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**The Writ Woman:
Portrayals of Tattooed Women in Japanese Society**

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**The Writ Woman:,
Portrayals of Tattooed Women in Japanese Society**

by

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always there for me and I do not know how I would have gotten through everything without you.

Preface

On a recent research trip to Tokyo I met up with an old friend. During our meeting, we were discussing why I was in Japan at the time and I explained to her that I was interested in Japanese tattoos and in particular women with traditional Japanese tattoos, known commonly as *irezumi*. At first, when I explained my thesis topic to her she seemed confused. She was not quite clear as to what kind of tattoos I was talking about until I said the words “you know the big full piece body suits...” She responded with, “Oh... you mean like yakuza?” and all at once her expression changed from confusion to understanding and then back to confusion. She then turns to me and said “Why would you want to study such a thing?” Her question, though blunt, was one that I encountered many times throughout my trip. Whenever I mentioned to another Japanese person my topic they would always ask me Why? Why do I want to study tattoos? Or why do I want to study something that “so obviously” had to do with *yakuza*, the members of Japan’s organized crime syndicate often compared to the Italian mafia. Their questions stemmed from the general consensus that tattoos were something low, something just for criminals or those on the edge of society.

But, for many people, tattoos hold other meanings. To some a tattoo can be a work of art, while for others, a marker of some traumatic event or a particular event that one wants to retain in one’s memory. But for most, it conjures up images of thugs and gangsters. In Japan especially, there has been a long history of associating those with tattoos as a part of the yakuza. Even though nowadays “the bearer of a full-back tattoo is

increasingly likely to be a sensitive salaryman rather than a punch-permed thug,” the stigma remains.¹

This is not to say that this negative image is not changing at all. In part this is due to the increasing international popularity and critical acclaim for tattoos. In the mid-1990’s the West experienced a “tattoo boom” and tattoos became more and more common among young people, especially in the United States. Tattoo artists are now regarded in high esteem with the most famous artists charging thousands of dollars for large pieces of their art on your skin. With shows such as *Miami Ink* (2005) and *La Ink* (2007) in the United States repeatedly thrusting artists into the limelight, tattoos have become just another part of the United States mass consumer culture. In fact, it is estimated that around 14% of Americans have at least one tattoo with the highest tattooed percentage being those in the 26-40 age range with about 40% being tattooed.² Due to its rise in popularity in the West it was not long until this “boom” made its way to Japan.

In this paper I look at the history of tattoos in Japan from their indigenous beginnings to the modern period in order to consider how the perception of tattoos has changed. I consider how popular media today, Edo popular culture, and serious scholarship have all tended to focus on the male tattooed body at the expense of the female one. In these, the male tattooed body gets associated with criminal activity, bravado, strength or the ability to withstand pain. I show how even though female

¹ Jon Mitchell, “Japan Inked: Should the country reclaim its tattoo culture?” *Japan Times*, May 3, 2014, accessed January 7, 2016. <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2014/05/03/lifestyle/japan-inked-country-reclaim-tattoo-culture/#.V7KnLPkrLIU>.

² “Tattoo Statistics,” *Statistic Brain*, last modified September 27, 2015, accessed June 23, 2016, <http://www.statisticbrain.com/tattoo-statistics/>.

tattooing has occurred for ages and continues in contemporary society today, the female tattooed body has been constantly portrayed as overtly sexual. Through the analysis of literature and film of the 19th and 20th centuries I show the repeated stereotypical representation of the tattooed female as one who is reduced to nothing but her sexuality.

Even though today there are more and more Japanese people getting tattoos, in Japan there is still a lot of stigma attached to them as a whole.³ Many places, such as bathhouses or golf courses still ban people from coming in who have noticeable tattoos. With this paper I hope not only to challenge the continued stigmatization of tattoos in contemporary society, but also to reveal their historical significance and their dispersal among different groups of Japanese society. I also intend to reveal how popular representations of the tattooed female body aim to project a certain “type” of tattooed female and how these do not accurately represent a real woman’s motivations for getting tattooed.

³ Mitchell, “Japan Inked.”

Abstract

The Writ Woman: Portrayals of Tattooed Women in Japanese Society

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Tattoos, or *irezumi*, in Japanese culture are closely associated with the Japanese crime group known as the yakuza. It is these negative associations that have made it difficult for anyone with tattoos in Japan to be viewed positively, especially women. This paper hopes to alleviate some of this stigma by providing more research and information on tattoos in Japanese society,

This paper looks at the historical significance of tattoos and their diffusion among different groups of Japanese society. Popular representations of the tattooed female body are also analyzed and how the “type” of tattooed female portrayed is dependent upon the gender of the author. Male authored works tend to focus on the tattooed female as overly sexual with a troubled past. Female authored works more accurately represent the female’s motivations for getting tattooed and that women feel liberated by them. Interviews of present day tattooed women show that many women now see tattoos as fashionable and that the younger generation is letting go of the negative perceptions associated with tattoos.

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Chapter One: Introduction

A full bodied tattooed skin stands on a wooden platform in a small a branch of the University of Tokyo's Pathological Museum. It depicts the tale of Kintarō, the Golden Boy and his fight against a giant carp from the neck to the upper thighs. The displayed skin is the result of a retired yakuza boss' donation and is much smaller than one would imagine. Unfortunately Dr. Sugimoto, the retired pathologist who curates and cares for the items in the museum, could not remember from what year the skin was. However, he did mention that it arrived at the museum in Showa-50 (1975). He also claimed that the reason for the skin's stature is because people did not grow that much taller back then, although when *then* is unknown. He stated that the skin's size most likely represents the male's accurate body size since not much shrinkage happens throughout the preservation process.

The tattooed skin is only one of a few skins available for public view. The University Museum's archives actually hold one of the world largest collections of tattooed human skins, but unfortunately the collection has been closed off from the public. The collection is a result of pathologist, Masaichi Fukushi's interest in Japanese tattoos and how pigments travel within the skin.⁴ While Fukushi may have begun his collection in the 20th century, Japan's history with tattooing actually spans hundreds of years, with their peak occurring in the period (1603-1867). Before the decorative style that became popular in the Edo period existed, tattoos were used as a form of

⁴Tattoo Club of Great Britain, "Educational Material: Human Skin Collection in Tokyo, Japan," last modified 2000-2002, accessed August 2, 2016. <http://www.tattoo.co.uk/edumaterial.htm>.

punishment, a way to permanently mark the wearer as a criminal and an outcast. In the Edo period many firemen, craftsmen and workmen would proudly display tattoos as a mark of strength. This rise in popularity led many other types of groups to famously display their tattoos, none more famous than the *yakuza*.

The *yakuza*, also known as the Japanese mafia, is a vast group of organized crime. *Yakuza* claim to trace their lineage back to the Edo period to the groups of men known as *otokodate* (chivalrous commoners) or *kyōkaku* (hosts of heroism). These men were seen as a type of noble outlaw who would protect the poor and desolate from unscrupulous landlords and government officials.⁵ These groups of men would often get their bodies decorated with large tattoos in order to appear tougher and intimidate their would-be opponents. When the *yakuza* formed, they continued this practice and would often have full body tattoos covering everything except their neck, hands and feet. Over time large body suit tattoos became synonymous with organized crime in Japan and many people learned to stay away from those with them.

Tattoos' negative associations caused them to be officially banned by the Japanese government during Japan's Meiji Period (1868-1912) in 1872. Japanese officials were afraid that tattoos would be regarded as barbaric by Western visitors. As a result, tattoo artists went underground. The ban was finally lifted in 1948, but many traditional tattoo artists or *horishi* (彫り師) still had the mentality that tattoos and their work should operate under covert conditions. When the tattoo boom finally reached Japan the Western "one-point" style became popular. "One-point" refers to the tendency

⁵Mark Poysden, *A History of Japanese Body Suit Tattooing*, (Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2006), 68-69.

for Western style tattoos to not be part of a larger piece; they only occupy one point on the body, with no connection to anything else. These one-point tattoos are quick and fashionable acting merely as a consumable fashion accessory for some. In contrast, large Japanese style tattoos or *wabori*, have traditionally been an indicator of status or identity. The long term process requires more of a commitment and an increased relationship between tattoo artist and patron. While the attitude towards this traditional approach is changing under U.S. influences, mainstream ideas about tattoos continue to stigmatize the tattooed body, and in particular the tattooed female.

PAST SCHOLARSHIP

A cursory look on a search engine for the words “Japanese tattoo” initially brings up tattoo shops or thousands of potential tattoo design ideas. This same search also brings up thousands of *yakuza* references. Other results not related to designs, shops or gangsters involve articles about the artists themselves. Articles mostly consist of interviews asking artists about their influences and what they think about tattoos and tattooing in general. The same is true of books. Most books focus on the artwork created by the tattooist themselves or information about the artists. These books act more like an artist’s portfolio displaying their best works rather than a source of reference. Most tattoo books are compiled by other artists themselves or if not an artist, a staunch tattoo enthusiast. Some books provide small sections of tattoo history as part of an individual group’s larger history. Some examples of those are, Cecilia Seigle’s *Yoshiwara: the Glittering World of the Japanese Courtesan* (1993) where she focuses on the prostitutes in Edo’s (the old name for Tokyo) old pleasure quarters and David E. Kaplan and Alec

Dubro's *Yakuza : Japan's Criminal Underworld* (2003), in which they go into great detail about Japan's organized crime institution.

The most comprehensive work on tattooing is W.R. Van Gulik's *Irezumi: the pattern of dermatography in Japan* (1982), which offers a detailed look at Japan's history of tattooing. He conducts a thorough study of firemen's tattoos explaining the meanings and reasons for the various symbols and motifs. Van Gulik also dedicates two chapters to Japan's indigenous people, the Ainu. The Ainu are known for their large facial tattoos, particularly among their female population, and he discusses the importance of their history and place within Ainu society.

Another valuable resource was Donald Richie and Ian Buruma's *The Japanese Tattoo* (1980). While a short book, Richie and Buruma go into historical detail about the rise of tattooing in Japan, but this book stands out because they also dissect the reasons for getting tattooed. Richie delves into the social psychology of tattoos. He gives six reasons for why a person would get tattooed: initiation, communal membership, an indication of candidacy into a group, to define oneself, talisman, and for beautification purposes.⁶

Mark Poysden's book *A History of Body Suit Tattooing* (2006) provides an exhaustive history of tattoos in Japan. Poysden not only discusses various methods and motifs of Japanese tattooing, he also provides a history of the Tokugawa's rise to power, the connection between firemen and tattoos, the presence of tattoos in Yoshiwara's pleasure quarters as well as a history of the yakuza.

⁶ Donald Richie and Ian Buruma, *The Japanese Tattoo*, (New York: Weatherhill, 1980), 54-76.

Takahiro Kitamura uses a comparative approach in his books. *Tattoos of the Floating World: Ukiyo-e motifs in the Japanese tattoo* (2003) focuses on tattoos' connection with wood block prints and *Bushido: Legacies of the Japanese tattoo* (2001) deals with the relationship between tattoo masters and their apprentices and the similarities this relationship has with the samurai code of honor known as *bushido*.

Unfortunately, most books and articles only deal generally with tattoos as historical phenomenon or treat as works of art. Few books focus on the modern period, many stopping shortly after the Edo period with the ban on tattoos. Most importantly, very few books (with the exception of Richie) deal with the question of how Japanese tattooing relates to identity. And the ones that focus on certain occupations that are attached to tattoos tend to privilege men. For example, Van Gulik does a nice job focusing on the Edo firemen and Kitamura does the samurai, and while there are those like Seigle and Poysden that do focus on courtesans and tattoos, it is usually in relation to their male clients rather than focused on the women themselves. In this past scholarship, the woman's own identity and sense of self is never discussed.

In contrast, there exists a wealth of scholarship on Western tattooing and identity or the psychology behind body modification.⁷ Perhaps this is because the West has long regarded tattoos more as works of art and therefore, an avenue for self-expression and identity, while in Japan the overall stigma with tattoos has prevented scholars from

⁷ For some examples see: Michael Atkinson, *Tattooed: The Sociogenesis of a Body Art* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003). Margo DeMello, *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000). Clinton Sanders, *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003). Nikki Sullivan, *Tattooed Bodies: Subjectivity, Textuality, Ethics and Pleasure* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2001). Beverly Yuen Thompson, *Covered in Ink: Tattoos, Women, and the Politics of the Body*, (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

gathering serious information on the subject since most people do not see it as a topic worth researching or perhaps because those who are tattooed in Japan do not want to talk about or display their tattoos in public because of said stigma.

METHOD

Social constructions of gender can either explicitly or implicitly say much about the cultural stereotypes or gender norms of the society in which these constructions were created. Gender representations in any form can “perpetuate unrealistic, stereotypical, and limiting perceptions” or they can subvert these normative gender expectations.⁸ I consider first the history of tattooing with attention to gender. Next, I analyze examples of Japanese literature and film as a means of understanding how they reflect and shape societal attitudes about tattoos. These works that focus on the tattooed female as a protagonist who works through some form of adversity create a dominant narrative formula that equates women and tattoos with sex. Through this analysis, I show that the tattooed female is one that is portrayed as an overtly sexualized being where her sexual nature and experience play a major, if not the only, defining role in her character. Alternatively, if the tattooed female is not shown as overtly sexual, she is occupying a stereotypically hyper masculine role, such as a gang boss, but this is not to say that her sexuality is nonexistent merely that it takes a masculine form. These works include short stories, crime dramas, erotic violent films, contemporary memoirs, documentary and feature films. Overall, however, woman plus tattoos equals sex.

⁸ Julia T. Wood, “Gendered Media: The Influence of Media on Views of Gender,” in *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, and Culture*, (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing, 1994), 231.

The stigma associated with tattoos is a hard one to get rid of. Even in the West, where the percentage of the tattooed population increases every day, heavily tattooed people can be seen as intimidating if they are male or promiscuous if they are female.⁹ The fact that many books, movies, magazines and TV shows still display those with tattooed as part of the fringe members of society does nothing to alleviate the situation. It is only through the increased research and analysis of the tattooed population in Japan that one can hope to change the average Japanese citizen's point of view on tattoos.

OVERVIEW

Chapter Two contains a wide scope of historical information on tattoos in Japan from its earliest mentions with the indigenous *Ainu* people in the first century until today. Japan is notable for being the first recorded instance of tattooing in the world. The effects of penal tattooing and the decorative tattoos that emerge during Japan's Edo period are also discussed. The chapter ultimately traces tattoos along different parts of Edo society, from the ramifications of Edo strict class system to firemen units, woodblock prints, Kabuki theatre and the pleasure quarters of Yoshiwara.

Chapter Three analyzes several works of Japanese film and literature featuring women with tattoos. These are: Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's *Shisei* (1910), Volume 4 of the *Lone Wolf and Cub* series "Baby Cart in Peril" (1972), the pinky violence films of the 1960s and 70s such as *Legends of the Poisonous Seductress: Volume 1: Female Demon Ohyaku* (1968), the 1973 films *Sex and Fury* and *Female Yakuza Tale*. Crime dramas, *Black Lizard* (1968) and *Swallowtail Butterfly* (1996) as well as more contemporary pieces like

⁹See: Thompson, *Covered in Ink*.

Naomi Kawase's film, *Kyakarabaa* (2001) Shōko Tendō's *Yakuza Moon: Memoirs of a Gangster's Daughters* (2004), and Hitomi Kanehara's *Hebi ni Piasu* (2005). The chapter is split up into works authored or directed by men and those created by women. This split highlights how tattoos and the perception of tattoos vary between the two sexes. While not a complete list by far, the works selected contain a fair number of the general tropes of the tattooed female and are indicative of the whole. Themes of sexual assault, criminal activity, the femme fatale, and promiscuity are seen again and again.

The final chapter goes to the present day and focuses, not on fictional representations, but more on how present day tattooed women see themselves. The materials/sources include interviews with the tattooed female in Japan as well as magazine and newspaper articles about these women. Such works can suggest contemporary attitudes about tattoos, as well as the future of tattooing in Japan.

In focusing on the tattooed female, it is my attempt to bring light to this neglected aspect in the world of tattooing. By placing an emphasis on their stereotypical and at times negative portrayals in media, it is my hope that it will inspire others to create a new kind of narrative for them, one not stained with the marks of the past, but instead one accepting of new possibilities in tattooing.

Chapter Two: A Tattoo History

Humankind has marked its body with decorative features for thousands of years. An archaeological discovery on September 19, 1991, known as *Oetzi the Iceman*, records the earliest incident of tattooing worldwide.¹⁰ Oetzi, named after the Oetzel Alps where he was found, is in actuality a Stone Age shepherd that was found preserved in the permafrost of the Schnalstal glacier on the Austrian-Italian border.¹¹ He is over 5300 years old and his body is covered with 61 tattoos.¹² The tattoos take the form of a series of lines or crosses and are thought to be for therapeutic purposes rather than decorative as they are placed in areas of the body that must have caused him in pain due to diseases while he was alive.¹³

Oetzi's is not the only ancient civilization to contain tattoos. Ancient Egyptian mummies were also discovered "bearing tattoos of animals and various creatures."¹⁴ In East and North Asia, a 2500-year-old intricately tattooed female mummy was found from the Altai Mountains indicating that the practice was widespread among Siberian peoples. The mummy, known as the Ukok Princess, was found alongside two males, possibly her

¹⁰ Nancy Heimbürger and Marco Bratt. *The Sketchbook: 80 unique designs by the world's finest tattoo artists*. (Leiden: Hotei, 2003), 11. Lori St. Leone, "The Art and History of Body Modification," *Lightspeed*. Issues 6. November 2010, accessed January 7, 2016. <http://www.lightspeedmagazine.com/nonfiction/the-art-and-history-of-body-modification>. "About the Val Senales Glacier in South Tyrol, Italy," *Schnalstaler Gletscherbahnen*, accessed June 6, 2016, <http://www.schnalstal.com/en/glacier/about-the-glacier.html>.

¹¹ Heimbürger. *The Sketchbook*. 11.

¹² South Tyrol Museum of Archaeology, "The Tattoos," last modified 2013, accessed June 6, 2016, <http://www.iceman.it/en/tattoos>.

¹³ South Tyrol, "The Tattoos."

¹⁴ St. Leone. "The Art and History of Body Modification".

warriors, who were also tattooed.¹⁵ In Japan's Jomon period (10,000-300 BC) clay figures known as *dogu* were found in tombs that date from 5000 BC or older.¹⁶ These figures often have lines and dots representative of tattoos with some featuring marks similar to the tattooed mouths found among *Ainu* women.¹⁷ Many think the markings had a religious or magical significance.¹⁸

Use of tattoos spread to different segments of Japanese society throughout the pre-modern and early modern (Edo) periods. This chapter traces their historical route and points out the gendered differences in historical tattoos, which offered men status, group membership, and bragging rights. While for women, tattoos were primarily an indicator of their relationship to the men in their lives.

EARLY TATTOOING

The *Ainu* are Japan's group of indigenous people who known for the extensive tattoo work they feature on their bodies, especially on their women. The earliest mention of *Ainu* tattooing comes from the *Nihon shoki*, or the Chronicles of Japan. In a passage from Book VII of the *Nihon shoki*, Takeshiuchi no Sukune, a legendary hero statesman, reported in A.D. 97 to the Emperor Keiko that "In the desolate wilderness of the East, there is a land called Hitakami. The inhabitants, both men and women, bind up their hair

¹⁵Nicholas Thomas, *Body Art*, (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2014), 139. Siberian Times Reporter, "The Siberian Princess reveals her 2,500 years old tattoos," August 14, 2012, accessed June 7, 2016, <http://siberiantimes.com/culture/others/features/siberian-princess-reveals-her-2500-year-old-tattoos/>.

¹⁶ Steve Gilbert, *Tattoo History: A Source Book*, (New York: Juno Books, LLC, 2000), 77

¹⁷ Thomas, *Body Art*, 139. Heimbürger. *The Sketchbook*, 19.

¹⁸ Gilbert, *Tattoo History*, 77.

in the shape of a mallet and they tattoo their bodies...”¹⁹ Even though this early reference states that both men and women mark their bodies, it is generally agreed upon that tattooing was a practice restricted to the Ainu women. Even the job of tattooist was reserved for women. There would always be one or two elderly women in every village whose function it was to perform tattoos upon request.²⁰ There was a strict division of labor between the sexes in Ainu society. Men were the hunters, fishermen, and warriors. They were also in charge of entertaining guests at parties and officiating religious ceremonies. Ainu women were the gatherers and cultivators of crops. They also took care of the rest of the daily activities, mainly the household chores.²¹

Ainu girls are first tattooed between the ages of 10 and 13 (some sources state as young as 6 or 7)²² with completed tattoos symbolizing “marriageable age”.²³ A completed tattoo takes the form of a wide band around the mouth with extended curved ends, symbolizing their virtue or purity.²⁴ Ainu women also bore tattoo marks on their arms and hands and other parts of the body. These tattoos functioned as talismans to protect young girls from evil spirits and as charms against diseases.²⁵

Japan’s introduction to Buddhism by Prince Shotoku in 593 A.D. facilitated many visits by Japanese priests, students and scholars to China and much information about

¹⁹ W.R. Van Gulik, *Irezumi: The pattern of dermatography in Japan*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1982), 4.

²⁰ Van Gulik, *Irezumi*, 187-192.

²¹ Van Gulik, *Irezumi*, 193.

²² Lars Krutak, “Tattooing Among Japan’s Ainu People,” 2008, accessed January 7, 2016, <http://www.larskrutak.com/tattooing-among-japans-ainu-people/>.

²³ Heimburger. *The Sketchbook*, 19.

²⁴ Heimburger. *The Sketchbook*, 19.

²⁵ Krutak, “Japan’s Ainu People,” 2008.

China was brought back to Japan.²⁶ By the time the *Nihon shoki* was formulated in 720 A.D., Chinese thought had already influenced Japan. The *Nihon shoki* was even compiled as a way to give “the newly Sinicized court a history that could be compared with the annals of the Chinese.”²⁷ It was this permeation of Chinese influence and thought into Japanese culture as well as Buddhist ideologies that explain why such early historical texts denigrated tattooing as negative. The Chinese people associated tattooing with barbarism as well as criminality using it only as a form of punishment.²⁸

One of the earliest references for penal tattooing in Japan is also found in the *Nihon shoki*. It is when Hamako, chieftain of Azumi, was brought before the Emperor under an imperial order “in the first year of the reign of Emperor Richū (A.D. 400), in the summer, 4th month, 17th day” and “spoke the following words to him:

Now, together with the imperial prince Nakatsu, you have plotted to rebel and to overthrow the state. This offence is punishable by death. I shall, however, confer great mercy on you by remitting the death penalty and sentence you to be tattooed.

On the same day, he was tattooed near the eye.²⁹

Tattooing on the face as punishment is also mentioned in the Jōei Code of 1232.³⁰ When referring to tattooing as a form of punishment the Japanese word, *irezumi* (入れ墨) (刺青), is used. The word *irezumi* is a compound word consisting of the verb *iru* (入る),

²⁶ Van Gulik, *Irezumi*, 10.

²⁷ Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, “Nihon Shoki: Japanese chronicles,” accessed June 7, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Nihon-shoki>.

²⁸ Gilbert, *Tattoo History*, 77.

²⁹ Van Gulik, *Irezumi*, 6.

³⁰ The Jōei code was an administrative code by the Kamakura government in which it pledged “just and impartial administration of laws,” Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, “Jōei Shikimoku: Japanese Administrative Code,” accessed June 7, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Joei-Shikimoku>.

which means to bring in, to put in or insert, and *zumi* comes from *sumi* (墨), which is the black-blue ink derived from soot used in Japanese tattooing. The compound is frequently written not as 入れ墨, but instead as 刺青 with the first kanji (刺) meaning to prick or to stab and the second kanji (青) is the character for blue or green, which could have to do with the way the traditional *sumi* ink used for tattooing turns a bluish-green hue as that tattoo matures on the skin.

Where you were tattooed denoted what kind of person you were or your place in society, whether that of an outcast or a criminal. Tattoos served as a permanent reminder that you cannot change your circumstances and a constant reminder to others of what you are. “Outcasts were tattooed on the arms: a cross might be tattooed on the forearm or on the upper arm”.³¹ Criminals, however, were marked in a variety of places. In a way tattoos acted as brands, a way of publicly displaying someone’s degradation and personal shame. Tattoos for criminals often consisted of wide black stripes on the arms. The placement on the arm was analogous to the region or part of the country the sentence was executed. In Edo the number of stripes also dictated how many times the criminal had repeated the offence. Sometimes a character was used. In the province of Chikuzen, located in Kyushu’s Fukuoka prefecture, a three time offender garnered the character for dog (犬) with each offense gaining a new stroke of the character across the forehead. Due to the very public nature of penal tattoos, a convicted criminal could never really get a “fresh start”. His offense permanently delegated him to the outcast portion of society, and

³¹ Gilbert, *Tattoo History*, 77.

as a result left people feeling frustrated and resentful.³² Some scholars believe that it was the attempts of these criminals and outcasts to hide their punishment marks by tattooing over them with figures or other decorative motifs that were the beginnings of Japan's representational tattooing seen later in the Edo period. Others are skeptical of this explanation since covering up the punishment tattoos would be directly tampering with state records.³³ In either case, the sense of solidarity formed by those with tattoos, and the tendency for these tattoos to be useful as a means for intimidation, alongside the popularity of decorative tattooing in the Edo period among the general population as well led the government to ban tattooing as punishment in 1870.³⁴

EDO SOCIETY

Japan's Edo period (1603-1868) was a time of peace and prosperity as well as a time of high social control. Edo's system of government was the *bakuhun* system with hereditary military leader known as the *shogun* having complete control.

The *bakuhun*'s domination over society made it possible for them to enact a strict class system. The military class, known as the *buke* (武家) was at the top. This class consisted of the *daimyo* or military commanders at the top and the samurai (侍), a name given to all the warriors in the service of the *shogun*, who were allowed to wear long and short swords (*daishoi*).³⁵ After the *buke* class are the farmers and peasants (*hyakushō*).³⁶

³² Van Gulik, *Irezumi*, 11-13.

³³ Peter B.E. Hill, *The Japanese Mafia: Yakuza, Law, and the State*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 87.

³⁴ Van Gulik, *Irezumi*, 13.

³⁵ Poysden, *Japanese Body Suit Tattooing*, 25.

³⁶ Van Gulik, *Irezumi*, 19.

Farmers were subjected to heavy taxes by the *daimyō*, who at times barely left them with enough rice to feed themselves and their families. Farmers could not buy, sell, or abandon their land. Travel and moving to another village was restricted as well, with permission given for special circumstances.³⁷ After the farmers, the third rung of society belonged to the artisan class (*shokunin*), which included day laborers. The fourth and final place belonged to the tradesmen and merchants (*chōnin*). The outcast group, whom were seen as separate or outside of society, consisted of two groups, the *hinin* and the *eta*. The *eta* class was a hereditary class of outcasts who almost exclusively performed tasks dealing death as animal slaughtering, body disposal and grave digging. They were considered “ritually unclean”.³⁸ *Hinin* consisted of those who occupied transient positions in society. These were the “registered beggars, itinerant entertainers, prostitutes, diviners, fugitives, medium, and religious pilgrims.”³⁹ Those convicted of a crime were relegated to this group.

The *bakufu* had rules and regulations for almost everything: from social status to wages, leisure activities, marriage eligibility and even clothing. Clothing has played an important role in Japanese society for a long time. Even as far back as the Heian period (794-1185) one can find examples of commentary on clothing and how certain colors and fabrics were only allotted for certain members of society.⁴⁰ Tattoos were another kind of

³⁷ Poysden, *Japanese Body Suit Tattooing*, 31.

³⁸ Van Gulik, *Irezumi*, 13.

³⁹ Poysden, *Japanese Body Suit Tattooing*, 35.

⁴⁰ See Murasaki Shikibu, *The Diary of Lady Murasaki*, (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1996) and Sei Shonagon, *The Pillow Book* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2006).

clothing, but one on the skin that offered a “safe” or subversive way to flout authority.⁴¹ Even though the *bakufu* barred commoners from using certain brightly colored or intricately designed kimono, tattoos offered a way to sport brilliant colors and works of arts without fear of removal.

Tattoos’ subjects offered another opportunity for silent dissent by Edo people. One of the most popular tattoo motifs are the heroes from the novel *Suikoden*. *Suikoden* is actually a Chinese novel written during the end of China’s Yüan dynasty (1279-1368) by the authors Shih Nai-an and Lo Kuang-chung.⁴² The novel’s title in Chinese is *Shui-hu chuan* translated as “The Water Margin” or “All Men are Brothers”.⁴³ It follows the heroic antics of outlaws presumably towards the end of the Northern Song dynasty (967-1127). These heroes banded together in a solitary group with a strict code of conduct and honor to defend the poor and destitute. The novel was actually a piece of anti-authoritarian writing. The entire premise of the plot features a band of outlaws revolting against the corrupt bureaucracy. Many scholars are surprised that the novel made it past the government censors, with its clear anti-establishment undercurrent, but have surmised that perhaps since the novel took place around 600 years earlier that no great correlation was detected.⁴⁴

The group consisted of 36 main characters and 72 lesser figure and their hideout was at Liangshan mountain known as Liang-shan-po and thus are known as the ‘Hundred

⁴¹ Richie, *The Japanese Tattoo*, 18-19.

⁴² Van Gulik, *Irezumi*, 44.

⁴³ It should be interesting to note that even though one of the common English translations for *Suikoden* is “All Men are Brothers” the 108 heroes actually consisted of both men and women!

⁴⁴ See Van Gulik’s *Irezumi*, Poyden’s *A History of Japanese Body Suit Tattooing* and Richie’s *The Japanese Tattoo*.

and Eight Liangshan Heroes'.⁴⁵ Even though by the beginning of the 18th century the novel had already been introduced to Japan, it was not until two masters of art and writing collaborated on an illustrated version of the text that it gained a huge influx in popularity. These two masters were Kyokutei Bakin (1767-1848) and Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849). Their version titled *Shinpen suiko gaden* ("Illustrated new edition of the *Suikoden*") was a massive ninety volume edition, of nine parts ten volumes each, and took an impressive 33 years to complete.⁴⁶ The first installment was published in 1805 and the second completed in 1807.⁴⁷ This renewed fervor for the *Suikoden* heroes led the publisher Kagaya Kichiemon to commission a set of designs from the popular artist, Utagawa Kuniyoshi.⁴⁸ At first there were only five designs in the series, but the prints gained such rapid popularity that he was soon asked to make prints for the rest of the 108 heroes.⁴⁹ He titled the print set "The 108 heroes of the popular *Suikoden* all told". It features the 108 warriors of the novel the *Suikoden* in all their glory and splendor, usually in their final heroic moments.

In the original Chinese novel only four of the main characters were tattooed. These were:

1. Chin-wen-lung Shih Chin (Kyūmonryū Shishin) or "The Nine Dragoned"
2. Hua-ho-shang Lu Chih-shen (Kaoshō Rochishin) or "The Tattooed Priest"
3. Lang-li-po-t'iao Chang Shun (Rōrihakuchō Chōjun) or "White Stripe in the Waves"

⁴⁵ Van Gulik, *Irezumi*, 45.

⁴⁶ Even though Bakin and Hokusai are largely credited for the entire series, their friendship dissolved after the tenth volume and Takai Ranzan took over translation for Bakin. Van Gulik, *Irezumi*, 46,

⁴⁷ Poysden, *Japanese Body Suit Tattooing*, 131.

⁴⁸ Kuniyoshi was a popular *ukiyo-e* artist of woodblock prints. *Ukiyo-e* are pictures of the floating world. "The floating world" was the nickname given to the licensed pleasure quarters in Tokyo known as Yoshiwara.

⁴⁹ Poysden, *Japanese Body Suit Tattooing*, 133.

4. Lang-tzu Yen Ch'ing (Rōshi Ensei) or “The Prodigal”.⁵⁰

When Utagawa Kuniyoshi was asked to create *ukiyo-e* prints for all 108 heroes, he took some artistic liberties with them and added tattoos to at least 16 more of the Lianshang heroes.⁵¹ Kuniyoshi's prints are known for their beautiful detail and colorful, intense expression of heroic deeds. It is their explosive use of color and actions denoting bravery and strength that appealed most to certain members of Edo society, who then inscribed these prints and motifs upon their bodies in order to gain some of the power depicted in them.

The group most attributed to popularizing tattoos in Edo society are the firemen or *hikeshi* (火消し). Due to the nature of the building materials many homes would catch fire, usually from unattended candles or cooking fires. Fire was such a pandemic in Edo society that after the destruction caused by the Great Meireki Fire of 1657 the *shogun* introduced a series of reforms for fire safety and prevention, including city expansion and the widening of city streets to prevent overcrowding.

Being a firefighter during the Edo era was not an easy task. Due to the frequent nature of fires in the city, firefighters were in constant danger of becoming seriously injured. In order to protect themselves from the flames firefighters utilized a number of different methods. Some firemen wore a protective coat (*kajibanten*) made out of layers

⁵⁰ Most sources say that originally only four of the characters were tattooed. However, Poysden mentions also mention Kōhōgi Shōkō or “Inlet Dweller”. Van Gulik, *Irezumi*, 47. Poysden, *Japanese Body Suit Tattooing*, 131.

⁵¹ In his book *Irezumi*, W.R. Van Gulik gives a detailed breakdown of the different prints featuring tattoos as well as what kind of designs each of the figures were portraying. Van Gulik, *Irezumi*, 51.

of heavily stitched cotton sewn together with the *sachiko* quilting technique.⁵² Others, particularly those of the commoner *machibikeshi* unit, employed a more superstitious route and took to tattooing the entire length of their bodies, except for their heads, hands and feet, with pictures of powerful beings such as dragons, since they were said to provide protection from the flames.⁵³ Firemen in the *machibikeshi* often only wore a loincloth (*fundoshi*) during a firefight and any “extra” protection was welcomed.⁵⁴ Even those who did not tattoo their bodies would have these same kinds of pictures painted on their coats because they believed it would provide the same kind of protection as the tattoos.

Firemen also simply wanted to appear tougher. Given tattoos past connection with the punishment of criminals as well their attachment to the bandit heroes of the *Suikoden*, many of those who chose to bear tattoos were trying to fashion themselves after such “hard and brazen characters”, those fringe members of society that did not follow the law and fought for what they wanted.⁵⁵ Edo firemen also had a reputation for being hot-headed and arrogant, as well as frequently causing fights between members of different units.⁵⁶ The high pain factor involved with getting a full body tattoo also helped add to their hard, masculine profile. Firefighters were not the only members of society to get tattoos either. Palanquin bearers, day laborers and many artisans or small tradesmen were tattooed as well, usually choosing designs indicative of their particular craft. For

⁵² Van Gulik, *Irezumi*, 67.

⁵³ Poysden, *Japanese Body Suit Tattooing*, 127.

⁵⁴ Poysden, *Japanese Body Suit Tattooing*, 45-47.

⁵⁵ Thomas, *Body Art*, 146.

⁵⁶ Poysden, *Japanese Body Suit Tattooing*, 50.

example, a fishmonger would get a fish tattooed on their arm or a professional gambler would tattoo a deck of cards on themselves.⁵⁷

Other members of the urban male tattooed population included the notorious *machi-yakko* (servants of the town), later known as the *otokodate* or “chivalrous commoners”. These were members of society that banded together during Edo’s population expansion in order to protect the townspeople against the *bakufu* and rising groups of *kabukimono* gangs.⁵⁸ The *otokodate* were so revered that they were of the subject of many kabuki plays, woodblock prints, songs and stories, all heralding their bravery, their fight against corruption and ruffians and their tattoos (the characters of the *Suikoden* all fill this “honorable outlaw” role).

One of the most popular kabuki plays in late Edo, titled *Benten Kozō* (1862), involves an *otokodate* hero “catching” two bandits disguised as two women pretending to shoplift. The play’s most dramatic scene comes when a third bandit exposes the “women” as men by revealing the cherry blossoms tattooed on of the men’s shoulders. This pivotal reveal is “one of kabuki’s most famous moments”.⁵⁹ *Otokodate* are so popular and revered that even the modern day crime organization, the yakuza, identify themselves with these “servants of the town”.

In reality, the yakuza are the descendants of two groups called *tekiya* (itinerant peddlers) and the *bakuto* (gamblers).⁶⁰ The members of each group come from the outcast and neglected members of society that banded together to do what they could to

⁵⁷ Van Gulik, *Irezumi*, 57-60.

⁵⁸ Poysden, *Japanese Body Suit Tattooing*, 68.

⁵⁹ Leiter, p. 15 as quoted in Van Gulik, *Irezumi*, 80.

⁶⁰ Hill, *The Japanese Mafia*, 36.

earn money. The *tekiya* had a monopoly over the portable booths and market fairs, known for their deceitful tactics that cheat customers out of their money, either selling shoddy goods or jacking up prices. The *bakuto* operated as gambling gangs along highways trying to swindle construction workers out of their high wages. The frequent procession of lords to Edo from the provinces provided them with a constant influx of nobles, servants and couriers that would also partake in games.⁶¹ Both groups, however, stuck to their own parts of town so closely that they were able to operate in the same area without much conflict. The word *yakuza* actually comes from the worst hand possible in a traditional Japanese gambling card game using *hanafuda* cards (flower cards).⁶² It essentially has the same meaning as worthless and it was later applied to the gangs themselves to suggest they were useless to society, much like convicts in the U.S. tattoo the words “born to lose” on their bodies.⁶³ The term was later spread to include the *bakuto* and the *tekiya* as well as other crime groups.

As with the term *yakuza*, tattooing also spread from the *bakuto* to the *tekiya*. It is now almost exclusively associated with the *yakuza* and the underworld in the Japanese mindset.⁶⁴ Members of gangs took to tattooing themselves with large-scale *irezumi* or tattoos. Like the firemen and day laborers, the undergoing of such a painful and extensive work on their skin was an indication of their strength, ability to endure pain and masculinity. It also speaks volumes about one’s commitment to the *yakuza* lifestyle and

⁶¹ David E. Kaplan and Alec Dubro, *Yakuza: Japan's Criminal Underworld*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 10-13.

⁶² *Hanafuda* cards are traditional Japanese playing cards much smaller in size than their Western counterparts. These cards were decorated by the founder of Nintendo Koppai in order to increase sales. Poysden, *Japanese Body Suit Tattooing*, 73.

⁶³ Kaplan, *Yakuza: Japan's Criminal Underworld*, 13.

⁶⁴ Kaplan, *Yakuza: Japan's Criminal Underworld*, 15.

to their group. Tattoos are so stigmatized in Japanese society in general (due to their connection with criminals, gangs and punishment) that by choosing to permanently mark yourself with such a large piece speaks volumes about your pledge to be a part of this underground world as well as conversely stating your disengagement from mainstream society.⁶⁵

THE PLEASURE QUARTERS: YOSHIWARA

Tattoos in Edo were not exclusive to the male body; many courtesans in the pleasure quarters of Yoshiwara took part in tattoo culture. Like the rest of Edo society Yoshiwara, established in the 17th century, also contained many traditions and protocols. Several books were published “instructing the courtesans on decorum, hygiene and the gracious handling of clients”.⁶⁶ Courtesans needed to make the customers fall in love with them, but not to fall in love with the customer. Many patrons, skeptical of the courtesan’s intentions, asked for proof of their loyalty and devotion in return. Acts of declaration of love were called *shinjū*.⁶⁷ There were a few different ways that courtesans could do this. The initial declaration could be as simple as a letter between lovers. Another way was to cut either a piece of hair or the whole thing completely off, called *kami-kiri*. Lovers could also express their bond via tattoos. A courtesan could exchange vows with their client through a practice called *irebukuro*, which literally means “the

⁶⁵ Hill, *Japanese Mafia*, 88-89.

⁶⁶ Poysden, *Japanese Body Suit Tattooing*, 44

⁶⁷ Nowadays, however, the term *shinjū* refers only to double love suicides or to the multiple suicides of a group of like minded people. Seigle, *Yoshiwara*, 276. Poysden, *Japanese Body Suit Tattooing*, 44.

putting in of a mole”.⁶⁸ This practice consisted of tattooing a small dot on each of the lover’s hands between the index finger and thumb, so that when they held hands their thumbs would be beside the other’s dot. Others still would tattoo their lovers’ names on their arms, or a few words or a small expression.⁶⁹ Clients that were more skeptical would ask for more substantial declarations such as the removal of a fingernail (*tsume-hanashi*) or even a whole finger or finger joint (*yubi-kiri*).⁷⁰ Large disfiguring body modifications, such as the removal of fingers or large tattoos, were avoided for the most part as employers did not want anything to “ruin the merchandise”.⁷¹ Either way the treatment of tattoos in Yoshiwara reduced the women’s bodies to nothing more than merchandise by their employers and a piece of property to be claimed by their clients turned lovers.

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

The decision to ban tattoos for good came as a direct result of United States interference. In the summer of 1853, Commodore Perry arrived with his “black ships” in Edo Bay. His visit eventually led to Japan to open up its ports to foreign vessels seeking safe harbor, which effectively ended Japan’s national seclusion policy after over a 100 years.⁷² When the country finally opened up to foreigners, Japan’s government was fearful of conquest by other countries, due to their more advanced weapons and technology. In order “to avoid occupation by Western countries, Japan needed to appear

⁶⁸ Van Gulik, *Irezumi*, 25-26.

⁶⁹ Seigle, *Yoshiwara*, 192.

⁷⁰ Van Gulik, *Irezumi*, 26.

⁷¹ Seigle, *Yoshiwara*, 193.

⁷² Conrad Totman, *A History of Japan, Second Edition* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 289.

civilized,” in other words more Western.⁷³ The Meiji government tried to erase aspects of which they thought foreigners would regard as barbaric or backwards. They encouraged the use of Western clothing, regulated men’s hairstyles banning the samurai topknot and in 1872, they effectively banned tattooing. Previous governments had tried to ban tattooing due to the subversive nature of the motifs, but due to its popularity, bans were never effective until now.

The ban in 1872 succeeded in finally driving tattooing underground and becoming a part of the underworld. Eventually, this led the yakuza to exploit tattoos’ negative connotations for intimidation and as a way to increase their profile. Nowadays, tattoos are largely looked down upon because of the ties they have with yakuza.

In reality, tattoos in Japan have meant different things for different people. To the Ainu women, tattoos were an indicator of marriageability, a coming of age rite for women and provided protection against harmful entities. An increased relationship with China brought penal tattooing to Japan and by the 8th century, tattoos were associated with crime and punishment. It is in Edo that we see tattoos reach a mass popularity as the art and literature of the time-period influence more and more people to get tattoos. The Yoshiwara prostitutes used them as a means to display their affection for a particular client. Firemen tattooed themselves as a form of protection from the many fires in the city and young street gangs used them as means to establish group solidarity. Tattoos have never been exclusive to the yakuza and hopefully, as more people get tattooed and as

⁷³ Yoshimi Yamamoto, *Irezumi no Sekai* (“Tattoo: The Anthropology of Body Decoration”), (Tokyo: Kawade Shobo Shinsha, 2005) as quoted in Mitchell, “Japan Inked”.

Japanese citizens' interaction with many different kinds of tattooed people increases, the stigma associated with tattooing will cease to exist.

Chapter Three: The Writ Woman

From the curved mouths of Japan's indigenous *Ainu* women to the *irebukuro* love pledges by the Yoshiwara prostitutes, women in Japan have had a long history with tattoos. The meaning of tattoos for different women has changed over time as has society's perception and expectation of these tattooed women. Nowadays, while it has grown more acceptable for women to sport small and cute, Western style tattoos (such as butterflies or flowers), there is still a fair amount of stigma attached to those who have tattoos, as evidenced by the continued bans of tattooed individuals in hot springs, gyms and other public facilities. There is an even greater stigma attached to those who opt for full back *irezumi* style tattoos, as in the Japanese mind these still largely associated with gangsters and criminals and are seen as hyper-masculine, something "not for a lady." This mindset is reflected and fueled by the various portrayals of tattooed women present throughout Japanese literature and film. Women with tattoos have been continuously portrayed as deviant. Their tattoos are depicted as a way to put their transgressive nature on display. Even those tattoos that are the result of some sort of trauma are depicted as further fueling one's deviant behavior instead of quelling it. The tattooed female is not an upstanding citizen, she is always on the edge of society, often either a criminal or a prostitute and her tattoos are a way to mark her social deviancy.

This chapter compares earlier film and literary works on women with tattoos by men to those authored by contemporary males as well as those authored by women. I argue that the tattooed female, as she is written for page and screen, is negatively marked by the earlier male perception of her. In male authored contemporary works, she becomes

more liberated, but is still forced to work within negative character stereotypes. It is only when the tattooed female is written from a female's perspective that she becomes truly empowered.

EARLIER MASCULINE PERCEPTIONS OF THE TATTOOED WOMAN

“The Tattooer” (Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, 1910)

“Shisei” (刺青, 1910) is a short story by Tanizaki Jun'ichirō about Seikichi, a jaded and sadistic tattoo artist that has long been searching for his one *perfect* canvas on which to etch his masterpiece. “Shisei” is often translated as “The Tattooer”, but in actuality the kanji 刺青 can be read as *irezumi*, which means tattoo, specifically Japanese traditional tattoos consisting of large back pieces. *Shisei* is just another way these characters can be read. However, while *shisei* literally means tattoo, the English version of the title is often translated as *The Tattooer*. Even though this is a small discrepancy in translation, the shift of focus from the tattoo to the tattoo artist in the English version may also say something about the West's connection with women and tattoos.

The novella starts with a brief description of the spirit of the Edo period, characterized by levity and lightheartedness. Even though Tanizaki's narrator describes “an age when men honored the noble virtue of frivolity, where life was not such a harsh struggle as it is today,” his tone is critical of the times, judging the “gaudy patterns” of the tattoos used by people “doing all they could to beautify themselves.”⁷⁴ Seikichi

⁷⁴ Jun'ichirō Tanizaki and Howard Hibbett, “The Tattooer,” in *Seven Japanese Tales*, (New York: Vintage, 1996), 160-161.

comes off as extremely judgmental, “no one whose skin or whose physique failed to interest him could buy his services.”⁷⁵ He searches for the perfect women on whose skin he would create his masterpiece. Not just any woman in the Edo quarters would satisfy him; she had to have “various qualifications of character as well as appearance.”⁷⁶ His customers who seek to beautify themselves at all costs are the perfect counterparts to the sadistic protagonist. Just as they are inflicting pain on themselves via tattoos for the sake of beauty, Seikichi enjoys being the one to administer that pain. He felt pleasure “in the agony men felt as he drove his needles into them, torturing their swollen, blood-red flesh; and the louder they groaned, the keener was Seikichi’s delight.”⁷⁷

Seikichi’s desires are realized when he finally finds what he’s been looking for in the form of a “bare milk white foot” peeking out of a passing palanquin.”⁷⁸ A year later his canvas shows up at his doorstep asking for a favor from her mistress. His canvas, a young girl, turns out to be an apprentice geisha. For Seikichi, this young girl seemed mature beyond her years due to her work in the pleasure quarters seducing men. But she is also the embodiment of the sins committed by the people of the capital. He elevates her to a position above men, one whose beauty has the power to fascinate them, but in the same breath debases her as a representation of the nation’s immoralities and transgressions.

The teeter totter game of placing the girl on a pedestal, while simultaneously lowering her by convicting her of heinous crimes is repeated when Seikichi shows her

⁷⁵ Tanizaki, “The Tattooer,” 161.

⁷⁶ Ibid

⁷⁷ Tanizaki, “The Tattooer,” 161-162.

⁷⁸ Tanizaki, “The Tattooer,” 163.

two paintings. The first is of a Chinese princess enjoying a cup of wine while watching a man about to be tortured. The second is of a painting called “The Victims” in which a young woman leans against a cherry tree “gloating over a heap of men’s corpses” while her eyes “radiated [with] pride and joy.”⁷⁹ The two paintings awaken something dark in the girl and in each she feels that she sees her true nature and feelings, the realization of which scares her. Seikichi has already realized the girl’s true nature upon meeting her and relishes it. He even becomes angry when she refuses to embrace it calling her a coward. In order to make her “a real beauty,” he drugs the girl and works into the night tattooing a large black widow spider on her back.

The forcible nature in which Seikichi chose to tattoo the girl can be interpreted as a form of rape. The girl while lying unconscious for hours gets a needle, symbolizing a penis, inserted repeatedly into her skin without her consent. As Seikichi works, he is even drained of energy, pouring his soul into his tattoo, the soul symbolizing his semen. Her virgin, milky white skin is essentially deflowered and defiled with an unwanted tattoo and when she wakes she has become a new, darker version of herself. Even her arousal from sleep is portrayed sexually. Just as Seikichi’s act awakens the femme fatale within her, her literal awakening also becomes sexualized in the faint moan she utters when she recovers. Moaning can be indicative of pain, as with “the agony men felt as [Seikichi] drove his [tattoo] needles into them,” or one can moan as a sign of sexual pleasure.⁸⁰ The fact that a moan can also be construed as sexual in nature coupled with the girl’s arousal from a deep sleep transforms this act into one embodying her sexual awakening. Once

⁷⁹ Tanizaki, “The Tattooer,” 165-166.

⁸⁰ Tanizaki, “The Tattooer,” 162.

she is awake there is an edge of authority to her voice that was not there before. Even Seikichi comments that he “was amazed at the change that had come over the timid, yielding girl of yesterday.”⁸¹ The black widow spider on her back already has her in its clutches and has facilitated this change within the girl.

Black widow spiders are known for devouring their male counterparts after mating and, just as the two paintings aroused something dark within the girl, the tattoo too brings something out of her. Seikichi describes the spider as stretching, “its eight legs to embrace the whole of the girl’s back”⁸² giving the spider a lifelike quality. The narrator’s description gives the reader the feeling that the spider is trying to overtake the girl or become one with her. However, her earlier reactions to Seikichi’s paintings prove she already had some of these femme fatale qualities-whether the tattooed spider on her back is truly working through the girl or merely bringing them out is unclear. What is clear is that she is only able to come into her “true nature” upon the tattoo’s completion. Her first words are a direct acknowledgement of the power that she has gained over men: she says, “All my old fears have been swept away—and you are my first victim!”⁸³ The symbol of the black widow spider as the destroyer of men has resonated with her. In the final moment of Tanizaki’s story, the spider is hit by a ray of sunlight and the spider is wreathed in flames that are suggestive of the flames kindled within the girl upon her realization of the power she now holds, allowing her to take back control of her (and his) body after the rape.

⁸¹Tanizaki, “The Tattooer,” 169.

⁸² Tanizaki, “The tattooer,” 168.

⁸³ Tanizaki, “The tattooer,” 169.

Lone Wolf and Cub: Baby Cart in Peril (1972)

This theme of rape and control is also one often seen in movies involving women and tattoos. In the fourth film installment of the popular *Lone Wolf and Cub* series “Baby Cart in Peril” (original Japanese title: *Oya no kokoro ko no kokoro* lit. “Heart of the Parent, Heart of the Child) (1972) directed by Buichi Saitō the opening scene features Oyuki, a female assassin about to be sentenced to death.⁸⁴ In this scene, the viewer is also shown one of Oyuki’s tattoos, that of a Kintarō around her left nipple. Kintarō (金太郎), also known as the “Golden Boy” is a hero from Japanese folktales and a common motif in tattoos. It is said Kintarō was a child of extraordinary strength, who was able to befriend animals. He is often featured fighting a giant koi (carp), and both figures are said to symbolize strength. The placement of Kintarō, a masculine image, on Oyuki’s breast in one of the first images of the movie effectively serves to simultaneously defeminize and sexualize her. Kintarō is a highly masculine image, denoting strength over all creatures, but by having part of the tattoo on such a revealing part of the body, one that she reveals in order to distract and stun her enemies, it gives her character a highly sexual overtone as well.

Her second tattoo is revealed just a few shots later when she uses her sword to kill one of her would-be executors. It is of a large dark-skinned hag with missing teeth, stringy hair, wearing rags and wielding a scythe known as a *yamauba*, or mountain witch covering the whole of her back. The *yamauba* is a Japanese *yōkai* (monster) who is said

⁸⁴ The series *Lone Wolf and Cub* started out as a manga by writer Kazuo Koike. After its first publication in 1970 the series has been adapted into a live action film series, a TV series and a video game. The fourth installment of the film series is the one I focus on here.

to live in the mountains. She is an old hag with a wide mouth split from ear to ear and scraggly white hair, sometimes pictured with fangs or horns. The *yamauba* usually wears a red kimono or conversely she is shown in rags or naked from the waist up. She is also a creature with both good and evil tendencies. In her “good” form she is a beautiful young woman that helps weary travelers. As an evil woman, she is an old hag with a voracious appetite, who sometimes eats humans. The *yamauba* is connected to the “golden boy”, Kintarō, in various ways. Some tales state that the witch saw Kintarō’s, chubby and helpless body and planned to eat him. Another states that she raised him from an orphan and yet another claims that she is the mother of Kintarō, having magically woken up pregnant with him in her virgin body.⁸⁵ For these reasons, they are often pictured together in traditional Japanese tattoos.

The placement of Kintarō around Oyuki’s nipple, as if he’s breast feeding, makes her like the *yamauba* taking care of the young boy. It might mean that she sees herself as a *yamauba*, an old hag with supernatural powers. By tattooing the *yamauba* on her back, it could also mean that she is trying to portray herself as a *yamauba* in order to gain her powers for killing as well as being feared. Kintarō at her breast could also be another way for her to gain strength, because as he “feeds” and gets stronger, so does she. Oyuki’s need for strength as well as her desire to kill stem from something that happened to her in her past: she was raped.

Oyuki used to be a member of the Goumune clan, a band of street beggars and performers, until a nobleman named Lord Owari took notice of her and her talents with

⁸⁵ “Yamanba (山姥),” *The Yokai Grove: A Refuge for the Benevolent and Malevolent*, last modified September 23, 2012, accessed July 22, 2016, <https://yokaigrove.wordpress.com/2012/09/23/yamanba-山姥>.

kodachi, small-sword techniques. Lord Owari was highly interested in martial arts and asked her to become a *besshikime*, a sort of woman warrior, and teach *kodachi* to his clan's ladies-in-waiting. There she receives training from Lord Owari's most skilled swordsman, Kozuka Enki. During one of their training matches, Kozuka knocks her out with one punch to the stomach. While she's unconscious he proclaims, "Why must such a beauty as she be a *besshikime*? When a girl is obsessed with swordsmanship the usual reason is, because she is so hard to look at that she has no chance of marrying." He finds it strange in her case since she is such a beautiful woman. While talking, he rips off her clothes and then fondles her now bare breasts. As his hand travels up in between her legs, she wakes up, presumably once he is inside her. She struggles, but he overpowers her with a lecherous cry of "The moment you realize, it is too late. If you want to bite your tongue, wait until this is over!" The audience is left to believe he raped her, ejaculated and cast her off. Afterwards, she runs away from Lord Owari's clan and he is on the lookout for her ever since. He marks her as a deserter, for which the punishment is death. The reason she later gets a tattoo is to give her the strength to confront her attacker and exact her revenge. She kills and sends back the topknots of the vassals she's killed, so Lord Owari will finally send his best warrior, Kozuka, and she can have her vengeance. In the end, it is the same sexuality that "made" Kozuka rape her that she uses against him by flashing her bare breasts causing him to falter, giving her enough time to strike and kill him.

The *Lone Wolf and Cub* series portrays Oyuki as a skilled assassin who uses her sexuality to stun and distract, however, this was just her taking control of her lot in life.

Instead of succumbing to the trauma of her rape, as seen in the flashback scene and her subsequent shocked with glossed over eyes on the brink of tears, she uses that anger to fuel her need for revenge. She takes control of her body (and implicitly also her sexuality) by tattooing herself with the image of a powerful male who derives his power from the female breast. Instead of her beauty and her body being a weakness or hindrance to power, she uses it as a weapon to stupefy her attackers. However, even though she has reclaimed her own body she does it out of necessity and a desire for control. Her hidden displeasure in having to show it off during fights is evident in her final words: “That I can die...without showing you my bare skin makes me happy.” In the end, Oyuki reclaims her tattoo for herself. It is not longer a weapon born out of revenge, but something that is a part of her and not for anyone else. She is now able to die happy.

Pinky Violence

Another genre of films notorious for their nudity and sex scenes are Japan’s *pinku eiga* (ピンク映画) or “pink films”. While there is no perfect Western equivalent, these low budget theatrical films are often described as “erotica” or “soft core pornography”.⁸⁶ As more and more people bought televisions in 1960s Japan, film studios saw a decrease in viewer audiences. To combat this decline, independent studios saw great success in the early 60s with exploitation and pornography films that were “cheap and popular at the box office.”⁸⁷ Larger studios took notice and in the 1970s Toei Studios created a string

⁸⁶ Jasper Sharp, *Behind the Pink Curtain: The Complete History of Japanese Sex Cinema*, (Surrey, England: FAB Press, 2008), 9.

⁸⁷ Alicia Kozma, “Pinky Violence: Shock, Awe and the Exploitation of Sexual Liberation,” *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema* 3, No. 1, (2011): 38, accessed July 23, 2016, doi: 10.1386/jjkc.3.1.37_1.

of films that mixed “tales of criminality, violence, class, race, vigilantism, torture, sex and girls gone bad.”⁸⁸ This genre later came to be known as “Pinky Violence” which featured many sadomasochistic themes often constructed around the character of the *sukeban* (girl boss or bad girl boss). The titular character would often be an independent female outlaw not bound by societal rules on how women should act who refused to make apologies for her sexuality and for exploiting others through her sexual power. The films are transgressive in that the female protagonist does not act in accordance to the established hierarchy of male dominance over the female sex and instead uses her sexuality to overturn the presupposed power dynamic. Some characteristics common in the *sukeban* trope include: living as orphans on the streets, owning up to their sexual power, advance fighting skills, involvement in underground criminal networks, and loyalty to fellow gang members.⁸⁹ In this subgenre of pinky violence, there seems to be an additional common feature of the *sukeban* trope. The main character is often a victim of sexual assault and this experience acts as the impetus for her actions throughout the rest of the film.

Female Demon Ōhyaku (1968)

One such film is *Legends of the Poisonous Seductress: Volume 1: Female Demon Ōhyaku* (original title: *Yôen dokufuden hannya no Ōhyaku*) (1968).⁹⁰ The film stars

⁸⁸ Ibid

⁸⁹ Kozma, “Pinky Violence,” 39-40.

⁹⁰ Even though *Legends of the Poisonous Seductress* was a three part series, only *Female Demon Ōhyaku* is classified as part of the pinky violence genre. *Female Demon Ōhyaku*, directed by Yoshihiro Ishikawa, (1968, Tokyo: Toei Studios, Synapse Films, 2007), DVD. The other two films, *Quick Draw Okatsu* (*Yôen dokufu den: Hitokiri okatsu*, 1969) and *Okatsu: The Fugitive* (*Yôen dokufu den: Okatsu kyôjô tabi*, 1969)

Junko Miyazono as Ōhyaku Dayu, a survivor of an attempted murder-suicide by her disturbed mother. She is now a skilled tightrope entertainer whose “talents” are sold to the highest bidder after her shows. Through this side job Ōhyaku encounters the local magistrate Sengoku, who she then spurns and he proceeds to try and rape her. She is saved by the thief Shinkuro, they fall in love and she learns of his plans to steal from the Japanese treasury and decides to help him. One of his colleagues betrays him, however, and both Ōhyaku and Shin are prosecuted by Sengoku. As she is tortured, Ōhyaku watches on as her beloved is beheaded. She is also beaten, raped and then sent off to an all male prison on Sado Island, so that the men there may further humiliate and violate her.

At the point when the warden’s lecherous lesbian wife, Omon, pretends to be Ōhyaku’s friend in order to sell her off to the highest bidder, she reveals that she is also a tattoo artist. Here, Omon also shows her own large back *irezumi* of what appears to be a *tennin* (天人), which can roughly be described as a Buddhist angel. A *tennin* symbolizes the concept of *yōen* (“ethereal beauty”) and can be either male or female. If female they are usually depicted as extremely beautiful women.⁹¹ Omon’s choice to tattoo something representative of ultimate female beauty shows her fascination with the female form as well as hints at her own Sapphic nature. Omon fascinated with Ōhyaku’s beauty and skin comments “What a beautiful girl” and states that she has “never seen skin like this”

are seen as strictly *chambara* movies. The Grindhouse Cinema Database, “Female Demon Ohyaku,” 11 June 2016, https://www.grindhousedatabase.com/index.php/Female_Demon_Ohyaku.

⁹¹ Martin Hladik, *Horikazu: Traditional Tattoo in Japan: Lifework of the tattoo master from Asakusa in Tokyo*, (Germany: Edition Reuss GMBH, 2012), 133.

eventually losing control at the sight of it, she starts to caress Ōhyaku.⁹² When Ōhyaku rebukes her advances, Omon says that she is a tattoo artist in Aikawa and she asks to tattoo Ōhyaku. Omon wants to give her something truly beautiful, to match her appearance. Ōhyaku, however, requests a demon.

The demon tattooed on Ōhyaku's back is a *hannya*, a demonic image used in many Noh plays. The *Hannya* mask, a female demon with long, sharp horns, represents the fury, sorrow and grudge of a jealous woman. It is known as a vengeful spirit mask and represents women who have turned into demons.⁹³ This demon embodies what Ōhyaku has become. Having Shin, her love, taken so violently from her, she becomes a demon consumed by revenge and willing to achieve it by any means necessary. She eventually uses her beauty to seduce those in her path and make them commit heinous acts for her. In the path to vengeance she leaves many dead in her wake, including Omon, the warden, her lover's traitor, Hyoe Sakaki, her protector and friend in prison Bunzo and finally she kills Sengoku himself (as well as torturing his wife, Yuki) in the same manner he killed her beloved Shinkuro.

Ōhyaku's transformation into a demon is finalized once the tattoo on her back is completed. Until then she has only plotted her escape and revenge. It is only once the tattoo on her back is finished that she is able to execute her plan and kill those who stand in her way. Like the young geisha in "The Tattooer" and Oyuki in "Baby Cart in Peril", Ōhyaku's tattoo becomes the mark of a new assumed identity, one that strays outside the

⁹² *Female Demon Ōhyaku*, directed by Yoshihiro Ishikawa, (1968, Tokyo: Toei Studios, Synapse Films, 2007), DVD.

⁹³ Japan Arts Council. "The Masks of Noh: Vengeful Spirit Masks," *Noh and Kyogen*, last modified 2004, accessed July 24, 2016, http://www2.ntj.jac.go.jp/unesco/noh/en/noh_mask/noh_maskghost.html.

pre-established hetero-normative gender boundaries in Edo society. Ōhyaku's tattoo acts as a beacon of courage for her. The demonic motif on her back fuels her vengeance further and gives her the will to never give up and to "run forward with all of [her] strength."⁹⁴

Sex and Fury (1973)

Tattoos as the markers of one's plot for vengeance are at the heart of many pinky violence films. In the 1973 film, *Sex and Fury* (original title: *Furyō anego den: Inoshika Ochō*), Inoshika Ochō, played by premier pinky film actress Reiko Ike, becomes involved in a plot to take down a corrupt politician as she finally tracks down the people responsible for her father's death. She witnessed her father's death as a young child and with his last breath he gives her a clue as to their identity, holding up three *hanafuda* cards symbolizing the three yakuza members identifiable by the tattoos on their backs of a deer, a boar and a butterfly.⁹⁵ We later see she has tattooed those three symbols on her arm and chest, serving as permanent reminders for her life mission. Like Oyuki in *Lone Wolf and Cub*, Ochō also exposes her right breast in preparation for battle, but instead of using it as a means to stupefy her opponent, she exposes her breast in order to have more mobility with her sword and become even more deadly. True to form, *Sex and Fury* delivers gratuitous nudity as well as more than a few sex scenes. In a typical scene, Ochō uses her body as weapon for revenge. She agrees to sleep with one of her father's

⁹⁴ *Ohyaku*, Yoshihiro Ishikawa, DVD.

⁹⁵ Inoshika Ochō actually gets her name from these three figures. *Ino* is short for *inoshishi* which means boar, *shika* means deer and *chō* means butterfly. These three cards also make up a prized combination in the *hanafuda* card game.

attackers, but unbeknownst to him she has covered her body in a poison that once ingested immediately kills “the deer”. Ochō, aware of her sexuality and its power, uses it as a means to an end. She proves it can be used for good, as shown when she offers it up to save her fellow gang members, but it can also be used for death and destruction, as in the deer’s demise. Ochō’s role as the quintessential femme fatale, one who uses not only her combat skills but her sexuality as a weapon, is epitomized in this climatic scene.

Ochō’s body remains a constant source of titillation throughout the film. She is often shown fighting naked or if not she eventually becomes naked as her clothes are stripped away halfway through the sword fight. Even in her first fight scene she springs forth like a demon from her bath fully naked and ready for action. The film ends with a spectacular fight scene in which Ochō slashes her way half naked through the “boar’s” bodyguards and ends up victorious, but badly wounded. The last moments of the film shows Ochō walking outside and falling onto snow. She grabs a handful of snow off the ground and uses it to clean her now blood soaked tattoo. Ochō’s decision to clean her tattoo first, before her wounds, demonstrates how truly connected she is to the markings on her chest and the figures they symbolize. The final scene of falling *hanafuda* cards is a direct callback to the opening credits in which Ochō is introduced. After witnessing her father’s murder, the opening scene cuts to falling *hanafuda* cards and an image of Ochō as a fierce adult, one who is thirsty for revenge. This direct reference serves to solidify Ochō’s ties to these cards and how they will always represent her.

Female Yakuza Tale (1973)

In the sequel to *Sex and Fury*, released later that same year, Reiko Ike reprises her role as Inoshika Ochō. The sequel, titled *Female Yakuza Tale: Inquisition and Torture* (original title: *Yasagure anego den: sōkatsu rinchi*) follows Ochō as she gets caught up in a yakuza drug cartel operation. The opening scene provides more gratuitous nudity as Ochō fights off several armed swordsmen, presumably yakuza, since some are shown with tattoos. Early on in the fight she again removes the sleeve covering her right arm for more maneuverability with her sword, exposing her right breast and *hanafuda* themed tattoo. Eventually she ends up with no clothes at all, taking on attackers in the nude, but coming out victorious. While the introductory scene has nothing to do with the rest of the movie's plot, this is how the director has chosen to re-introduce the audience to Inoshika Ochō: as a sexed up femme fatale unafraid to show off her tattoo or the rest of her body.

The first substantial scene of the movie involves Ochō arriving at Kobe harbor in order to pay her respects to an old friend—an old yakuza boss that saved her from getting her fingers chopped off when she was caught cheating at gambling. She ends up being led astray and abducted by three yakuza members. Again we have the tattooed female as a victim of sexual assault, and that assault driving her actions throughout the film. The yakuza members mistake Ochō for a drug mule and only learn of their mistake after she has been tied up to the rafters, stripped and her vagina thoroughly searched.⁹⁶ Upon this realization, they let her go but on the way down she hits her head and passes out. When she wakes and realizes what has happened to her, Ochō, states “I’ll kill the ones who put

⁹⁶ We later learn that these three members are the middle men for a drug smuggling enterprise and their preferred method is smuggling drugs through a vial in a woman's vagina.

me through this”, referencing her earlier sexual assault by the three gang members.⁹⁷ Ochō is once again driven by vengeance, but this time not for her family, but for her violated body.

Ochō’s search for her three victimizers is what leads her to becoming involved in the drug smuggling ring. Here, Ochō again uses her sexuality as an asset. She “seduces” one of the yakuza bosses in charge of the drug smuggling in order to gain more information on the operation, to get closer and to influence the boss’s actions.

In the climactic final scene, we see Ochō’s vengeance delivered. The scene is most notable for the all nude gang of woman fighting alongside Ochō against the yakuza drug dealers. Ochō manages to keep her clothes on, but still bares her tattoo throughout the final struggle. In the first film, Ochō’s tattoos were a symbol of the vengeance she sought for her father, now in this second film, the tattoos have transformed into her crest, her shield of courage and while they are exposed she also transforms into a stronger, better fighter.

These three pinky violence films: *Female Demon Ōhyaku*, *Sex and Fury*, and *Female Yakuza Tale* all portray the tattooed female as sexually aggressive, dangerous or both. In *Female Demon Ōhyaku* she is a demon bent on avenging her dead lover. She also uses her sexuality to seduce those around her into doing her bidding. Even the other tattooed female shown, the tattoo artist Omon, is basically portrayed as a greedy lesbian unable to keep her hands off of Ōhyaku. The two films, *Sex and Fury* and *Female Yakuza Tale*, showcase Inoshika Ochō as a femme fatale that uses her sexuality as a powerful

⁹⁷ *Female Yakuza Tale: Inquisition and Torture*, directed by Teruo Ishii (1973, Tokyo: Toei Studios, Panic House Entertainment, 2005), DVD.

weapon. While in the first film a childhood trauma is what drives her actions, in the second, they result because she is a victim of sexual assault. Even the other characters shown to have tattoos in both films are portrayed as negative types. We see villains, criminals, yakuza and the sexually promiscuous also tattooed. The three main villains in *Sex and Fury* are identifiable as criminals only by their large *irezumi* style back pieces. The only other female character that is shown with a tattoo is Ochō's prostitute mother, also known as "the butterfly", who was paid by the other two villains to marry Ochō's father in order to keep an eye on him. So not only is the other tattooed female a major villain, but also a prostitute and an adulterer, as we also find out she has been cheating on her husband with "the deer". In *Female Yakuza Tale* the other female we see with tattoos is the wife of another yakuza boss who strips naked in order to appease Ochō after her husband accuses Ochō of cheating at cards.⁹⁸ Although portraying the main female character as a strong fighter, these films only further the correlation between tattoos and the over sexualized female as well as the association of tattoo bearers with crime, yakuza and the underworld.

Black Lizard (1968)

Unfortunately the negative connotations do not seem to lessen even if the size of the tattoo decreases. In the 1968 film, *Black Lizard* (Japanese title: *Kurotokage*) directed by Kinji Fukasaku, a female jewel thief plots to steal Sanae, a renowned jeweler's daughter in order to trade her for his prized "Star of Egypt" diamond. The jewel thief also known as "Black Lizard", played by drag queen Akihiro Miwa, is thwarted again and

⁹⁸ The yakuza boss' wife strips so Ochō would not be the only one humiliated by showing her body.

again by “Japan’s number one detective” Kogoro Akechi. In the film *Black Lizard*, disguised as Midorikawa, is only recognizable by her black lizard tattoo on her upper arm, which she keeps hidden for most of the film under long sleeves or gloves. Midorikawa initially reveals the crest in an act of egotism after a successful escape from Detective Akechi’s clutches. “More certain than fingerprints,” the tattoo is *Black Lizard’s*, only identifiable marker. By having the tattoo be the only mark of the jewel thief’s true identity, it reduces her character and persona to only this, the tattoo. Aside from her charms and love of jewelry and beautiful things, the film does not feel the need to elaborate more on her personality. The audience is left with just a tattoo and a grotesque stuffed human museum to form their opinion of her, both of which show her as the deviant female and the psychotic main criminal.

CHANGING VIEWS OF WOMEN AND TATTOOS IN CONTEMPORARY AND FEMALE AUTHORED WORKS

The exploitative and campy B-movies described above employ tattoos to signal female deviance, but more recent films and novels demonstrate a more multivalent attitude toward women and tattoos. Arthouse films like *Swallowtail Butterfly* (1996), documentaries like Kawase Naomi’s 2001 *Sky, Wind, Fire, Water, Earth*, memoirs like *Yakuza Moon: Memoirs of a Gangster’s Daughter* (2004) and novels like *Snakes and Earrings* (2005) more clearly illustrate a woman’s perspective on tattoos. Contemporary films and works authored or directed by women also tend to conceptualize tattoos less as advertisements for female sexuality and violence than as a mechanism for coping with or overcoming past traumas, which are also often associated with men. The tattooed female

is still indicative of the flaunting of social and gender norms, but motivations for women receiving them differ from male authored accounts.

Contemporary views in Swallowtail Butterfly (1996)

In more recent films tattoos have had more uplifting significations. *Swallowtail Butterfly* (*Suwarōteiru*, 1996), directed by Shunji Iwai, is a film set in a dystopian Tokyo, where the Japanese yen has become the world's strongest currency leading to a mass influx of immigrants hoping to make their fortunes. These immigrants call the city Yentown, but the Japanese themselves hated that name and referred to the immigrants themselves as Yentowns. Yentowns live as outcasts in poor parts of the city, struggling to get by. One such Yentown, a Chinese immigrant prostitute named Glico, is one of the main characters of the film. She sports a trendy swallowtail butterfly on her chest, in between her breasts. As Glico explains to another main character, an orphaned teenage girl with no name, for her, this tattoo is an identification marker. She got it as a result of seeing one of her brothers taken away in an ambulance after getting hit by a car when she was young. At the time she did not know any Japanese so she was unable to help him and they took him away, as just another unidentified Yentown. She still does not know what happened to him. She states she does not want to be just another Yentown, unidentified and dead. She then "tattoos" with permanent marker, a caterpillar on the girl's chest with the word "Ageha" (the Japanese translation of swallowtail butterfly) underneath it finally giving the girl a name. Ageha now has her own identity marker, her own identity. The film, classified as a coming of age crime drama, deals with many different themes

including homelessness, sexual assault, poverty, theft, gangs, the music industry, dreams fulfilled and dreams taken away.

Glico, played by the pop singer Chara, eventually gets scouted as the lead singer of The Yentowns and she is catapulted into superstardom. Her butterfly tattoo becomes one of her trademarks, something for which to recognize her and it is splattered across many albums and posters. In essence it becomes exactly what she wanted it to be, a marker of her identity.

Glico's rise in popularity causes the group of friends at the beginning of the film to drift apart. Ageha, desperate to maintain their fading bond, decides to get an identical butterfly tattoo in the same location as Glico. For Ageha the tattoo is not a way to differentiate herself from the crowd, but a way to tie her back to her past. Ageha uses the tattoo as an anchor to how everything once was, to when she was happy. The tattoo is symbol of Ageha's past, a time when she had a close knit group of friends, and a symbol of how she wished it could be, a hope that she will return to those happy times.

In *Swallowtail Butterfly* the tattoo itself symbolizes something positive, something not fueled by sexual assault or crime. Unfortunately, however, the portrayals of the tattooed females retain association with deviancy and sexualized identities. Glico starts off the film as a prostitute and at the time Ageha has decided to tattoo the butterfly on her own chest she is a gang boss, leading a pack of juvenile delinquents in a money laundering scheme. Both are socially deviant outcasts whose decision to get a tattoo only further embeds themselves as members of this group. While the tattooed females are still

wrapped up in these negative character tropes, their tattoos manage to transcend these negative stereotypes. It becomes a symbol of a quest for identity and community.

The Feminine Perspective

The many iterations of the tattooed female as presented by men portray her as highly sexualized, a criminal or both. Works by women focus more on the unique situations and personalities of the women that leads her to get a tattoo. She comes across as more nuanced displaying both positive and negative attributes. The tattoos themselves, however, are overwhelmingly shown as positive acts, ultimately empowering the bearers.

Sky, Wind, Water, Fire, Earth (2001)

Naomi Kawase is one of Japan's premier female film directors. She gained recognition when she won the Caméra d'Or prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 1997 for her first fiction feature film *Suzaku* (Japanese: *Moe no Suzaku*), becoming, at age 27, the youngest person ever to win.⁹⁹ Kawase, however, started out in documentary film. She began her journey with the film *Embracing* (*Ni tsutsumarete*, 1992). The 40 minute documentary dealt with her feelings of abandonment by her mother and her journey to find the father she never knew. In 2001 she made the sequel to *Embracing* titled *Sky, Wind, Water, Fire, Earth* ("*Kyakarabaa*"). In it she documents her feelings upon learning of her father's death. She eventually decides to get a tattoo to commemorate her father. She asks for the same carp motif that her father had on his sleeves, but on her back. The

⁹⁹ Mark Schilling, "Keeping it real: Naomi Kawase on filmmaking," *The Japan Times*, last modified June 22, 2016, accessed July 24, 2016, http://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2016/06/22/films/keeping-real-naomi-kawase-filmmaking/#.V5n7I_krLIU.

tattoo artist reprimands her and claims she is “begging for help, so [she tries] to avoid things with a half done tattoo.” The artist comments on Kawase’s own feelings of emptiness, stemming from her abandonment by her parents at an early age. She avoids committing to things in an attempt to not be abandoned again. What follows is an intense exchange between Kawase and the tattoo artist about the seriousness and the repercussions involved with getting at a tattoo.

The tattoo artist directly addresses the stigma behind tattoos in Japan. He states that “only Yakuza gangsters get tattooed” and “if you can live with that prejudice, go ahead and get one.” He advises her to not get a tattoo because of a grudge since a lot of people end up regretting getting them. The artist further discusses the pain involved with tattoos, “not just physical, in your psyche too.” He states that everyone has darkness within them in some form. If she were to go through with the tattoo with that pain inside of her, it makes things difficult for him as the tattoo artist. As he explains, the pain she feels makes him hold back and it will not make for a good tattoo. It is also why he can never love. If he loves someone he would not be able to concentrate all his attention to his art. In the end, she does get a full back piece of a Buddhist deity. The last shot of the film is of her running naked through a field with a completed tattoo before switching to a silent old video of her father with birds chirping while the old footage rolls.

The dialogue between Kawase and the tattoo artist is one of advice and warning. The tattoo artist wants to make sure Kawase is getting her tattoo for all the right reasons and not out of spite in resentment of her father. The fact that she chose to not get the carp pattern from her father’s tattoo, but still opted for a large back piece also shows that she

is ready to get over the pain in her own heart, the pain from being abandoned at an early age by both her parents and the pain of feeling as if she is not good enough, because if she were, would her parents have left? The final shot of her running naked through a field away from the camera into the horizon feels reminiscent of a rebirth or a new beginning. Naked like the day she was born, she runs towards new possibilities—away from her past, away from the grudges and resentments she has held. She strips it all off and just runs. Fading from her running in the field to him in the last moments of the film, with both scenes accompanied by the same sounds of birds chirping, solidifies for the viewer, the connections between her, her tattoo and her father.

Yakuza Moon: Memoirs of a Gangster's Daughter (2001)

Shōko Tendō is another woman whose tattoo deals, in part, with her relationship with her father. In 2004 Shōko Tendō first published *Yakuza Moon: Memoirs of a Gangster's Daughter* in which she writes about growing up as the daughter of yakuza boss and the subsequent effect her father's business practices and lifestyle had on her own relationships with others, especially men. Her childhood was one of comfort due to her dad's wealth as well as moments of terror from the abuse she received if her dad had been drinking or was in a bad mood. She was also sexually molested by one of the younger yakuza in her father's gang, causing her never to really trust men. In her teen years Tendō became involved in girl gangs, started abusing drugs and running away from home. She described her first experience of sex as "very painful" and not "the least bit

pleasurable.”¹⁰⁰ These early years of her life created a template for how the rest of her life would play out. Tendō would constantly be used and abused by her “boyfriends”, who were usually yakuza members themselves and would keep her supplied with a steady stream of drugs and false promises.

Tendō’s moment of revelation came after a violently abusive relationship ended and she was out with a friend who met up with her boyfriend at a tattoo parlor. Right then and there she made the decision to get tattooed. Her tattoo of Jigoku Dayū, a courtesan of the Muromachi period (1336-1573), is a full body back piece. Tendō was instantly drawn to this tattoo and for her it symbolized a chance to start over. Tendō “had always wanted to be someone’s number one, but always ended up being number two.”¹⁰¹ This tattoo of the number one courtesan in the pleasure quarter would give her the self-confidence to allow herself to think she was better than number two, good and worthy enough to be number one. “No more wimpy attitude”, she thought. ¹⁰² The tattoo empowered her.

When Tendō got her tattoo she was aware of the yakuza associations these kinds of full body pieces had having been around them her entire life. She knew that they were taboo in Japan because of such negative associations. However, for her getting a tattoo was something very positive, it helped make her strong and break out of the self-destructive patterns that she had been repeating.¹⁰³ In part, the tattoo is also a tribute to who her father was, a criminal, and what he chose to do in life. She knows she cannot

¹⁰⁰ Shōko Tendō, *Yakuza Moon: Memoirs of a Gangster’s Daughter*, trans. Louise Heal, (New York: Kodansha International, 2007), 22.

¹⁰¹ Tendō, *Yakuza Moon*, 116.

¹⁰² Ibid

¹⁰³ Shōko Tendō, *Yakuza Moon: Memoirs of a Gangster’s Daughter*, trans. Louise Heal, (New York: Kodansha International, 2012), 3-4.

escape that part of herself and neither does she want to disrespect her father by trying to do so. Her decision to get a tattoo is her being honest with herself and directly acknowledging where she comes from and who she is: a yakuza boss' daughter and she is okay with that.

Snakes and Earrings (2008)

Finally, there is Hitomi Kanehara. Kanehara is the author of *Snakes and Earrings* (*Hebi ni Piasu*, 2008), a novella that at the tender age of 20 earned her Japan's most prestigious literary award, the Akutagawa Prize, making her and her fellow 19-year old co-winner the youngest recipients in history. The book, although classified in the young adult genre, deals with some very explicit content such as sex, drugs, alcohol, murder, and body modification. The story revolves around the narrator Lui, a masochistic young woman whose relationship with two men, Ama and Shiba-san, dictates the course of action throughout the novel. When Lui first meets Ama, a young punk, she becomes fascinated with his forked tongue and back tattoo. She wants the same and soon after she gets her tongue pierced and picks a design for a full back tattoo just like his.

The design involves a dragon and a *Kirin*, a mythological hooved creature of East Asian tradition often compared to the Western unicorn. When Lui and Shiba-san, her tattoo artist and piercer, discuss the *Kirin* he tells her that it is a sacred animal and that it is a god of the animal kingdom. Lui's inspiration for the *kirin* comes when she sees it tattooed on Shiba-san's upper arm. He claims that the guy who tattooed it "burned himself to death, holding a picture of a Kirin in his arms"; some say that "maybe he

incited its rage.”¹⁰⁴ Despite his warnings, Lui goes through with the tattoo, with one condition: the tattooer must not tattoo in the eyes of the *kirin* and dragon.

Lui describes the legend *Garyōtensei*, which states that once the painter, Choyōsō, drew his white dragon’s eyes in, the dragon came to life and flew away.¹⁰⁵ The name of the legend itself, *Garyōtensei*, means finishing touch and it gives rise to the Japanese belief that the final dot of ink in a drawing will bring it to life. The “finishing touch” for a dragon happens to be its eye. By not allowing Shiba-san to draw in the creatures’ eyes, she “knew [she’d] always possess a beautiful dragon and a *Kirin* right there on [her] back. That “they’d never betray [her], and without eyes they’d never fly away. They’d always, always be there.”¹⁰⁶

Lui’s tattoo symbolizes her constant struggle for possession or dominance of something. She is used to being a part of relationships where guys gradually become more and more domineering and has come to see relationships as a situation where two people are constantly trying to possess each other. With her tattoo *she* owns the creatures, they are *hers*. She does not have to worry about them vying for dominance because they will always be her possessions and never leave her. Her struggle for control stems from her masochistic personality, letting her partner have control and do whatever they want sexually to her, as in the case with Shiba-san. As payment for her tattoos, Lui has sex with Shiba-san after every session and the sex is always ferociously violent. She is tied up, choked and thrown around. At times Shiba-san has quite literally had her life in his

¹⁰⁴ Hitomi Kanehara, *Snakes and Earrings*, trans. by David James Karashima, (New York: Penguin Group (USA) Inc, 2005), 32-33.

¹⁰⁵ Kanehara, *Snakes and Earrings*, 69.

¹⁰⁶ Kanehara, *Snakes and Earrings*, 80.

hands, but now with her tattoos she has the power to do the same, to hold their “lives” in her hands and not let them fly away. The thought of losing either of them propels her to want to secure them, to control them, to make sure that they cannot leave her, just like her tattoos cannot.

Lui does eventually let them go, however. By the book’s ends she realizes that by not filling in the kirin and the dragon’s eyes, she was really not letting herself have a life; instead of controlling the dragon and *Kirin* she was actually just subjugating herself, not letting herself do what she wanted. When Shiba-san tattoos their eyes and notices her new demeanor he too realizes that he can no longer violate her as he had and she now “[knows] he would take care of [her].”¹⁰⁷ Lui’s tattoos have transformed from being mere possessions to embodying her inner self and she has finally let herself be free.

Sky, Wind, Fire, Water, Earth, Yakuza Moon and *Snakes and Earrings* are three pieces of contemporary film and literature created by women featuring the tattooed female. The works feature women who are struggling with their own inner demons and trying to figure out ways how to deal with them. Tattoos become an essential coping mechanism. They do not use tattoos as a means to fight off an outside enemy, but rather to work something out within themselves.

In all three of these works by women about tattoos, we see women who use tattoos to let go of any negative feelings or experiences; tattoos are not symbols of things that they wish to harbor inside and fuel their inner fire. *Sky, Wind, Fire, Water, Earth*, Kawase lets go of the resentment she felt towards her father for abandoning her during

¹⁰⁷ Kanehara, *Snakes and Earrings*, 118.

childhood. Shōko Tendō lets go of the stigma and negative feelings she's carried for being a gangster's daughter and letting herself get caught up in that lifestyle. Lui lets go of her need to control, to possess, she finally just lets herself be free. Like in *Swallowtail Butterfly* the tattoos symbolize something positive, they are the physical representations of the bearer's journey to find themselves and accepting who they are.

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

Throughout literature and film the tattooed female is portrayed with negative character traits time and time again. She is either a killer, a criminal, or overly sexual. She is usually portrayed as a strong female character, however, this character tends to get punished for that strength through sexual assault. She then channels the anger from the sexual assault to justify more violence. While works in the pinky violence genre were essentially no more than sexploitation films for a male audience not interested in the nuanced representation of women's lives, character tropes for the tattooed female reoccur no matter the genre. At least this is the case in the popular media created by men.

The works created by women about women, feature women with traumatic pasts that choose tattoos as a way to overcome them. Yes, both Shōko Tendō and Kanehara's Lui are highly sexualized females, with Tendō the victim of constant emotional and physical abuse, but they chose to rise above their circumstances and move past them, while the females depicted in works by men wallowed in them. The B-movies and literary works by men used tattoos as way to signal female characters' deviance and sexualized identities in response to some tragedy perpetrated by men, while works by

women demonstrate their ability to empower themselves and overcome tragedy through tattoos.

Chapter Four: Conclusion: A Modern Perspective

In Beverly Yuen Thompson's book *Covered in Ink: Tattoos, Women and the Politics of the Body* (2015), she discusses what it was like growing up as an Asian-American woman with multiple tattoos or with what she defines as "heavily tattooed". She notes the amount of attention people gave her if her tattoos of two half sleeves were exposed. Looks of shock and awe, as well as many questions and sometimes even inappropriate and unasked for touching. The attention that her tattoos garnered bothered her so much that she resorted to wearing long sleeve t-shirts, even in the summertime. This is not something unique to Thompson. The author dedicates an entire chapter to the struggles women face trying to cover up their tattoos for fear of being judged at home, in the workplace or in everyday life.

Thompson's book may deal with issues facing tattooed American women, but it does give a good example of the reality of many tattooed women in general, including those in Japan where there is still much prejudice facing those with tattoos. Many women often hear things like: "Will you even be able to find a boyfriend if you have tattoos? What will you do if you have kids?"¹⁰⁸ or that "it is proof you are low class."¹⁰⁹ In an interview with *Skin Deep* magazine Shōko Tendō, the author of *Yakuza Moon: Memoirs of a Gangster's Daughter*, describes the difficulties facing a tattooed woman in Japan. She states that "it drastically reduces your chances to live a normal life, personally or

¹⁰⁸ Stasia, "Tattoos in Japan: Garyō the Tattoo Artist," *Living the Tokyo Dream*, last modified January 30 2015, accessed March 1, 2016, <https://shichijyuuni.com/2015/01/30/tattoos-in-japan-garyo-the-tattoo-artist/>.

¹⁰⁹ Seiko(guest), comment on "Question Forum: How do Japanese people react to tattoos?" *Japan-guide.com*, last modified September 19 2014, accessed June 23, 2016, <http://www.japan-guide.com/forum/quereadisplay.html?0+117968>.

professionally, in Japanese society.”¹¹⁰ She claims, “I could never have a common boyfriend who had a normal life” and that “I always have to think about not showing off my tattoos. Dressing with long sleeve clothes, when I take the metro and I grab a handle, I have to think about hiding my wrist. It’s a situation that considerably reduces your world.”¹¹¹ It is the reason that Naomi Kawase’s tattoo artist warns her of the prejudice she would have to face if she got her tattoo. “In Japan, only yakuza gangsters get tattooed. If you can live with the prejudice, go ahead and get one. But a tattoo commits you to taking that road,” he states.¹¹² This is the unfortunate reality of many tattooed women in Japan. However, there is still hope.

According to Osaka artist, Shura, “There are tattoos you can show and ones you should hide. Traditional tattoos are OK to show at festivals, certain public baths, and during fights. The cute, fashionable ones, they are OK to show whenever.”¹¹³ The cute, fashionable ones Shura refers to are also known as “one-point” tattoos or Western style tattoos. These types of tattoos became popular through the influence of American popular culture and trends. Famous Japanese celebrities like Namie Amuro and Ayumi Hamasaki also sport tattoos which helped their popularity rise among Japanese youth.¹¹⁴ Nowadays, women have an increasing presence in the tattoo industry. They are taking an interest in the fashionable art and more and more women are getting tattoos. Many of the

¹¹⁰ Shōko Tendō, Interview by Pascal Bagot, “Shōko Tendō: Yakuza’s Daughter,” *Skin Deep 181*, January 2010 as seen in *Big Tattoo Planet.com*, last modified July 06, 2010, accessed March 1, 2013, <https://www.bigtattooplanet.com/features/reader-profile/shoko-tendo-yakuzas-daughter>.

¹¹¹ Ibid

¹¹² *Kyakarabaa*, directed by Naomi Kawase, (2001: Arte France, Nara-shi: Kumie, 2008), DVD.

¹¹³ Manami Okazaki, “Tattoos come out of hiding,” *Japan Times*, last modified August 26, 2008, accessed July 25, 2016. http://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2008/08/26/lifestyle/tattoos-come-out-of-hiding/#.V6Rz2_krLIU.

¹¹⁴ Okazaki, “Tattoos come out of hiding.”

top artists are female and most editors for tattoo magazines are female.¹¹⁵ According to Horinami, a female tattoo artist featured in Manami Okazaki's book *Wabori: Traditional Japanese Tattoo* (2013):

Nowadays a lot of the fashionable kids are getting [tattoos]. It was around 15 years ago that "one-points" and western tattoos like roses became popular. They get it either for fashion, like they think it's cute to wear with swimmers and so on, or some want to become psychologically stronger.¹¹⁶

Shōko Tendō, the same woman who stated that she must hide her tattoos in daily life, also states that her tattoos gave her the confidence to change her life, "to start over."¹¹⁷ Tendō's tattoo is a source of strength and empowerment for her. She has not even stopped with a full back tattoo, slowly accumulating more and more throughout the years.¹¹⁸ Many women also use tattoos for therapeutic purposes such as covering up mastectomy scars.¹¹⁹

Many women are embracing the "cute" tattoo trend and female artists are becoming more popular since women are more comfortable showing their bodies to other females. Ryoki, a female tattoo artist of Al Haut tattoo shop in Osaka, states in a feature for *Skin Deep* magazine that "the fact that she is female makes her easy to approach for other girls."¹²⁰ Nattsu, another artist at Osaka's Chopstick studio, says "I get lots of girls,

¹¹⁵ Ibid

¹¹⁶ Manami Okazaki, *Wabori: Traditional Japanese Tattoo*, (China: Kingyo Ltd, 2013), 128.

¹¹⁷ David McNeill, "Interview: Shōko Tendō on growing up in the seamy world of Japanese gangsters," *Independent*, last modified November 10, 2007, accessed July 25, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/interview-shoko-tendo-on-growing-up-in-the-seamy-world-of-japanese-gangsters-399537.html>.

¹¹⁸ Tokyo Reporter Staff, "The Celestial Journey of Shoko Tendo," *Tokyo Reporter*, last modified June 13, 2010, accessed July 25, 2016, <http://www.tokyoreporter.com/2010/06/13/the-celestial-journey-of-shoko-tendo/>.

¹¹⁹ Okazaki, "Tattoos come out of hiding."

¹²⁰ "Osaka Tattoo Scene, Japan: Al Haut," *Skin Deep* 145, May 2007, 31.

girls working in the fashion and beauty industries.”¹²¹ The popularity of tattoos among women in Japan is only growing with the trendy Japanese tattoo magazine, *Tattoo Girls*, being a testament to its growth among fashion models and photographers. So while many may be of the mindset that “tattoos are not girls”,¹²² many of the gruff blue collar workers and yakuza types are giving way to these young trend seekers.

Younger generations are embracing tattoo culture and letting go of the negative perceptions associated with tattoos that their parents hold. However, it is still more likely to see Western one-point tattoos in Japan than the full body suit of traditional Japanese tattoos. Even tattoo conventions held in Japan are made up of Western style tattoo artists than traditional *tebori* artists, those that use the traditional Japanese method of hand tattooing.¹²³ Some tattoo artists think that because of the rising popularity of Western style tattoos that Japanese traditional tattoos are on the decline; while others like world-renowned, Horiyoshi III, see it differently:

It’s just a reflection of things from the West being so popular up until now, and humans begin to want different things. If things that weren’t around up until then suddenly appear, they appear fresh, and Japanese like to sensationalize everything, that’s all it is. I mean, the fact that American tattoos, became so hot is just reflective of Japanese people going ecstatic over it! This is typically Japanese: to get overly excited over something, and then get over it quickly too.¹²⁴

Horiyoshi III also goes to say that, “If there are tattoo artists using machines there will always be people that will want to do it by hand”.¹²⁵ Horiyoshi refers to the practice

¹²¹ Okazaki, “Tattoos come out of hiding.”

¹²² Stasia, “Garyō the Tattoo Artist.”

¹²³ Manami Okazaki, *Tattoo in Japan: Traditional and Modern Styles*, (Germany: Editions Reuss, 2008).

¹²⁴ Okazaki, *Wabori*, 44.

¹²⁵ Ibid

of Western style tattoo artists using a machine to tattoo instead of the *tebori* method. Horiyoshi III is seen as one of the most, if not the most, famous Japanese traditional tattoo artist, who still uses *tebori*, the traditional method of hand-tattooing. He is also one of the most prolific, having written or co-authored numerous books as well as being featured in countless shows, articles and interviews. Many consider Horiyoshi III as the number one authority on Japanese traditional tattoos, both as an artist and as a reference. Horiyoshi III is also the owner and curator of one of the few museums in the world dedicated to tattooing. I was able to visit the Bunshin Tattoo Museum located in Yokohama, Japan in May of 2106. It is a two room studio turned museum filled to the brim with tattoo memorabilia, books, figures, equipment and artwork. He even operates a studio on the third floor of the museum. The museum is frequently featured in many international guidebooks and is a tribute to the beauty and art of tattooing.

Many contemporary artists believe that for traditional Japanese tattooing to continue a mix of ideas is necessary. *Irezumi* must adapt if it is to survive, while traditionalists fear that the true essence of the Japanese traditional style will disappear if it is changed at all.¹²⁶ However, many tattoo artists, including Horiyoshi III, have already successfully integrated Western methods into their tattooing. Many traditional tattoo artists will use a machine to tattoo the outline of a traditional piece, since a machine allows for a cleaner, more precise line. They will then tattoo the rest using the traditional *tebori* method. Some artists will also mix new and traditional tattoo elements to create their own unique style, like tattoo artist Horitsuna.

¹²⁶ Okazaki, *Tattoo in Japan*, 2008.

Still whether they are traditional or Western, new school or old school, the tattooed members of Japanese society are increasing and they are not just yakuza. In one interview, Horiyoshi III even states that “Nowadays I have 90 percent non-yakuza clients and 10 percent yakuza clients. Ten years ago it was much different...The landscape has changed and so have the customers.”¹²⁷ Still, according to Manami Okazaki, tattoos create “fear and uneasiness. It’s a difficult problem. It’s true that the *irezumi* could be seen as part of Japanese culture, and people who are not members of the yakuza are also wearing tattoos. However, in general, in Japan, tattoos are not good.”¹²⁸ The ongoing stigma makes it difficult for many people especially females, like Shōko Tendō, to display their tattoos openly. More people need to be made aware of the true meanings and history of tattoos as well as the real people sporting these tattoos. This paper was written as an attempt to educate more people about tattoos and it is my hope that the ink on these pages will somehow alleviate the stigma for those who have ink on their bodies.

¹²⁷ Subcultureist, “Japanese Tattoo Master: “The carving is one’s personal symbol...,” *Japan Subculture Research Center*, last modified January 4, 2013, accessed August 3, 2016, <http://www.japansubculture.com/japanese-tattoo-master-horiyoshi-the-3rd-the-carving-is-ones-personal-symbol/>.

¹²⁸ Jake Adelstein, “In Japan Tattoos Are Not Just For Yakuza Anymore,” *Japan Subculture Research Center*, last modified January 2, 2013, accessed August 3, 2016, <http://www.japansubculture.com/in-japan-tattoos-are-not-just-for-yakuza-anymore/>.

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