

THE TRADITIONAL JAPANESE TATTOO: TABOO OR TREND?

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

World surveys of body decoration ultimately posit the Japanese tattoo as the pinnacle – the final stage – in the evolution of the decorated body and consider Japanese tattooists the most skilful tattooists in the world (Buckland 1888, Hambly 1925, Kitamura 2000). The traditional Japanese tattoo - recognised in this thesis as that form of tattoo comprising integrated, multicoloured motifs extending over the back, arms, chest and abdominal region - is a visual spectacle, from the large, eye-catching display of colour to the intricacy of the designs, with their every detail etched into the skin. The application of a traditional Japanese tattoo transforms the body into a living, breathing work of art, with the tattooist bringing realism to a design through the manipulation of muscles and body shape. There is much adulation and emulation of the Japanese tattoo around the world. Yet, in Japan, this visual phenomenon goes uncelebrated and remains largely suppressed. Representations of the traditional Japanese tattoo, in academic scholarship as well as public sentiment, assert that tattooing is taboo in Japan. The physical display of tattoos elicits strong social disapproval.

An examination of Japanese history indicates that this was not always the case. Woodblock prints, kabuki, travel writings, and photographs by Western visitors to Japan depict the tattooed body as an integral part of the cityscape during the Edo period (1602-1867). The proud display of conspicuous tattoos on the streets of historical Edo is a drastic contrast with the concealment the tattooed body necessitates today. But suppression of the Japanese tattoo has done little to curb its development or attraction, and the practice still continues. Essentially the traditional Japanese tattoo remains a fascinating phenomenon, in both its visual mastery and its social aberration.

Central Question and Rationale

Current scholarship on traditional Japanese tattooing recognises its popularity amongst specific groups of people and alludes to the normative values of the tattoo within these tattooed groups. However, the overall trend is to represent the traditional Japanese tattoo as inherently taboo. Notions of identification and disidentification through criminal association, group exclusion, and prohibition are the themes most commonly emphasised in both academic scholarship and visual media representations.

Three elements are cited as grounds for taboo ascription in relation to tattoos: Confucianism, punitive associations, and religion. Paradoxically, however, further examination of these three elements indicates that they were in fact catalytic in both the development of the tradition itself and its undeniable appeal to specific groups of people. If it is recognised that the origins of both taboo and trend lie in these elements, it follows that the tattoo was in fact more normative than is recognised in the current

literature. Moreover, such a recognition would suggest that the traditional Japanese tattoo needs to be read as *both* a trend and a taboo. This raises the question at the centre of this thesis: *What is the traditional Japanese tattoo: taboo, or trend?*

In order to ascertain whether the traditional Japanese tattoo can be categorised as trend or taboo, two specific interrelated areas need to be examined. Firstly, to clarify the hypothesis that the nature of Japanese tattoo is actually both trend and taboo, it is necessary to examine how the Japanese tattoo came to be seen as characteristically taboo or trend. And secondly, *if* the Japanese tattoo is read as both taboo and trend, and current scholarship on Japanese tattooing does not comprehensively account for the simultaneity, what alternative explanations or understandings of the Japanese tattoo can account for both the taboo and trend characteristics?

Recognition of the Japanese tattoo as a ‘trend’ would undermine the current assertions of an inherent, **historicised** taboo, and so necessitate a reconsideration of *when* the taboo characteristic was actually formulated or popularised. This is based on the understanding that the contemporary stigmatisation and suppression of the traditional tattoo is clearly *based on historically ascribed taboo sentiment*. These factors must be considered in any discussion of the nature of the traditional Japanese tattoo.

In addition, *since current scholarship refers to the taboo on today’s traditional-style tattoos in the same light as the Edo tattoo*, questions of *how* or by what means *the Japanese tattoo has continued to be characterised as a taboo entity also need to be examined*.

Methodology

This thesis comprises a historical and thematic analysis of tattooing in Japan. The two themes in question are the characteristics of trend and taboo. ‘Trend’ in this discussion is considered to mean both ‘fashion or craze’ and ‘inclination or tendency’. Therefore, reference to the ‘trend of tattooing’ has the connotations of both popularity and acceptance. Given that no comprehensive empirical data¹ is available on this subject, the assertion that tattooing was indeed a trend is based on the understanding that the popular arts of the time, woodblock prints, kabuki, and *e-hon*, picture books, are, **as XXXXX suggests**, representational of real life (Van Gulik 1982: 78-83). Van Gulik (1982: 41-53,78-83) and Kitamura (2003) give detailed accounts of numerous prints, and of kabuki featuring tattooed characters. Accounts by early travellers to Japan, such as Cortazzi (1987: 127), Rein (1888: 414), Bird (1905: 82) and Faulds (1973: 285), with their descriptions of the many tattooed palanquin carriers and coolies, corroborate this reading of trend in the popular arts.

Taboo is defined as the sentiment of “strong social prohibition, relating to any area of human activity or social custom acknowledged as sacred and forbidden”.**[SOURCE?]**

In order to identify and situate the formation of tattoo in the three elements of Confucianism, punitive tattooing and religion, Mary Douglas’s theory on the construction of taboo is taken as a framework.

Discussion throughout this thesis is informed by the concept that a body is best read as a ‘text of culture’, as proposed by sociologist Michael Atkinson (2003). Atkinson states that recent body theory, with its multitude of foci and divergent interpretations

¹ Extant figures suggest there were around ten thousand tattooed firemen during the mid nineteenth century (Tamabayashi 1936) and over thirty thousand tattooed people in Edo in the late nineteenth century, despite the prohibitory laws (Van Gulik 1982, 85).

of bodies, encourages such an approach precisely in order to discern accurately the meaning and motivations of corporeal marking. **Reading the body as a text of culture** requires an understanding of the relevant cultural contextualisation, and for this thesis cultural context is defined as the **historicised societal structures** and meta-narratives of religion and ideology of a particular culture. Atkinson's concept has been particularly useful in the formation of a framework for discussion in Chapter Three.

The concept of the body as a 'text of culture' was also important for this thesis by fostering the initial realisation that alternative readings of the Japanese tattoo were possible. Current scholarship on Japanese tattooing, while emphasising the importance of socio-cultural influence and history, discusses only motivations and meanings as derived from the objectified tattoo. It scarcely recognises the *body* that the tattoo occupies. This thesis contends that reading the body as a text of culture, replete with cultural context and historicity, is necessary for the accurate representation of the traditional Japanese tattoo.

Terminology

As above, throughout this thesis the term 'traditional Japanese tattoo' is used to refer to the integrated, multicoloured motifs that extend over the back, arms, chest, and abdominal region.

I

In Japanese there are a multitude of words for tattooing, and each of them has an implicit meaning. The character, 囚, defined as a mark of criminals, and the characters, *bunshin*, 文身, literally 'decorated body', were used in the earliest references to tattooing in Japan. In the Tokugawa period (1602-1867), the same