Pascal Bagot, "From the End of Edo to the Present Day," in *Tattoo*, ed. Aude Gros de Beler (Paris: musée du quai Branly, 2014), 97.

32. Ibid.

33. Satsuki Kawano, "Japanese Bodies and Western Ways of Seeing in Late 19th Century," in *Dirt, Undress, and Difference: Critical Perspectives on the Body's Surface*, ed. Adline Masquelier (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 150.

but subtle ways of seeing practiced by Japanese actors.”<sup>34</sup> This notion of impoverished “ways of seeing” is highly relevant to tattoos as well. While *ukiyo-e* later gained international recognition as one of the Edo period’s great artistic traditions, the painstaking work of *horishi* using the human body as a canvas was erased from the public mindset by the ban that forced them to work underground or overseas.<sup>35</sup> However, together with their legalization in 1947 after the end of World War II and the enactment of the new Constitution of Japan, *irezumi* came into the spotlight once again, this time in a decidedly disreputable context.

### *The Yakuza Connection*

As mentioned above, for many people in Japan, the image of *wabori* Japanese-style tattooing is indelibly linked with the country’s powerful organized crime syndicates, the yakuza, and for good reason. The yakuza have, in various incarnations, been depicted on celluloid since the silent film era, when *bakuto* 博徒 (itinerant gamblers and some of the precursors to the modern-day yakuza) were shown as sympathetic, “noble outlaw” characters who flaunted authority and forged their own paths with honor. This basic format led to a genre that blossomed in the 1960s called *ninkyō eiga* 任侠映画, or “chivalry films.”<sup>36</sup> These films usually depicted the postwar yakuza as honorable bands of male comrades fighting for their gang loyalties in the face of corrupt authorities or unscrupulous rival gangs. Like the tales told in the *Water Margin* woodblock print series more than a century earlier, these narratives resonated powerfully with working-class men, many of whom had migrated to metropolitan areas from the countryside in search of jobs.<sup>37</sup> Feeling detached and unmoored in the face of the new and impersonal urban sprawl and lacking social networks, these men were often highly attracted to the stories depicting powerful bonds among male mafia members, who led lives based on seemingly obsolete yet positive notions of loyalty and personal honor.<sup>38</sup> A typical storyline would involve an honorable gangster being released from prison after many years, only to find that his female partner has left him and his gang is in disarray. A new and less scrupulous mob group has taken over, preying on the weak and trampling former loyalties. The honorable hero has no choice but to take on the rival gang in a spectacularly bloody fashion, usually perishing in the effort.<sup>39</sup> My research led me to view dozens of yakuza films, and I found that tattoos often made an appearance, even featuring in titles such as *Tattooed Life* (*Irezumi ichidai* 刺青一代, 1965). Many of the older cohort of

34. Ibid., 163.

35. See, for example, Yamamoto Yoshimi, “Hon Kon no Nihonjin horishitachi: 19-seikimatsu kara 20-seiki shotō made (The Japanese Tattooists of Hong Kong: From the End of the 19th Century to the Beginning of the 20th Century),” *Meiji University Bulletin, School of Political Science and Economics* 85, no. 3-4 (2017): 179-216.

36. Mark Schilling, *The Yakuza Movie Book: A Guide to Japanese Gangster Films* (Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press, 2003), 23.

37. Ibid., 24.

38. Ibid., 24.

39. Patrick Macias, *Tokyo Scope: The Japanese Cult Film Companion* (San Francisco: Cadence Books, 2001), 98.

tattooists that I had conversations with mentioned a fondness for these films and how they influenced their choice of career. It can be said that the image of yakuza presented in these films was, while not wholly positive, not entirely negative either.

This image changed rather radically in the 1970s, when the yakuza film developed in a new direction known as *jitsuroku eiga* 実録映画 (“actual record films”), which appeared on the scene after the *ninkyō eiga* of the past decades had waned in popularity. In contrast to the “chivalry films” of the 1960s, mafia members in these newer films were clearly portrayed as criminals. Their lives were often depicted as ruled by ruthlessness, raw ambition, and treachery, all conveyed through over-the-top violence—usually captured in a cinema verité style to lend a documentary feel to the proceedings—which frequently served as the star attraction.<sup>40</sup> These films were generally based on journalistic accounts of real events, or even the memoirs of yakuza members themselves, and landmark works include Fukasaku Kinji’s eight films in the *Battles Without Honor and Humanity* (*Jingi naki tatakai* 仁義なき戦い) series from 1973 to 1976.<sup>41</sup> Toei Studios was particularly prolific, releasing hundreds of titles through the 1960s and 1970s, and there were even attempts to bring the yakuza genre to the U.S. with titles like *The Tattooed Hit Man* (*Yamaguchi-gumi gaiden – Kyūshū shinkō sakusen* 山口組外伝 九州進攻作戦, 1974), but success in these overseas endeavors was limited.<sup>42</sup> The advent of home video systems in the 1980s led to a decline in theatrical releases, but the direct-to-video market kept the genre alive throughout the following decades. In addition, the 1990s and 2000s were punctuated by several high-profile theatrical releases from directors Kitano “Beat” Takeshi (e.g., *Boiling Point* [*San tai yon ekkusu jūgatsu* 3-4X10月, 1990], *Sonatine* [*Sonachine* ソナチネ, 1993], *Outrage* [*Autoreiji* アウトレイジ, 2010]) and Miike Takashi (e.g., *Dead or Alive* [*Deddo oa araibu hanzaisha* DEAD OR ALIVE 犯罪者, 1999], *Ichī the Killer* [*Koroshiya ichi* 殺し屋1, 2001], *Yakuza Apocalypse* [*Gokudō daisensō* 極道大戦争, 2015]). The genre was taken in a somewhat more serious and existential direction by the former, and in an irreverently witty, perversely stylized direction by the latter.

Yakuza films have thus been a highly accessible medium through which many Japanese are exposed to images of tattooed gangsters, and the popularity of such films, in combination with the high media profiles of bold and powerful yakuza families, ensured that the association of Japanese tattooing with illegal activities would be deeply entrenched in Japan’s popular imagination. The portrayal of tattoos onscreen (accomplished through makeup) was often highly realistic and detailed, lending a significant degree of verisimilitude to the fictional proceedings. It should be noted however, that although the image of organized crime and *wabori* became inextricably intertwined in the postwar era, this association was not immediate. As pointed out by tattoo scholar Yamamoto Yoshimi

40. Schilling, *The Yakuza Movie Book: A Guide to Japanese Gangster Films*, 33.

41. Ibid., 33.

42. Macias, *Tokyo Scope: The Japanese Cult Film Companion*, 110. Perhaps the most famous film to first introduce Western audiences to the image of tattooed yakuza gangsters is Sydney Pollack’s *The Yakuza* (1974), starring Robert Mitchum and Takakura Ken. A financial failure upon its release, it has since gained something of a cult following.

(and as noted by several of my informants), bodysuit tattoos were not an uncommon sight in Japan's *sentō* 銭湯, or public bathhouses, during the early postwar period where most Japanese needed to bathe in the absence of widespread indoor plumbing. Yamamoto<sup>43</sup> notes that individuals would have had the opportunity to encounter many tattooed non-criminals, like carpenters and manual laborers, in these public bathhouses.<sup>44</sup> However, the introduction of indoor plumbing and the simultaneous rise of yakuza films saw these images of harmless tattoo works on townsfolk was thoroughly supplanted by much more frightening associations with violent gangsters. Moreover, in 1991, when Japan's Anti-Organized Crime Law came into effect, in cooperation with its regulations, police forces worked with local businesses to drive the yakuza out of public spaces. Of course, since it would be somewhat difficult to recognize yakuza if they hid their tattoos and occasional missing fingers,<sup>45</sup> hot springs and some bathhouses would pre-emptively display signage prohibiting tattooed individuals, thereby effectively barring members of organized crime from gathering there. Prominent signage in many hot springs and public baths has ensured that the image of tattooed criminals is reinforced for all who enter such facilities on a daily basis. This stands in ironic contrast to the reality that very few yakuza are being tattooed today. Scholars like Yamada Mieko have reported that tattoos among yakuza have declined, with two of the artists she interviewed having only 50% of their clientele comprised of yakuza.<sup>46</sup> Others have reported percentages closer to



**Figure 2.** Japanese-style dragon back piece by Horitsuna (Tattoo Studio Desperado).

43. Quoted in Jon Mitchell, "Japan Inked: Should the Country Reclaim Its Tattoo Culture?," *The Japan Times*, May 3, 2014, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2014/05/03/lifestyle/japan-inked-country-reclaim-tattoo-culture#.Vmjfvd8rLeQ>.

44. In most cases, the individuals exposed to such tattooing would be men in same-sex bathing areas, but Japan has, and continues to have in some areas, facilities with mixed-sex bathing areas. Also, fathers with very young daughters may sometimes take them into the male baths with them. Some of my female informants had first encountered tattoos this way.

45. Yakuza are notorious for the practice of *yubitsume* – proof of loyalty or sincere remorse by way of the ritual amputation of a digit. This practice was made explicitly illegal (in Articles 16-26 of the 2007 Revision to the Anti-Organized Crime Law) and has declined as yakuza families seek to avoid conspicuous appearances.

46. Mieko Yamada, "Westernization and Cultural Resistance in Tattooing Practices in Contemporary

zero based on interviews with dozens of tattooists in Japan, who indicated that most of their clients seeking *wabori* tattoos were simply those who appreciate the artistry and aesthetic of the style.<sup>47</sup> My own research also found that the percentage seems to be far less than 50% in most cases.

### *Rise of the Tattooists*

Japanese tattooists increased exponentially from approximately 250 in the 1990s to anywhere from 3,000 to 5,000 in the present day according to one of my interviews with Professor Yamamoto Yoshimi, a prominent tattoo scholar in Japan. This rise coincided to a degree with the aforementioned “tattoo renaissance” experienced in the U.S., as well as the increased availability of tattoo information and equipment that became purchasable through various publications and, later, the popular diffusion of the Internet. Aspiring tattooists could now access a wide range of information and easily order tattoo machines and specialty inks from overseas. Unlike the previous generations of tattooists, who worked out of their own homes or rented apartments and underwent a strict system of apprenticeship under a master tattooist for several years before being able to begin their own practice, the new tattooists were often young and self-taught, having read books and magazines and ordered their ink and tattooing equipment from catalogs. Imported mostly from the U.S., tattoo machines, while requiring a certain amount of practice, are far easier to pick up and use effectively than the hand-poking implement – a rod with a bundle of needles attached to its tip – used by many *wabori* practitioners (although many tattooists work in *wabori* using machines as well). It is difficult to assign a percentage, since there are thousands of tattooists operating in Japan with no official documentation of their numbers and styles they specialize in, but I would estimate based on my research that approximately 25% of all tattooists in Japan specialize in *wabori*, and perhaps only a few hundred regularly practice the traditional hand poking method. Many early tattooists were content to tattoo flash – premade designs created by other tattooists. Questions of artistic originality aside, such tattooists proliferated and operated out of walk-in shops that encouraged more casual clientele and spur-of-the-moment decisions among young people, in contrast to the previous decades, when an introduction from an existing client, phone call, and personal meeting with the tattooist were prerequisite to getting a tattoo that one might or might not have a say in choosing the design of. The popularity of Western musical styles, including hip-hop, combined with the ready availability of tattooists and information available on the Internet, saw increasing numbers of young people becoming tattooed in the Western “one-point” style that they observed on musicians and other celebrities.<sup>48</sup>

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Japan,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 12(4) (2009): 327-28.

47. See, for instance, Okazaki, *Wabori: Traditional Japanese Tattoo*, 2013, 12; John M. Skutlin, “Japan, Ink(ed): Tattooing as Decorative Body Modification in Japan,” 256-58.

48. The information in this paragraph has been collated from accounts by numerous informants, both tattooists and tattooees, who were in Japan during this period and recalled what the situation was like during our interviews.



It should be noted here that, along with the increase in Western-style tattoos, there was also a concomitant increase in Western-style tattoo studios. Eccentric Tattoo Shop in Nagoya and Scratch Addiction in Tokyo's fashionable Harajuku district are generally regarded as the first "walk-in" tattoo studios in Japan, having been established in 1993 and 1995, respectively. Up until that point, anyone wishing to have a tattoo would generally visit the tattooist's home or rented apartment devoted to that purpose, with no external advertising to clue passersby in to the body modification activities going on behind the door. Such arrangements are still used by artists like Horiyoshi III, although finding the location of his main studio nestled in an obscure residential district of Yokohama – once a daunting task that required asking for directions at the local police box or finding a knowledgeable taxi driver – has been vastly simplified now that it is prominently labeled on Google Maps, complete with Google Street View. The vast majority of tattooists that I encountered during my research, however, were operating out of "walk-in" shops with varying degrees of signage to indicate their practices. I also found that tattooists working in *wabori* designs generally worked out of studios that were densely filled with books, magazines, manga, and assorted bric-a-brac, and had the artists' drawing paper hanging on the walls to display their previous works for clients, often alongside framed images of *wabori* designs.

The customers that I observed at these studios specializing in *wabori* never received any instructions or warnings about their tattoos, and it was assumed that the mere act of seeking out such a tattooist was indication enough of their preparedness to take on the body modification. Among younger Japanese tattooists working in styles other than *wabori*, however, I noticed a tendency to be influenced by the hygiene-consciousness and modern aesthetic sensibilities of the tattoo studios I encountered in the U.S. and Europe. Such studios were generally well lit, minimal in design and furnishings, and tastefully decorated with art and décor typical of such establishments, such as skull-themed items, skateboards, and various popular culture-related figures and objects. Tattoo tables and chairs for clients were covered with removable plastic sheeting, cling wrap coated almost everything, including the wires connecting tattoo machines to their power sources, and tools and ink pots were carefully arranged on stainless steel trays. The overall image of an alternative, yet safe and hygienic, environment was conveyed. These types of walk-in "street shops" proliferated around the turn of the millennium and consciously or unconsciously represented a type of differentiation strategy to distance the "art" and "fashion" of globalized, international *tatū* (tattoos) from the local associations of criminality that have historically been attached to Japan's *irezumi*.

The year 1999 witnessed the first international tattoo convention to be held in Japan, which was organized by both Japanese and overseas tattooists who wished to strengthen exchanges of designs and techniques between Japan and the rest of the world, and its success brought about another in the following year. Japan had already held its own tattoo events in previous years, most of which were associated with motorcycle enthusiasts, but this large-scale event opened up the floodgates to a heightening of the artistic level of Western-style tattooing in Japan and helped to encourage a wide range of young tattooists taking up tattoo machines and setting up shops, which were still relatively rare at the time.

Japan's first mainstream dedicated tattoo publication, *Tattoo Burst*, printed its first issue in 1999 as well, and its pages brought not only the history of tattooing to a broad readership, but also information on a plethora of tattooing styles and where and how to find tattooists in Japan. Even famous pop star Amuro Namie caught on to the tattoo trend, and had her arm prominently tattooed with a design and her son's name in Roman letters.<sup>49</sup> Massively popular recording artist Hamasaki Ayumi also flaunted a new tattoo on her shoulder in the early 2000s, which can be easily seen in videos and photographs online, and tattoos seemed to be catching on among youth in Japan as tattoo studios cropped up in cities around the country.

While fan reactions were mixed, the tattoos of media sensations like pop stars Amuro Namie and Hamasaki Ayumi challenged the view of such body modification as exclusively within the realm of criminals and social malcontents and introduced to a wide audience the concept of the "one-point" tattoo as a stylish fashion statement. Even so, Amuro's tattoos were blurred out on television,<sup>50</sup> and I was told by informants that other tattooed singers cover them during annual televised events such as the famous annual *NHK Kōhaku Uta Gassen* NHK紅白歌合戦 singing contest. Amuro eventually went on to have her tattoos removed, although outlines of where they were can still be plainly seen. The persistent negative image of tattooing and the erasure of potentially positive portrayals of "fashion" and "one-point" tattoos in Japan's mass media thereby contributed to a lasting stigma that continues to this day. The following section explores how individuals in Japan who adorn themselves with tattoos as fashion, rather than affiliation with criminal groups, negotiate and cope with the stigma surrounding their body modification choices.

### Fashioning Stigma Management Strategies Among Japanese Tattooees

The term stigma is so particularly suited to the subject of tattooing as to be almost taken for granted. Goffman, who wrote extensively about social stigma in *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* and other works, explains that the original Greek word indicated "bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier. The signs were cut or burnt into the body and advertised that the bearer was a slave, a criminal, or a traitor – a blemished person, ritually polluted, to be avoided, especially in public places."<sup>51</sup> C.P. Jones has pointed out that these marks, rather than branding, were almost always a variety of ancient tattooing,<sup>52</sup> and thus the very first stigma was a tattoo. While modern usage of the term "stigma" tends to refer "more to

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49. It should be noted that Amuro had already received a small tattoo of a barcode on a trip to Jamaica as early as 1996, but her highly visible arm tattoos were the first time her tattoos attracted national attention. She has since had her arm tattoos permanently removed, although traces are still visible.

50. Leo Lewis, "Japan's Crackdown on Tattoos Sparks Legal Battle," *Financial Times*, December 16, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/cbdabcce-c340-11e6-9bca-2b93a6856354>.

51. Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, 1.

52. C.P. Jones, "Stigma and Tattoo," in *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*, ed. Jane Caplan (London: Reaktion, 2000), 1.

the disgrace itself than to the bodily evidence of it,"<sup>53</sup> in the case of tattooing the original meaning once again comes to the fore, as tattooing may serve as presumed bodily evidence of any number of characteristics. Such meanings are not universal, of course, and Goffman discussed stigma as being relative within the context of relationships among various social actors, noting that, "an attribute that stigmatizes one type of possessor can confirm the usualness of another, and therefore is neither creditable nor discreditable as a thing in itself."<sup>54</sup> A study by Link and Phelan has pointed out that much of the problem with literature on stigma lies in the fact that it focuses on the effect of a particular stigma on just one outcome when, in fact, it can exert significant influence over a multitude of outcomes that can thereby limit the life chances afforded to an individual.<sup>55</sup> In Japan, tattooing has the potential to affect the lives of individuals in numerous ways, including career, marriage, lifestyle, and even housing.

Tattoos in North America were once seen as "marks of disaffiliation" and, by contrast, could be seen as symbolizing affiliation in social groups that engage in illegal or socially disvalued behavior.<sup>56</sup> Together with other forms of aesthetic deviance, they could also be ways of indicating affiliation with rebellious subcultures.<sup>57</sup> Tattooing is a deviant social action that takes the form of a visible attribute resulting in stigmatization, but, because the deviant act of being tattooed is almost always a voluntary one, such acquired stigmas do not meet with the same degree of sympathy or reactions from "normals"<sup>58</sup> as a hereditary physical ailment or accidentally acquired disability.<sup>59</sup> Since the act of getting a tattoo is a "characterological stigma," those who have them are seen as responsible for their own situations, and thus any discrimination they face may be legitimized.<sup>60</sup> Because of this, tattooees must often engage in a wide range of "stigma management strategies"<sup>61</sup> to manipulate how they are perceived by themselves and others. Katherine Irwin, in her study of first-time tattooees in the Western U.S., discovered four main "legitimation maneuvers" that individuals used to justify and explain their choices of body modification.<sup>62</sup> These

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53. Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, 1-2.

54. Ibid., 3.

55. Bruce G. Link, and Jo C. Phelan, "Conceptualizing Stigma," *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 27 (August 2001): 381-82.

56. Clinton Sanders, *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 58-60.

57. See Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979).

58. Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, 5, 28. In his works, Goffman refers to those who bear stigma as "stigmatized" and those who are not as "normals," with an additional category of the "wise" – those normals who are aware and sometimes accepting of the stigmatized.

59. Gretchen Larsen, Maurice Patterson, and Lucy Markham. "A Deviant Art: Tattoo-Related Stigma in an Era of Commodification," *Psychology & Marketing* 31, no. 8 (2014): 672-73.

60. Ibid., 673.

61. Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*.

62. Katherine Irwin, "Legitimizing the First Tattoo: Moral Passage through Informal Interaction," *Symbolic*

included the use of mainstream motivations (explaining tattoos as markers of celebration or memorialization of conventional life transitions and milestones), commitment to conventional behavior (asserting that the tattoo was well planned and thought out, and making assurances that it did not indicate a departure from conventional social activities), offering of verbal neutralizations (condemning the stigmatizers for being intolerant and insensitive to trends), and conformance to conventional aesthetics (usually getting small and discreet tattoos that adhere to mainstream aesthetic sensibilities).<sup>63</sup> Such individuals seeking tattoos experienced both “deviant attraction”<sup>64</sup> toward tattoos, but also “deviant aversion” of the prospect of lost status due to their ink, and thus engaged in a process of “reconciliation” in which “they attempted to capitalize on the positive associations with deviance while avoiding the negative ones.”<sup>65</sup> In North America and much of Europe, such meanings have largely changed and allowed tattooing to hold a wide array of often-positive meanings, particularly when accompanied by the legitimization strategies described above. However, the associations of tattooing as a characterological stigma in Japan remain firmly entrenched in the public imagination, and the culturally and historically specific modes of tattooing’s stigmatization in that country lead to both similar and different legitimization maneuvers and stigma management strategies engaged in by individuals.

### *Tattoos as (Gendered) Fashion in Japan*

In the literature on tattooing in North America, Europe, and Australia, it is clear that there is a certain hierarchy of tattoo designs and placements that affects how a given tattoo is perceived by tattoo enthusiasts or by the general public. For instance, DeMello points out that in the early days of tattoo conventions in the U.S. during the 1970s, facial tattoos were not allowed in the convention centers in order to maintain the respectability of the events at a time when such tattoos were strictly the purview of gang members or particularly bold tattooists.<sup>66</sup> This issue will be explored further in the following section, but suffice it to say, face, neck, and hand tattoos are still heavily stigmatized by the non-tattooed public in the U.S. and elsewhere,<sup>67</sup> and some tattooists reserve the right to refuse service to customers who request tattoos in such areas.<sup>68</sup> Naturally, tattoo designs that would generally be considered grotesque, obscene, or otherwise offensive are meant to serve as statements of rebel-

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*Interaction* 24, no. 1 (2001): 49-73.

63. Ibid., 61-67.

64. Patricia Adler and Peter Adler, “Tinydopers: A Case Study of Deviant Socialization,” *Symbolic Interaction* 1 (1978): 90-105.

65. Irwin, “Legitimizing the First Tattoo: Moral Passage through Informal Interaction,” 68-69.

66. DeMello, *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community*, 31.

67. Astead Herndon, “Society Isn’t Quite Ready for Facial Tattoos,” *CNN*, August 7, 2014, <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/08/06/living/face-tattoos-style-identity/>.

68. Anna Codrea-Rado, “Are Tattoo Artists Right to Refuse to Adorn Necks and Hands?” *The Guardian*, August 9, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2015/aug/09/can-tattoo-artists-refuse-adorn-necks-hands>.

lion against mainstream tastes, and thus it should come as little surprise that such forms of self-expression might serve as detriments to one's employability if discovered. In the case of "Western" tattooing, such designs might include realistic skulls, satanic imagery, nude female figures, and symbols with racist connotations. In Japan, however, many of the *wabori* designs that inspire such fear and discomfort among many people might be hung up and displayed proudly on the walls of art museums, were it not for their medium of human flesh rather than paper or canvas. Intricate designs featuring heroes of Japanese mythology, swimming carp, or religious figures take on a sinister aspect due to their association with Japan's yakuza organized crime groups – an ignominious distinction that bleeds over to all tattoos regardless of design but is especially pronounced when it comes to *wabori* designs.

Whether or not a tattooed individual encounters difficulty in their daily life in Japan can depend on a wide range of factors, including sex and gender, ethnicity, family situation, place and type of employment, area of residence, and socioeconomic class. Even more important, however, is the type of tattoo in combination with any or all of these factors, meaning that the size, placement, design, and meaning of a tattoo can have a significant bearing on how the tattooed individual is perceived and may successfully or unsuccessfully navigate various situations in their lives. Most of my informants were Japanese in terms of both nationality and presumed ethnicity, and thus it was numerous other factors that came to the fore as they told me their stories. The following cases are provided in an effort to demonstrate the various ways in which individuals that I interviewed, who were tattooed in spite of the prevailing stigma, encountered and sometimes overcame difficulties in their lives due to their tattoos, and how various social and cultural factors affected their specific situations, particularly with regard to how tattoos are situated as fashion, rather than marks of (dis) affiliation.

For women with relatively small tattoos in Japan, having a tattoo is little more than a minor inconvenience in most situations. Keiko,<sup>69</sup> a 40-year-old woman living with her parents on the outskirts of Tokyo, got her first and only tattoo in her late twenties, when she first became more involved in the underground subculture scene in Tokyo, particularly that involving *visual kei* ビジュアル系<sup>70</sup> music and fetish-related events. She told me she never really saw herself as someone who would get a tattoo, but a trip to France inspired her to have a Baroque floral design tattooed on her upper arm, featuring the leaf scroll motifs of that art style in the design of a candleholder that she had seen in an antique shop. When asked why she tattooed the image instead of merely framing a photograph of it, she replied, "The style really moved me. I wonder what it was...somehow a photograph wasn't enough. I wanted [the design] to be a part of my body." I inquired about how her parents reacted,

69. A pseudonym.

70. Similar to glam rock, *visual kei* (with *kei* roughly meaning "style") is a Japanese musical and fashion genre that features musicians with highly stylized and androgynous makeup and attire. Despite being considered a musical genre, the styles of bands cover a wide gamut of rock subgenres and, as implied in the name, the appellation indicates a visual aesthetic more than a musical style.



and her response was similar to what I received from many of my informants. “They weren’t very happy about it at first, but when they saw that it was a beautiful design, and they knew that I had done it after thinking it through, they really didn’t mind.” She spoke about her own tattoos using the terms “art” and “fashion tattoo,” without using the more negatively charged term *irezumi*, and generally described her experience as a cathartic one.

I asked Keiko if she had ever faced any other difficulties in her life due to the tattoo. At work, Keiko told me, it was a simple matter of wearing sleeves that covered her upper arm and, in fact, her superior in her job as a sales clerk was actually a woman more heavily tattooed than her (also in a non-*wabori* “Western” style) who also covered her tattoos as appropriate for the job. I assumed that surely, she must have trouble when entering *onsen*, or hot springs, in Japan, but her answer was somewhat surprising.

*About that, I actually went to an onsen recently. I told the woman at the front desk that I have a tattoo on my upper arm, showed it to her, and asked her if it would be okay to go in. She told me it would be fine as long as I covered it with bandages, so I did and went into the onsen. Of course, the bandages got all wet and ended up falling off, so the tattoo was exposed, but no one was bothered by it.*

It should be noted that, particularly in recent years, many hotels, *onsen* facilities, pools, and gyms have been allowing visitors to cover their tattoos with adhesive bandages (*tatū kakushi yō no tēpu* タトゥー隠し用のテープ) when using their facilities, thus allowing these institutions to maintain the tattoo ban in practice while allowing customers with small “fashion tattoos” to enter. Naturally, anyone with a full sleeve or back tattoo might end up looking like someone who has suffered a serious injury if they attempted to take advantage of this tactic, and thus it is only applicable to smaller tattoos like the one Keiko has. Several factors contributed to the ease with which Keiko was able to enter the *onsen*. The size of the tattoo and its placement in an area that would be easy to cover with a bandage (her upper arm) made it simpler for her to conceal her tattoo, but the issue is not so simple. Her tattoo design stretches nearly from her shoulder to her elbow, large enough to be highly conspicuous. In addition, the bandage would be likely to fall off in the humidity of the *onsen*, or if she decided to enter the water up to her shoulders. The individual at the front desk was most likely aware of this but made a judgment based on her impression of Keiko. As a woman with a feminine Western design, Keiko was able to circumvent the usual ban on tattooing.

It has been observed in U.S. cases of court battles involving tattoos in the workplace that male tattoos as body adornments are generally coded as masculine in terms of toughness, aggression, and military associations, while in contrast, tattoos on women are viewed as indicating that they are sexually available to men.<sup>71</sup> A study by Swami and Furnham in the U.K. also found that women with tattoos were viewed as less attractive, more sexually

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71. Lucille Ponte and Jennifer Gillan, “Gender Performance Over Job Performance: Body Art Work Rules and the Continuing Subordination of the Feminine,” *Duke Journal of Gender Law & Policy* 14 (2007): 361-62.

promiscuous, and more likely to be heavy drinkers.<sup>72</sup> During my fieldwork in Japan, I found that such stereotypes applied rather evenly regardless of gender. The difference was that tattoos for women, provided that they were within a certain size and of a suitably feminine design, were generally more acceptable than tattoos on men, which tended to be stereotypically masculine in style. In other words, tattoos on males in Japan are coded as representing only a negative, criminal masculinity, while tattooed female bodies are gaining a modicum of acceptance as decidedly more radical forms of accessorizing, self-expression, or beautification through bodily fashion. This slight degree of acceptance, however, depends greatly upon the design, echoing the findings of Thompson, whose ethnographic work in the U.S. has shown how non-stereotypically feminine tattoo designs, while often empowering to the women who choose to have them indelibly marked upon their bodies, are generally viewed as masculine or even ugly.<sup>73</sup>



**Figure 3.** A “one-point” tattoo using both tribal and Japanese design elements by Horitsuna (Tattoo Studio Desperado).

The above points were illustrated well by an episode of a television program called *Suki ka kirai ka iu jikan* 好きか嫌いか言う時間 (Time to Say Whether You Love It or Hate It), which aired on Japan’s TBS television on June 30, 2016. In the episode, a panel of celebrities and a live audience were asked whether they loved or hated “the trend of tattoos being completely okay.” The more neutral loan word *tatū* was used throughout the segment instead of *irezumi*, which would have more loaded connotations of *wabori* designs on gangsters. The results of the vote were overwhelmingly uniform, with the older men on the panel saying they hated this trend, and the one woman and one twenty-year-old man on the panel saying they liked it. The young women in the audience were also overwhelmingly positive in their responses to the trend. However, the young man who liked it, genderless fashion (*jendāresu kei* ジェンダーレス系)<sup>74</sup> icon Ryuchel (りゅうちえる), made an important distinction that revealed an

72. Viren Swami and Adrian Furnham, “Unattractive, Promiscuous and Heavy Drinkers: Perceptions of Women with Tattoos,” *Body Image* 4, no. 4 (2007): 343-52.

73. Beverly Yuen Thompson, *Covered in Ink: Tattoos, Women and the Politics of the Body* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

74. “Genderless kei” is a recent fashion trend in which individuals (almost exclusively male) incorporate

underlying assumption of all of the participants, saying “If it’s like a dragon all over the back, I think it can’t be helped if someone judges that person, but if you do it as a ‘one-point’ and as a part of your fashion to express your own worldview, I think it’s rather cool then.” It became clear from the conversations and images given throughout the entire segment that the “one-point” tattoos being discussed were those practiced by women, and the designs on display included hearts, stars, and crowns in “coin-size” designs on the ankle (which one audience member actually showed off for the panel). As was the case with Keiko, so long as the design is not unreasonably large and suitably “fashionable,” it can be coded as appropriately feminine. It is also clear that there is a distinction between *irezumi* (e.g., “a dragon all over the back”) and *tatū* (e.g., a “one-point” fashion tattoo). The Kanto Federation of Bar Associations’ 2014 survey of 1,000 individuals in Japan indicated that 39.2% claimed that the impression they receive from *tatū* is different from that of *irezumi*.<sup>75</sup> While the study had no follow-up question to determine what impressions are discussed, my research indicates that *wabori* tattoos are much more likely to have a negative reaction due to their association with the yakuza.

Keiko’s case elucidates one other important point concerning tattoos in Japan, namely, that the mere act of attempting to hide something is often sufficient to satisfy the seemingly adamant social and cultural demands for conformity. For Keiko’s fellow *onsen*-goers, it is highly unlikely that her bandage would have been mistaken for anything other than a tattoo cover. If she actually had an injury requiring such a bandage, she first of all would not be in fit condition to enter the bath, and furthermore would pose a health hazard if her wound contacted the water shared by the other bathers. Much as celebrity tattoos can be obviously blurred out on television, or the way Amuro Namie’s laser-erased tattoo designs are still visible as traces on her skin in photos and televised appearances, the very fact that one has made the effort to cover a tattoo shows consideration to others. Thomas Rohlen has pointed out how belonging to a group, in this case, society as a whole, is inculcated in Japanese children from a very young age, and this group mentality continues throughout the social patterns of the workplace and even daily life. He explains:

*The very powerful emotional pressures for participation normally associated in the West with the family are at work throughout the society. Failure to follow directions, careless variance from group norms and standards in such matters as uniforms, etiquette, and practice, for example, create surprising levels of consternation centering on issues of the offending individual’s connectedness to the group. The result of such pressure is very high levels of orderly conduct in the organized spheres*

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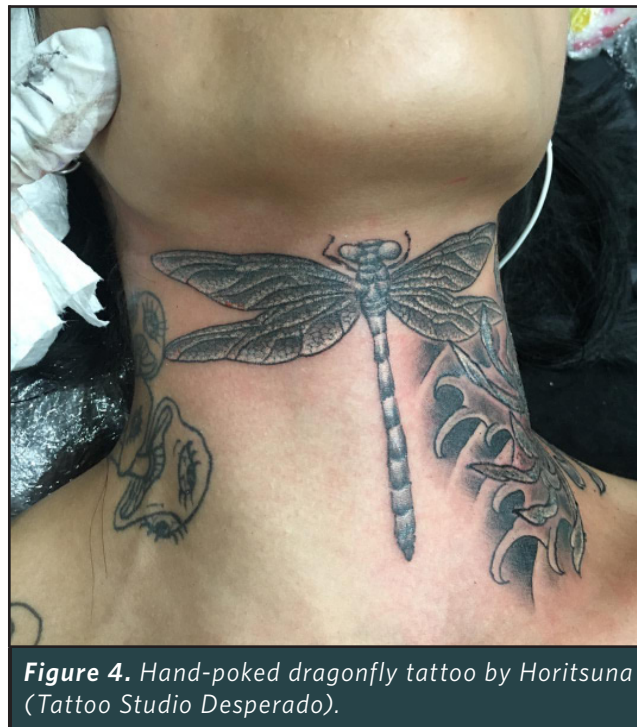
both male and female fashion items and beauty techniques to achieve an androgynous appearance. (“Genderless Kei – Japan’s Hot New Fashion Trend.” *Tokyo Fashion*, January 30. Accessed May 30, 2017. <https://medium.com/@TokyoFashion/genderless-kei-japan-s-hot-new-fashion-trend-9e25a2c559c6>).

75. Kantō Federation of Bar Associations, *Jikoketteiken to gendaishakai: Irezumi kisei no arikata wo megutte* (Tokyo: Kantō Federation of Bar Associations, 2014).

of society that do not depend on authoritative action<sup>76</sup> [emphasis added].

Tattooing is certainly a variance from group norms and standards in Japan, yet I emphasize the word “careless” in the above quote to draw attention to the fact that, in the case of tattooing, it is not the tattoo itself that causes consternation, but rather the failure to make adequate efforts to hide the offending stigma. In other words, the effort to hide tattoos can serve as a reconciliatory strategy, which can help reestablish one’s “connectedness” to social groups in Japan.

Through full disclosure of her tattoo and willingness to cover it, Keiko demonstrated that she was aware of the social norms and explicit rules pertaining to the onsen. Her desire to conform counteracted the generally negative attribute marked visibly on her skin, easing any consternation that it may have ordinarily caused. The combination of her gender and the feminine Western design and small size of her tattoo enabled her to enter an *onsen* that would normally bar anyone with tattoos. Even the tattoo’s ultimate exposure when the bandage fell off was not an issue. Further evidence of the powerful effects of reconciliatory



**Figure 4.** Hand-poked dragonfly tattoo by Horitsuna (Tattoo Studio Desperado).

efforts like Keiko’s can be found in the prominent example of pop singer Amuro Namie and her tattoos. Although Amuro eventually had her tattoos removed, the removal process left behind faint traces of the original design, traces that are often quite visible in marketing photos and on album covers. Such marks could have easily been removed using even the simplest photo editing software, and yet they were left as they were, a visible reminder of her decision to make amends and conform to social norms, which adds depth to her public

76. Thomas Rohlen, “Order in Japanese Society: Attachment, Authority, and Routine.” *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 15, no. 1 (1989): 29.

persona. Once known for her “bad girl” image, Amuro now visibly parades her acquiescence to social norms through the traces of ink still visible on her skin.

### *Tattoos Under Cover*

The examples above show how tattoos can be revealed, covered, and removed through reconciliatory strategies that serve as (in)visible concessions to social norms. But what of those with extensive tattoos, which are more likely to be seen on male bodies? Naturally, such individuals first have the choice of limiting them to areas that can be hidden beneath a business suit. Ichirō,<sup>77</sup> a male piercer operating in Tokyo, offered some insight into such choices. Ichirō’s ears and face were, as might be expected, adorned with piercings, including a septum piercing and prominently stretched earlobes, as well as a dermal punch in the outer conch of his right ear. He also sported full sleeve tattoos and large subdermal silicone implants on the backs of his hands, one in the shape of a captive bead ring and the other in the form of a circular barbell. During our interviews, he told me about one of the major differences he perceived between many Western countries and Japan was the need to show off piercings or tattoos. In Japan, he explained, people might get completely covered in tattoos and yet take great pains not to show them any more than necessary. He told me of a girl he knew who lived with her parents, and therefore decided to get tattooed only around her midsection, so that even if she were to get out of the bath wrapped in a towel, her tattoos would be covered. We eventually got on the subject of “crossing the line,” meaning to reach the point where one’s body has been modified so much that there is no practical means of returning to a less “marked” state in society. I asked him when he felt he had crossed this line, but his answer surprised me:

*I haven't crossed that line. Probably, in terms of myself, while I'm in Japan, I won't cross that line here. I've [tattooed] up to this point [indicates tattoos cutting off at wrists], but that's where it stops. If I were to go abroad and make my living there, I could cross the line. As to why, it's because I wouldn't have to cover them anymore. Japan's society is very cramped [semai 狭い], so that's really troublesome [mendōkusai めんどくさい]. If I weren't in Japan, I'd probably have my neck tattooed. I'd have them on my hands, and I'd probably even tattoo my face. I'm in Japan, so that's why I haven't done it... There are people [with hand and neck tattoos], but if those people live in Japan, I think they're regretting their choices. I think there are a lot of people like that... You see, I have my tattoos cut off [at the wrists], so if I put on clothing, I have no tattoos.*

At first, I was perplexed to find that Ichirō, despite being heavily pierced and tattooed, felt that he hadn’t “crossed the line,” and I was particularly interested in how he rationalized this in light of the subdermal implants on his hands, which could not be hidden and could be considered much more extreme and even illegal than tattooing. He responded matter-of-factly, saying:

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77. A pseudonym.



*Yeah, but people don't actually know what these things are – neither good nor bad – before that all they have is a question mark. But, if they see my tattoos, [they think] I must be a scary person. Also, in a worst-case scenario, I can easily remove these [implants]. You can't remove tattoos.*

Of course, tattoo removal is possible, but is a highly costly procedure and, depending on the method, can leave behind traces of the tattoo design, scarring, or both. His extensive tattooing, moreover, was well past the point of any possibility of removal. His first point is significant however, in that he acknowledges that the gut reaction that many have toward tattoos would not apply to something like implants, which are essentially neutral in their associations simply because most people outside of the world of body modification have no idea what they are.

For individuals with more extensive tattoos, particularly men, covering up one's tattoos may involve additional efforts – efforts that may ultimately be only partially successful if the tattoo is on the hands or neck. I spoke with Satoshi, a Tokyo tattooist in his thirties, about any problems that he faced in his daily life due to his American traditional-style tattoos, which covered his arms and extended all the way to his fingers, and also the side of his neck. He told me that his difficulties went beyond simply being unable to enter an *onsen*. He told me:

*It is difficult, you know. Usually if you can't see [the tattoos] it's okay, but I'm already like this [indicates his tattooed hands and neck], so even if I wear gloves, it just ends up being even more suspicious and people ask questions. So, when I ask a real estate agent to look for an apartment, he'll say, "I found a place and called, but the landlord hates tattoos"... Always. Even now it's like that for me. I'm working and looking [for a new place to live], but the landlord can't rent the place to me.*

As a tattooist, his tattoos served as a kind of (sub)cultural capital but as a man with tattoos that extended even to his hands and neck, it became difficult to even rent an apartment and “pass” in his everyday life. Being a man may actually serve as a detriment in this case, as Chie,<sup>78</sup> the only Japanese woman living in Japan that I interviewed with easily visible hand tattoos,<sup>79</sup> was able to secure secretarial jobs for a construction company and later an English language school, but eventually ended up making most of her income from bartending due to personal reasons unrelated to her tattoos. The association of tattooing, particularly extensive designs, with male gangsters makes it comparatively easier for women than men to avoid discrimination due to tattoos, provided they avoid large designs in areas that are difficult to conceal. Nevertheless, I found that my informants still made the attempt

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78. A pseudonym.

79. One other informant had an anarchy symbol tattooed on her middle finger, but she was able to easily hide it with a large ring. Some lines that resembled stitches were also somewhat visible, but mostly faded. The other two female Japanese informants with hand tattoos were living in Germany and planned to continue residing there.

to conceal their tattoos, even wearing long sleeves during the sultry Tokyo summers.

During my fieldwork in tattoo shops throughout Japan, I often observed tattooists wearing long-sleeved clothing in the summer. Yasu,<sup>80</sup> a Tokyo tattooist in his forties, wore a long-sleeved tracksuit when I visited his shop in July, even though his hand and neck tattoos were still clearly visible past the cuffs and collar. While he declined to give a personal interview, an issue of a well-known Japanese tattoo magazine<sup>81</sup> included a statement about his feelings toward showing his tattoos.

*I normally try to maintain a sense of moderation by not exposing my tattoos [irezumi] very much, and it is my intention to communicate this about tattoos to my customers as well. If we disregard that aspect, we will increasingly find we have no place to belong in society, and so I want to act with propriety.*

Yasu's words "to act with propriety" were *eri o tadishite* 襟を正して, which literally means, "to straighten one's collar." Speaking of moderation and propriety, Yasu indicates that tattooists and tattooed individuals can only expect to be accepted by the general public if they keep their tattoos hidden and act appropriately to prove that they are upstanding members of society. Moreover, his stigma management strategy of "committing to conventional behavior"<sup>82</sup> also calls to mind the example given by Goffman of a former mental patient who, due to a heightened consciousness of his own stigma, is afraid to engage in heated arguments with others out of fear that his outbursts may be interpreted as evidence of his psychological condition. He avoids showing a level of emotion that in a "normal" person would be perceived as negligible or even expected, thus overcompensating due to consciousness of his stigma.<sup>83</sup> In the case of tattoos, for example, a man in a business suit bumping into another person in a train station without a word of apology may be quickly forgiven and forgotten; the same action, committed by a visibly tattooed person, may be instantly interpreted as reflective of the negative character of that person, and used to justify past and future feelings of discomfort and fear toward such individuals. As mentioned above, tattoos are almost always voluntarily acquired "characterological stigmas," meaning that the tattooed individual is fully responsible for their decorative body modification and thus any negative response that they meet with is something they should be prepared to face without complaint. It is important to remember that this way of thinking is often internalized not only by those who are opposed to tattoos, but by those who have them as well.

Committing to the practice of "straightening one's collar" is a way for Yasu to "pass" in society – showing that, even if his neck and hand tattoos are visible, he is making an effort to cast a positive light on tattooees in Japan. As in the case of Keiko above, the effort to

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80. A pseudonym.

81. The name, issue number, article title, author information, and other details of this magazine are withheld to protect the anonymity of the informant.

82. Irwin, "Legitimizing the First Tattoo: Moral Passage through Informal Interaction," 62.

83. Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, 25-26.

hide one's tattoos can be viewed as a reconciliatory action that allows reintegration into a situation in spite of common knowledge of the stigmatizing attribute. Yasu thus represents a view held by other tattooists that I encountered in Japan as well – that tattoos should be hidden and that one who shows them cannot expect to achieve public acceptance. Such attitudes and ways of negotiating tattoos in Japan stand in a state of tension with other, more globalized discourses that rely on principles of freedom of expression and the right to self-determination.

## Conclusion

As shown briefly in this paper, the narrative of tattooing's general transformation in Western countries from appropriated cultural practice to marginalized mark of "disaffiliation" to widely accepted fashion cannot be accurately applied to the case of Japan. The story of tattooing on the Japanese archipelago stretches beyond recorded history, and the uses and meanings of tattoos have been multifarious across time periods and contexts. Among the various factors contributing to the contemporary stigma of tattoos in Japan, the yakuza and their full bodysuit *wabori* tattoos certainly loom large, yet most of the individuals going under the needle today (and their tattoo designs) have nothing to do with organized crime. While linguistic and stylistic distinctions are now made between the generally vilified *wabori* style of *irezumi* and the foreign *tatū* that can be practiced as *āto* アート (art) or *fasshon* ファッション (fashion), tattoos nonetheless remain redolent of antisocial forces regardless of their design, and the practical implications in the daily lives of those who undertake such decorative modifications are largely similar. Thus, rather than stigma management efforts that seek to justify or legitimize tattooing, tattooed individuals in Japan engage in reconciliatory strategies to show their adherence to social standards while ostensibly deviating from them, and these endeavors are generally recognized in a reciprocal exchange that reinforces group norms of tattoos as something that should be hidden in public. These findings offer new insight into the nature of stigma in Japan, illustrating both vividly and colorfully on actual human bodies how, even when the offending mark of a tattoo remains visible, a discernible effort to acquiesce to social norms is generally recognized and maintains social cohesion. This paper highlights the realization that concepts such as stigma and the strategies used to manage it are not necessarily interchangeable across social and cultural contexts, and that explorations of bodily praxis must take into account the everyday lived experience of individuals if we are to reach a greater understanding of tattooing and its stigma in Japan.

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