

Kara White

Professor Rivas

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## Changing Views of Tattoos in Japan

Although Japan's general views regarding tattoos, and the people that have them, tend to be negative and associated with crime, tattoos were not always viewed in this way. Historically we can observe various shifts in attitudes, tolerances and regulations concerning tattoos in Japan. Those views continue to be adjusted and evolve as society progresses. With tourism on the rise, and an important economic factor, Japan may have to once again alter their stance on tattoos to accommodate different cultures and opinions. By understanding the evolution of the tattoo in regards to the history, policies, societal impact and current concerns in Japan by analyzing the use of tattoos one can better understand how the opinions were formed and shed light on how some of the factors that lead to a negative view of tattoos may no longer hold as much weight as in the past.

Tattoo practices in Japan can be potentially traced back as far as the Jōmon period (10,000 B.C. – 300B.C.). Although some may argue that the Jōmon people were not ethnically Japanese, they did reside on the continent that is now known as Japan, and as such I do believe it to be note worthy. However, there are no historical documents from this time. Therefore “all data

referring to this period are derived from archeological excavations” (Poysden 114). The main artifacts found in these excavations that are used to discuss potential use of tattooing in the Jōmon period are the dogū, ceramic figurines (McCallum 111). These humanoid ceramic figurines, which mostly appear to be female, contain markings “around the eyes, foreheads, cheeks and lips”, which may suggest the presence of tattoos (Poysden 114). Thus some scholars argue that these markings could represent scarification, or face paint (Poysden 114), these markings appear to be extremely similar to confirmed tattoo practices in the following historical periods. It must be acknowledged, however, “there is no definite proof that these markings are, in fact, indications of tattooing” (McCallum 111). It is simply that “the cumulative results of analysis of the dogū, combined with ethnographic comparisons, leads very strongly to the conclusion that the Jōmon peoples did practice permanent modification of the skin” (McCallum 112-113). Due to the lack of historical data it is also impossible to make assumptions about the views on tattooing practices during this time.

Unlike the Jōmon period, there is a much wider range of information available concerning the Yayoi period (300B.C.-A.D.300) and their cultural practices, including tattooing (McCallum 113). Additionally, the Yayoi people are “believed to be ethnically and culturally identical to the population of Japan from the sixth century”, making their practices increasingly significant (Poysden 114). The Yayoi people learned of rice cultivation techniques “some time in the fourth century B.C.”, which led to a denser population that spread from “Kyushu to Shikoku, and northward up the main island (Honshu) through Kansai, Kanto and Tohoku regions” (McCallum 113). This wide spread of denser populations allowed for a vast amount of historical information to be collected from various sources, giving us concrete evidence of the existence of tattoo customs. Much like the Jōmon peoples, the Yayoi peoples also had very similar pottery that

depicts figures with markings upon their faces that could be interpreted as tattoos. This suggests a potential blending of cultures of the Jōmon and Yayoi (McCallum 115). If this were indeed true, it would strengthen the importance of the Jōmon people's tie into overall Japanese history, and reinforce the theory of tattoo use in that era. Though the Yayoi period has additional evidence relating to tattoo use. The "Chinese dynastic histories" contain references to tattooing in Yayoi Japan (McCallum 114). "The Chinese had by this time travelled to Japan and included information about the Japanese islands and their inhabitants" (Poysden 114). The sections that the Chinese discuss the Yayoi are in the sections "dealing with barbarians" (Poysden 114). Two references can be found in the "History of Wei (Wei Chih)" which is "part of the *History of the Three Kingdoms* (San Kuo Chih) compiled by Ch'en Shou in A.D. 297" (McCallum 114). The first text reads: "Men, Young and old, all tattoo their faces and decorate their bodies with designs" (Goodrich 10). This passage was then followed by:

A son of the ruler of Shao-K'ang of Hsia, when he was enfeoffed as lord of K'uai-chi, cut his hair and decorated his body with designs in order to avoid the attack of serpents and dragons. The Wa, (Chinese designation for the inhabitants) who are fond of diving into the water to get fish and shells, also decorated their bodies in order to keep away large fish and waterfowl. Later, however, the designs became merely ornamental. Designs on the body differ in the various countries... their position and size vary according to the rank of the individual. (Goodrich 10)

These accounts give us insight to a few aspects of the practice of tattooing in this era. First, that the Yayoi people tattooed their bodies at all ages. Second, that the tattoos were used for a variety of reasons depending on the region. Some tattooed their bodies as a sign of status. Due to the population increase, in contrast to earlier times, there were more "complex institutions of social

organization” which naturally would lead to “some degree of social stratification, placing some individuals in leadership positions and the majority in subordinate roles” (McCallum 113-114). Therefore, some regions seemed to use tattoos to identify their rank within their society, “the position and size indicating the difference in rank” (Poysden 115). In addition, the passage suggests that they also decorated their bodies for “protective purposes” (McCallum 114). Although it is not likely these tattoos actually protected them from “large fish and waterfowl”, they could have been used as a symbol of luck. Lastly the passage indicates that some individuals decorated their bodies with tattoos that were “merely ornamental”, suggesting that some individuals in certain regions simply enjoyed the art of the tattoo, and not its meaning. This implies that tattoos in this era were viewed in a favorable, or at least useful, practice. There does not seem to be any indication that the Yayoi people had any negative association with tattoos, or the people who possess them. However, “The Chinese regarded the practice of tattooing, or any other type of skin-marking, as despicable and adherent, worthy only of barbarians” (McCallum 114). This insinuates that the Chinese whom were making these records did not view the tattoo practices in a positive manner.

The period following the Yayoi, the Kofun period (A.D. 300-600), had significant changes in the uses and views of tattoos. “Federations of local political units formed on the Japanese archipelago” coming together into “confederations which can be referred to as states” (Poysden 115, McCallum 115). These federations meant larger regions adhered to values set in place by the elite, and “Chinese attitudes were prevalent amongst the elite of the central region” (McCallum 116). The Chinese, just as they did in the Yayoi period, visited regions in Japan in the Kofun period, and greatly influenced the culture and values. One of the values greatly influenced by the Chinese were the attitudes towards tattoos. Previous socially acceptable tattoos

now “appear to have acquired negative associations” (Poysden 115). Evidence of this can be found in Japanese texts that refer to the Kofun period. The *Nihon Shoki* (Chronicles of Japan), written in 720, “traces the ‘history’ of Japan from her legendary origins at the time of the descent of the Sun Goddess until the end of the seventh century” (McCallum 116). It contains detailed accounts of historical events and practices, some of which pertain to tattooing. One such account, written in A.D. 97, solidifies that the Japanese peoples have now adopted the ideology that those with tattoos are barbarians and outsiders. The passage reads:

27<sup>th</sup> year, Spring, 2<sup>nd</sup> month, 12<sup>th</sup> day, Takenouchi no Sukune returned from the east Country and informed the Emperor, saying: ‘In the Eastern wilds there is a country called Hitakami. The people of this country, both men and women, tie up their hair in the form of a mallet, and tattoo their bodies. They are of fierce temper, and their general name is Emishi (barbarian tribes). Moreover, their land is wide and fertile. We should attack them and take it (Poysden 115; Van Gulik 4).

This passage provides proof that the Japanese have adopted the Chinese view that people with tattoos are barbaric, and undesirable. It was not only the views that changed during this period, but also the practices. A later passage in the *Nihon Shoki* pertaining to the emperor describes how the use of the tattoo has taken on a completely different role than previous eras. The text reads:

1<sup>st</sup> year, Summer, 4<sup>th</sup> month, 17<sup>th</sup> day. The Emperor summoned before him Hamako, Muraji of Azumi, and commanded him saying: “Thou didst plot rebellion with the Imperial prince Nakatsu in order to overturn the State, and thy offense is deserving of death. I will, however, exercise great bounty, and remitting the penalty of death, sentence

thee to be tattooed.” The same day he was tattooed near the eye. Accordingly the men of that time spoke of the “Azumi eye”. (Aston 305-306; Sakamoto 424-425)

This displays the new use of tattooing in this time, a form of punishment. Although the passage gives the impression that tattooing the offender is merciful given the usual sentence, it was also used for lesser offences. For example, in a latter passage there contains a report of a bird being bitten by a dog, causing it to die. The Emperor ordered that the owner of the dog be tattooed on the face and “made him one of the bird keepers guild”, a very low social position (Aston 359; McCallum 117; Sakamoto 486-487; Van Gulik 8).

In addition to the *Nihon Shoki*, there are also references to the views of tattoos in the Kofun period in the *Kojiki*, the oldest Japanese text “compiled in 712” (McCallum 117). The *Kojiki* includes a story about emperor Jimmu, “considered the founder of the Japanese state” selecting his soon to be wife out of “a group of seven women walking on a nearby plain” (Poysden 116). Jimmu selects a princess by the name of Isuke-yori, and instructs his attendant, O-kume-no-mikoto, to announce his will to marry her. When the princess sees that O-kume-no-mikoto has tattoos around his eyes, she is surprised and it gives “her reason to question his character” (Poysden 116). Though his position as the attendant to the emperor suggests that his tattoos were likely a sign of position, and not punishment as she may have suspected. This signifies that there were some uses of tattoos as status, but they were likely much less common, as we can conclude from the princess’s initial reaction. Another story told later in the *Kojiki* provides further evidence of tattoos being used as punishment and a way to identify criminals. It states:

When they arrived at Kariha-i in Yamashiro, as they were eating their provisions, an old man with a tattooed face came along and seized their provisions (Aoki 267).

The man that stole the provisions was later executed. The description of his behavior, and later execution insinuates that the man had been tattooed on the face for an earlier crime. These examples from *Nihon Shoki* and *Kojiki* show that the practices and ideals surrounding tattoos of this time were mixed and complex. In some instances the tattoos indicate criminality, while others still use them as distinctions or have a more tribal significance.

It is important to note that the “states” formed during this time, up to Pre-Edo (600-1600) and even the Edo periods did not control all of the Japanese islands. Therefore, there were a number of indigenous groups that retained their own cultures and customs, including tattoo practices. One such case was the inhabitants of the Ryūkyū islands, “the southernmost islands of Japan”, which “consists of three archipelagos around three larger islands of Oshima, Okinawa and Miyako (now part of the Okinawa Prefecture)” (Poysden 117). The Ryūkyū women partook in Hajichi, the traditional practice of tattooing of the “back of the hands, the fingers, the wrists and the knuckles” (Omata; Poysden 117). The patterns that were used “derived from the fine woven fabrics made by the Ryūkyū women” (Poysden 117). However, the Ryūkyū men were seldom practiced tattooing, though there are records of some having “talismanic tattoos of harpoons, tridents and saw-teeth” (Poysden 117). The purpose of tattoos for these people related to “religious beliefs, sexual maturity, marital status, decoration, gender and tribal customs” (Poysden 117).

Another significant group of native peoples that retained their distinctive culture and customs were the Ainu, “the indigenous inhabitants of Hokkaido” (McCallum 118). The Ainu women, “starting at the age of twelve or thirteen”, “tattooed themselves by cutting their flesh” with a Makiri (knife) and “rubbing wood ash into the incisions” that appeared “blue-green and never faded” (Poisson 35; Poysden 116). The most prominent of the Ainu tattoos were the ones

around the mouth, called “anchipiri” meaning “black-stone mouth”(Poysden 116). The “tattoo was made first on a small section of the face” and would be “made larger each year” (Poisson 35). Upon completion of the anchipiri, usually around the age of 15, the “young women were then eligible for marriage” (Poisson 35). Additionally, “abstract geometric designs derived from their traditional clothing were allied to their arms and legs” (Poysden 116). These tattoo practices had “cosmetic, tribal and religious connotations” as well as “indicating sexual maturity” (Poysden 116). Tattoos were an extremely important aspect of both the Ryūkyū and the Ainu’s lives and had absolutely no negative associations. They continued these practices until they were forced to integrate into Japan, requiring them to “adopt Japanese names, and ordered to cease religious practices such as the custom of tattooing” (Levinson 19).

The Edo period (1600-1868) is when the image of what we today visualize as the “Japanese tattoo” came into existence. The Tokugawa bakufu (military government) “was exceedingly conservative, basing its philosophical ideas of Chinese Confucian philosophy” and as such “regarded the tattoo as a particularly severe form of punishment” (McCallum 119). Therefore, there were, “from time to time, harsh crackdowns on activities that the government deemed undesirable” such as tattoos, “Kabuki drama, wood-block prints, and various types of popular literature” (McCallum 120). Individuals whom associated with these genres and activities developed what was to be known as “the floating world”, the entertainment and pleasure districts of Japan. It was in this “floating world that the Edo tattoo grew and flourished” (McCallum 120). The tattoos of this time were “utilized particularly by those on the periphery of society” (McCallum 120). This could indicate that the individuals partaking in the practice were doing so in rebellion against the regulations of the Tokugawa bakufu. The tattoos of this time were termed “irezumi”, meaning to insert pigment (McCallum 119). The full body Irezumi is



hypothesized to have originally sprouted from wood-block prints that were inspired by the *Shui-hu Chuan*, an incredibly popular Chinese novel. This novel included a “number of important characters” that were tattooed (McCallum 121). Initially the novel was written in Chinese, and consequently only accessible to the highly educated respectable members of society. It is believed that due to it being regarded as classic Chinese literature, and the language only being understood by the desirables that the Tokugawa bakufu did not feel it was necessary to censor it. The novel was later published in a “punctuated version which allowed it to be read in Japanese” (McCallum 121). With the novel now accessible to a wider range of people, it increased in popularity, and with that popularity came an influx of books based on the story, now called *Suikoden* in Japanese. A “phenomenally popular version of *Suikoden*” called *Shinpen Suiko* then began to appear in Edo and included illustrations “by the most prominent artist of the time, Kataushika Hokusai” (McCallum 121). Kataushika Hokusai created elaborate depictions of the characters with “extremely flamboyant dragon designs that fill the entire surface” of available skin “for decoration” (McCallum 122). These are the very same “quality that is the characterizing feature of the Japanese full body tattoo” we think of today (McCallum 122). This indicates that despite the negative connotations and restrictions put in place by the Tokugawa bakufu there were many individuals who still practiced the art of tattoo, either for rebellion or as a way to define their character. Therefore, one can conclude that, much like the previous eras, the views of tattoos within Japan in the Edo period were mixed and varied in the different groups, with the most prominent view being unfavorable and associated with degenerates and criminals.

There are continued significant developments regarding tattoos in the Modern Period (1868-present). “With Japan’s defeat in August, 1945 and the subsequent establishment of the American Occupation, many of the oppressive regulations and laws of the previous government

were overturned” (McCallum 124). Tattoos were no longer illegal, but there wasn't a surge in individuals getting tattoos. The types of individuals who “would have themselves tattooed is quite close to that of” the Edo period, “essentially members of the urban lower classes who are frequently alienated from polite society” (McCallum 128). This leads us to the most common issue facing the modern day views of tattoos in Japan, the yakuza. “The yakuza are the criminal element of contemporary Japan”, and are generally are who ordinary Japanese first think of when imagining who would get themselves tattooed (McCallum 128). Each yakuza gang “has its own tattoo or crest, which they have tattooed on their bodies. Undergoing the procedure is considered proof of a gang member’s ability to withstand pain and the hardships he will encounter as a member” as well as a symbol of loyalty (Poysden 68). Although it is widely understood that yakuza have large elaborate tattoos and as such have become associated with the tattoo, “many people who are not gangsters affiliated with yakuza groups bear tattoos” (McCallum 129). Despite this fact, the mental association continues to this day, influencing regulations and policies in various areas.

The image of the tattoo has once again been linked to criminality. Though this time not by the Japanese government, but by the criminal element themselves. This seems to have had a greater and longer lasting effect of the views surrounding tattoos. Although having tattoos is currently legal in Japan, one might find it difficult to find a place to get one, find a job or enjoy leisure activities if they possess them. Recently there have been reports on a new battle facing the tattoo industry. In 2015 a tattoo artist by the name of Taiki Masuda was arrested for giving tattoos. The law in which he “broke” was the “Medical Practitioners Act, which forbids anyone other than a doctor from performing medical procedures” (Himmer 5; Marsh). “A Health, Labor, and Welfare Ministry notice in 2001 ruled that tattooing, along with laser hair removal and

chemical peels, is medical work because it involves a needle piercing the skin” (Marsh). This law would then imply that anyone wishing to practice the art of tattooing would first need to obtain a medical license, which is time consuming and extremely expensive. This could effectively make it extremely expensive or impossible to obtain a tattoo legally.

If a Japanese citizen currently has tattoos, or finds a way to obtain one, they then encounter another problem. It was reported that in 2012 the mayor of Osaka, Toru Hashimoto, will be requiring all civil servants to complete a questionnaire that requires them to disclose if they have any tattoos on their bodies, and indicate where on a diagram of the human body (Fitzpatrick; Lloyd). If the individual working in a civil servant position discloses that they possess tattoos on their body, their job could be in jeopardy or they could be required to have it removed (Fitzpatrick).

Japanese citizens are not the only people who are affected by the adverse views towards tattoos. Foreign tourists can also find themselves restricted due to bearing tattoos. Signs stating “No Tattooed People Allowed” are often displayed in public places such as saunas, pools, public bathhouses, beaches and hot springs (Yamada 319). This can cause a large number of people to be able to participate in attractive tourist activities. Tourism is an important economic factor for Japan, and as such they are losing out on a potentially large profit by having this restrictions.

Although Japan still has a lot of restrictions in place, there is acknowledgment for the need for change. In 2015 the Japan Tourism Agency (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism) released an article recognizing that there is a problem with their current policies pertaining to tourist with tattoos and them being refused entry into bathhouses and hot springs. They compiled statistics from a survey sent to hotels and Japanese style inns concerning how many refuse entry or allow with certain conditions. They found that 56% of the responses

collected stated that the refuse entry to anyone with tattoos, and 31% allow individuals to enter if their tattoos can be covered with a bandage. The number of facilities that are allowing entry, even if it is with the condition of concealment, seems to be increasing over the years. This shows that the Japanese government is beginning to take other cultures and opinions into consideration when addressing policies, and with the 2020 Olympics quickly approaching it has never been more important. Japan seems to be recognizing that, at least in the aspect of other cultures, individuals who partake in the practice of tattoos are not to be deemed criminals, and should be able to participate in the same leisure activities that they have the privilege of enjoying. It is not difficult to understand where the apprehension towards tattoos originates from, but the factors that lead to the previous negative views concerning tattoos may not hold as much weight when considering modern societal changes. Globalization gave way to the blending of cultures. With that blend comes an increase in cultural influences, which can change the way one society sees an aspect of their own culture, in this case Tattoos.

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