

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 (Hambly 1925, Kitamura 2000, Buckland 1888).

The traditional Japanese tattoo, recognised in this thesis as the form of tattoo that comprises integrated, multicoloured motifs that extend 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 where every detail is etched into the skin. In the application of a traditional Japanese tattoo, the physical body transforms into a living breathing work of art as the tattooist brings 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 today, 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 in Japan is taboo, and as such the physical display of tattoos elicits sentiment of strong social prohibition.

Nevertheless, an examination of Japanese history indicates 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). While the conspicuous tattoo proudly displayed on the streets of Edo, is a drastic contrast from the concealment necessitated the tattooed body today, suppression of the Japanese tattoo has done little to curb development or attraction, and the practice continues today. Essentially the traditional Japanese tattoo remains a fascinating phenomenon, in both its visual mastery and its social aberration.

Central Question and Rationale

In current scholarship on traditional Japanese tattooing, there is recognition of its popularity amongst specific groups of people, and allusion to the normative values of the tattoo within these tattooed groups. However, the overall trend is for the representation of 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.

Paradoxically, the grounds for the taboo ascription are given as three elements: Confucianism, punitive association, and religion, and further examination of these three elements indicate that they were in fact catalytic in both the development of the tradition itself and its undeniable appeal to specific groups of people. In recognising the origins of taboo and trend in the same elements, there is implication that the tattoo was in fact more normative than is recognised in the current literature. Moreover, it suggests that the traditional Japanese tattoo needs to be read as *both* a trend and a taboo. Thus raising the question, which is 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, the origins by which the Japanese tattoo is seen as characteristically taboo or trend, need to be examined. And secondly, *if* the Japanese tattoo is read as both taboo and trend, what alternative explanations or understandings of the Japanese tattoo can account for both the taboo and trend characteristics, based on the understanding that current scholarship on Japanese tattooing does not comprehensively account for the simultaneity?

Recognition of the Japanese tattoo as a ‘trend’ undermines the current assertions of inherent, **historicized** taboo, necessitating a reconsideration of *when* the taboo characteristic was actually formulated or popularised. This is based on the understanding that contemporarily, the traditional tattoo is clearly stigmatised and suppressed *based on the historically ascribed sentiment of taboo* and thus, these factors must be considered in any discussion on the nature of the traditional Japanese tattoo.

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

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 there

is no comprehensive empirical data¹ available on this subject, the assertion that tattooing was indeed a trend is based on the understanding that the popular arts of the time, wood block prints, kabuki, and *e-hon*, picture books, are representational of real **life as suggested by** (Van Gulik 1982: 78-83). Van Gulik (1982: 41-53,78-83,) and Kitamura (2003) give detailed accounts of numerous prints, and 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), in their description of the prolifera of 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”. 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 of bodies encourage such an approach, precisely in order to divulge accurate meaning and motivations of corporeal marking. **Reading the body as a text of culture** requires the understanding of both relevant cultural contextualisation. Accordingly, cultural context is defined as the **historicized societal structures** and meta-narratives of religion and ideology of a particular culture.

Atkinson’s concept has been particularly germane in the formation of not only a framework for discussion in chapter three, but first, in initially realising the possibility of alternative

¹ Extant figures suggest there were around ten thousand tattooed fire fighters 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).

readings of the Japanese tattoo. 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, scarcely recognises the *body* that the tattoo occupies. Furthermore, reading the body as a text of culture, replete with cultural context and historicity, is necessary for 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.

In Japanese there are a multitude of words for tattooing, each of them has an implicit meaning. The character, 刺, defined as 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 characters, 刺身 were used but pronounced *irezumi*. The characters, 入れ墨, also pronounced *irezumi*, were also used during this period. With a literal meaning of ‘insertion, *ireru*, 入る, of ink, *sumi*, 墨’ this word was largely reserved for reference to punitive tattooing and hence retains those connotations today. At the beginning of the Meiji period (1868-1912), 入れ墨, ‘*irezumi*’, was popularised by novelist Tanizaki Junichiro in his short story of the name. 入れ墨 is a combination of the verb *sasu*, 刺す, to poke, prick or pierce, and the noun, *aoi*, 青い, meaning green or blue – a literal description of the characteristically blue colour the ink becomes on insertion under the skin.

In the early part of the Tokugawa period, *irebokuro*, 入れ墨, was used to denote the ‘beauty spot’ style love pledges, particularly in Osaka and Kyoto. In Osaka, tattooing was also known