

**MEANINGS OF TATTOOS IN THE  
CONTEXT OF IDENTITY-CONSTRUCTION:  
A STUDY OF JAPANESE STUDENTS IN CANADA**

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**Introduction**

Tattoo culture in Japan has been practiced for many reasons: body decoration, social status, religious practice, tribal custom, and punishment. While tattooing has been acknowledged as art, it has its negative connotations. In Japan, tattooed people tend to be stigmatized and frequently conceal their tattoos. Public places such as pools, baths, or saunas prohibit tattooed people on their premises.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to these negative views about tattooing, however, its growing popularity has been noticeable. With the popularity of body arts, some Japanese are accepting tattoos as fashionable or as an art form.<sup>2</sup>

What accounts for these polarized attitudes? It is often said that Japanese cultural values emphasize collectivistic views such as conformity and uniformity. A number of scholars in the field of Japanese studies argue that Japanese views of individuality stress interdependency of the self.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Mansfield, "The Indelible Art of the Tattoo," *Japan Quarterly* 1/1 (1999): 30-41.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Mansfield, "Tattoos, body piercing gaining popularity," *Daily Yomiuri*, October 5, 1994, p. 3; and Yasuo Saito, "Karada de shucho? Body Art [Self-expression with the body? Body Art]," *Asahi Shinbun*, August 26, 1997, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Harumi Befu, ed., *Cultural Nationalism in East Asia* (Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1993); Shinobu Kitayama, Hazel Rose Markus, Hisaya Matsumoto, and Vinai Norsakkunkit, "Individual and Collective Processes in the Construction of the Self: Self-Enhancement in the United States and Self-Criticism in Japan," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 72/6 (1997): 1245-1267; Takie Sugiyama Lebra, *Japanese Patterns of Behavior* (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1979); and Yoshio Sugimoto, *An Introduction to Japanese Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

From this perspective, Japanese culture assumes a view of “interdependent” individuality rather than “independent” individuality. The pursuit of the Western value of individuality would appear to be at the opposite pole from social expectations in Japan.

Examination of Japanese popular culture also points out changing conceptions of individuality. Marilyn Ivy suggests that new feelings and sensibilities based on individual specific desires emerge in postwar Japan.<sup>4</sup> The influence of Western values may liberate individuals from the intense social constraints imposed by traditional Japanese structures. More recent studies of Japanese popular culture find conflicts, tension, and vacillation between Japanese tradition and Western cultures.<sup>5</sup> Thus, this recent trend in Japan does not necessarily suggest that Japanese traditional values are being replaced by Western ones, but rather, it may be a reflection of pluralistic realities that various values and individual desires coexist. Given these arguments, Japanese tattoos may express complex issues created by social currents reflected in the polarized attitudes.

This study explores the meanings of tattoos among Japanese students living in Canada to understand the complexity of cultural self-expression in the context of identity-construction. The major issues in this study are how Japanese international students in Canada commit to being tattooed while living abroad, and how they construct their identities through these experiences. Given results based on survey questionnaires and interviews with Japanese international students studying in Canada, this study identifies the historical, social, and cultural shifts and multi-layered meanings of tattooing practices. The tattoos of the Japanese students are a hybrid cultural form of Western influence and Japanese tradition. Their experiences are significant evidence of Western cultural consciousness but

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<sup>4</sup> Marilyn Ivy, “Formations of Mass Culture,” in Andrew Gould, ed., *Postwar Japan as History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 239-259.

<sup>5</sup> For example, please see Mary Grigsby, “*Sailormoon: Manga (Comics) and Anime (Cartoon) Superheroine Meets Barbie: Global Entertainment Commodity Comes to the United States*,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 32/1 (1998): 59-80; and Michael L. Maynard, “‘Slice-of-Life:’ A Persuasive Mini Drama in Japanese Television Advertising,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 31/2 (1997): 131-142.

also may reveal a cultural tension between Japanese traditional views and the Western concept of individuality.

### **Japanese Tattooing from the Past to the Present**

The tradition of tattooing is often characterized as unique in Japan,<sup>6</sup> where a long history of tattooing exists.<sup>7</sup> The Japanese-style tattooing, so-called “full body suits,” was developed during the eighteenth century. This is a style that covers the entire body, from the neckline, back, and chest to the ankle, and the design is based on *ukiyo-e* pictures or Japanese traditional woodblock prints. Its traditional examples were dragons, carp, peonies, and Kannon, the Goddess of Mercy. Punitive tattooing was also widely employed to identify criminals and social outcasts during the same period. Criminals were tattooed on the arm or forehead with symbols designating the places where the crimes were committed.<sup>8</sup> With the advent of modernization, all tattooing practices, including tribal customs, were regarded as a sign of barbarism and were prohibited between 1872 and 1948.

Because of its historical and socio-cultural background, tattooing in Japan is associated with dark and negative images in the minds of many people. It has been inclined to represent either a criminal aspect or a rebellious response to traditional cultural codes. There are notorious Japanese criminal syndicates, *yakuza*, represented by distinctive tattoos.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Brain, *The Decorated Body* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1979); Donald Richie, “The Japanese Art of Tattooing,” *National History* (1973): 50-59; Donald Richie and Ian Buruma, *Japanese Tattoo* (New York: Weatherhill, 1980); Donald McCallum, “Historical and Cultural Dimensions of the Tattoo in Japan,” in Arnold Rubin, ed., *Marks of Civilization: Artistic Transformations of the Human Body* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 109-134; and W.R. Van Gulik, *Irezumi: The Pattern of Dermatography in Japan* (Netherlands: Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1982).

<sup>7</sup> W. D. Hambly, *The History of Tattooing and Its Significance* (London: H.F.G. Witherby, 1925); and Haruo Tamabayashi, *Bunshin Hyakushi* [A Hundred of Tattooed Appearances] (Tokyo: Bunsendō Shobō, 1956).

<sup>8</sup> Tamabayashi, *Bunshin Hyakushi*.

<sup>9</sup> David E. Kaplan and Alec Dubro, *Yakuza: Japan's Criminal Underworld, Expanded Edition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California

Kaplan and Dubro report that approximately sixty-eight percent of the *yakuza* have tattoos. Recently, however, a number of *yakuza* members have tried to remove their tattoos and replace missing fingers in order to return to mainstream society.<sup>10</sup> Japanese cultural codes, influenced by Confucian doctrine, claim that bodies are given to people by their parents and that intentionally hurting bodies is contrary to the Confucian concept of filial piety.<sup>11</sup> Hence, tattooing would be considered a rebellion against or rejection of parents or authority. Although tattooing is now legal, some tattoo studios are still housed in unmarked buildings.

Despite the fact that these negative views of tattooing remain, its growing popularity has been noticeable. The popularity of body arts such as body piercing, henna painting, nail-decorating, tattooing, and temporary tattoos among young Japanese is ensuring that the practice will continue.<sup>12</sup> Once defined as symbols of social outcasts, tattoos are beginning to be considered trendy and fashionable.

### **Tattooing Practices as Subculture and Identity-Construction**

Tattooing practices are part of a subculture, which represents a different way of handling social relations. The experience encoded in subcultures is shaped in a variety of locales.<sup>13</sup> The phenomenon strongly reflects circumstances at school, work, or home, and all environments surrounding us are bound to each other. There is a power struggle between dominant and subordinate cultures, teachers and students, or parents and

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Press, 2003); and Florence Rome, *The Tattooed Men* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1975).

<sup>10</sup> “Moto kumiin shakaifukki ni kenmei [Ex-yakuza members try hard to come back to mainstream],” *Asahi Shinbun*, February 28, 1997, p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> Robert O. Ballu, *Shinto: The Unconquered Enemy* (New York: The Viking Press, 1945), p. 131.

<sup>12</sup> “Tattoos, Body Piercing Gaining Popularity,” *Daily Yomiuri*, October 5, 1994, p. 3; Ken Mori, “Tattoo Mania: ‘yōbori’ yori ‘wabori’ ga erai [Tattoo Mania: Japanese style tattooing is greater than Western style],” *Shūkan Asahi*, May 21, 1999, p. 73; and Saito, “Karada de shucho? Body Art,” p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 84-87.

children. This process produces marginal discourses within the broad confines of experience.

The concept of identity emerges from interactions between individuals and society. Identity is an ongoing phenomenon constructed by interactions among people, institutions, and practices.<sup>14</sup> Tattooing is a way of using coded meanings in the everyday life of social interaction. Why does the practice of tattooing gain popularity in Japan regardless of the negative cultural attitudes toward tattooing? This study suggests that the acceptance of being tattooed is an essential experience for the Japanese participants to express and manifest themselves.

A physical body is decorated with images, symbols, or signs. Symbols and signs are used to convey messages to others. The images of tattoos are significant symbols representing not only the self, but also one's interactions with others and society. Clinton Sanders sees a tattoo as a product which extends a social life.<sup>15</sup> While tattoos are symbols of disassociation from conventional society, they are also seen as a connection to alternative social groups which appreciate this type of body decoration.<sup>16</sup> Self-expression is a response to a set of circumstances, particular problems, and contradictions.

In this study, tattoos are seen as socially and culturally meaningful signs to reflect specific events in ongoing life histories. Meanings, norms, and values are intertwiningly shaped by external as well as internal worlds. By accepting to be tattooed, the Japanese students learn, understand, and reproduce cultural norms and values through symbols on their bodies. Being tattooed becomes an event in the process of actual becoming, that is, part of constructing identities.

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<sup>14</sup> Johan Fornäs, *Cultural Theory and Late Modernity* (London: SAGE Publications, 1995); Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990); and Madan Sarup, *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1996).

<sup>15</sup> Clinton R. Sanders, "Tattoo You: Tattoos as Self-Extensions and Identity Markers," in Mary Lorenz Dietz, Robert Prus, and William Shaffir, eds., *Doing Everyday Life: Ethnography as Human Lived Experience* (Toronto: Copp Clark Longman Ltd., 1994), pp. 203-212.

<sup>16</sup> Clinton R. Sanders, *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989); and Sanders, "Tattoo You."

### **Tattoos as Cultural Tensions**

Today's society may contain elements of both modernity and postmodernity. Due to the different uses of time and space, "[g]lobalization divides as much as it unites; it divides as it unites – the causes of division being identical with those which promote the uniformity of the globe."<sup>17</sup> Various dimensions of polarity in the globalized society can be observed: assimilation, uniformity, and inclusion, as well as segregation, separation, and exclusion. This is not a shift from traditional to modern society; rather, these dimensions represent conflicts and contradictions between modern and postmodern phenomena.

Identity discourse reflects the state of society. Our individuality is socially and culturally produced. The shape of our society depends "on the way in which the task of 'individualization' is framed and responded to."<sup>18</sup> Individualization refers to the emancipation of the individual from the ascribed and inherited determination of one's social character. The idea of individualism exists in terms of responsibility and autonomy. Actors are charged to take responsibility for performing a task and for its consequences. Although the concept of individualism gives us a wider range of choices, it also gives us a new challenge to overcome our conflicts, contradictions, and constraints. Searching for identity is the by-product of the combination of globalizing and individualizing pressures and tensions that the globalization processes raise.<sup>19</sup>

This study helps to ascertain whether cultural conflicts and contradictions exist in self-expression. The conflicts and contradictions emerging from their tattoo experiences serve as valuable information to provide a more complete understanding of the complexity of Japanese culture. Why did Japanese students studying abroad want to get tattooed, given that tattoos are still viewed as negative by large segments of Japanese society? What is expressed by tattoos? How do the students understand their home country and a new culture through being tattooed? Examining attitudes among the Japanese students in Canada, this study intends to answer these questions.

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<sup>17</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *The Individualized Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p. 144.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

### **Research Setting and Data Collection**

This research was conducted in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, and Tokyo, Japan from 1998 to 2001. A questionnaire and interviews were conducted at the University of Victoria, Canada. The questionnaire was intended to identify general attitudes toward tattooing practices among Japanese students. A total of thirty Japanese students (ten males, twenty females) participated in the survey. In the questionnaire, social and personal attitudes toward tattooing practices were asked along with impressions about tattoos.

Face-to-face interviews with tattooed Japanese students were conducted in order to explore a deeper understanding of the cultural complexity that appeared in their tattoo experiences. Interviewees were recruited by word of mouth or by an advertisement posted on campus and in Japanese supermarkets in Victoria. The survey participants were also asked if they were tattooed and if they would be willing to participate in the interviews.

### **Attitudes toward Tattooing Practices**

Impressions about tattooing practices among survey participants had both negative and positive elements. Although approximately seventy percent of Japanese participants had never seen tattooed people in Japan, the others reported that the tattooed people they had seen in Japan were either the *yakuzas* or young Japanese who accept tattoos as a form of fashion. The *yakuzas* have a very negative image and tend to be associated with tattoos, and as such, their tattoos are negative and stigmatized in Japanese society. On the other hand, the popularity of tattoos among young Japanese was frequently mentioned.

The most common knowledge about tattooed people is that they are not allowed to go to public places such as pools, saunas, and baths. Half of the participants reported that tattooed people in Japan are treated differently, depending on the tattooing styles. If people have traditional Japanese tattoos, they are regarded as members of the *yakuza*. If they have Western tattoos, they are considered to be ordinary people or non-*yakuza*.

The majority of the survey respondents denied having any tattoos. They indicated that there are three major obstacles: the permanency of tattoos, the pain during the operation, and getting permission from parents. Even though tattoos are technically erasable by laser surgery, it is impossible to get the original skin back. Because of the permanency, it could be “regretful” and cause one to be permanently “stigmatized” in

Japanese society. In addition, there were physical concerns about the physical pain associated with a tattoo. Many frequently mentioned the pain during the drawing operation. Finally, the participants were concerned not only with the permanency and pain, but also with the filial impiety that tattooing might reflect.

The conflict between filial piety and individuality was clear. In Japan, filial piety is a key criterion for decision-making. Even though individuals want to pursue their own freedom, they are particularly concerned with their family, especially their parents' reactions and opinions. These Japanese students clearly struggled with the traditional code of ethics and a new cultural theme of the role of individuals in contemporary Japan.

### **Meanings of Tattoos in the Context of Identity-Construction**

My questions were why Japanese students decide to be tattooed, given that tattoos are still viewed as negative by large segments of Japanese society; how the students legitimate their tattoo experiences as well as other cultural practices in a new environment. Five Japanese students, two males and three females, ranging in age from nineteen to twenty-seven years old, agreed to participate in unstructured interviews. By analyzing the tattoo narratives by the five Japanese international students,<sup>20</sup> I explore how they construct the meanings of tattoos and how they learn and understand the concept of individuality in the context of identity-construction.

### **Dream for the Future**

"I wanted something related to the sea," said Sachi, a nineteen-year-old female college student who had been in Canada for about two years. Sachi has a tattoo of Orca, a killer whale, on her right ankle. The only color is black. "It was not until I came to Canada that I met a person with a tattoo. Tattoos were not my style till then," Sachi said. In Canada, it became common for her to see people with tattoos in daily life. "One of my Canadian friends has a tattoo on her ankle, and I thought it was cute. This might be the first time I had seen a tattoo." Sachi got her tattoo in Canada when she was seventeen. There are several reasons why she chose the ankle for her tattoo:

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<sup>20</sup> Interviewees' names are pseudonyms.



I didn't want it on the arm, but I don't know why...I didn't choose the arm because I imagined that my tattoo on the arm might change when I lost more weight [She laughed]...And it would look awful when I became older. I heard that a tattoo on the arm was for men. A tattoo on the ankle is for women. I heard it looked feminine.

In Sachi's case, her tattoo is connected with her major, biology, and her dream for a future career as a marine biologist. Sachi had visited an aquarium in her childhood and this impacted her for life. "I still remember the Orca at the first sight in my childhood. It was huge and beautiful. It just fascinated me."

### **Ultimate Beauty**

The traditional Japanese style of tattooing is based on *ukiyo-e*, where the whole body is considered a canvas. Shoko, a twenty-seven-year-old Japanese woman, was first attracted by tattooed Japanese women. "In a certain scene on TV, a tattooed woman wearing a kimono showed up. I saw the tattoos on her back when she took off the kimono. I thought, 'Wow! How beautiful she is!' Since then, I had wanted to wear tattoos, but couldn't find a tattooist. I wondered how I could find such people." Shoko asked many people if they knew anyone who could tattoo. Finally, one of her friends introduced a tattooist to her, and eventually she had a chance to get tattooed.

Shoko has two butterflies: one on her left earlobe and the other on her right breast. They were done on the same day in Japan, at the age of twenty. The butterfly on her earlobe is only black, and the other is colored black and blue. Shoko also has a cosmetic tattoo on her eyebrows. The cosmetic tattoo is permanent make-up, replacing eyeliner, eyebrow pencils, lip liners, full lip tinting, and beauty marks. Her eyebrows were tattooed at age twenty-six in Japan.

Shoko described her tattoos as two different types: "real" tattoos (the butterflies) and "cosmetic" ones. Shoko liked butterflies with big black wings. Blue is her favorite color and she also used that for her butterfly tattoo on her breast. Shoko explained why she chose the image of the butterfly:

I was often told that I did not settle in a certain place like a butterfly flies from a flower to a flower. Actually, I moved from

place to place very often. I thought the butterfly was me. Then, I decided to have the image for my tattoos.

Shoko is fashion conscious and wears many earrings, rings, and bracelets. In reference to her other tattoos, she used the Japanese term, *aato meiku*, which means “artistic make-up.” She said that *aato meiku* or cosmetic tattoos are used on the eyebrows, eye lines, or lips and that it was popular among women at her workplace in Japan. Shoko had *aato meiku* because she was not satisfied with her own eyebrows; she wanted to look prettier. Shoko also said that getting *aato meiku* was more painful than for her other tattoos. The tattoos on the eyebrows were done by hand, not by machine: “When the tattooers puncture the skin on the eyebrows, they tattoo with the needles by hand as many times as the number of pores.” Shoko continued, “Women are likely to care about the eyebrows when they make up. To draw eyebrows are important for women who don’t have rich eyebrows.”

### **Creativity**

Risako is a twenty-one-year-old female college student in Victoria, majoring in art. She spent most of her high school years in England and then moved to Canada. Risako had been in Canada for five years. Besides her three tattoos, which were done in Canada, she got her ears and tongue pierced. Risako described how she first met tattooed people and revealed her bias about being tattooed:

I saw a tattoo for the first time when I was in England. All members of my host family were tattooed. I had negative images about tattooing before I had met the host family. I had thought tattooed people were scary and that only the *yakuzas* had tattoos. But, I found the host family nice even though they had tattoos. I shouldn’t think that they were bad people, judging from their tattoos. I saw many people who were engaged in the church in England. They were serious Christians, and working with charity activities. They were very kind and compassionate. My bias toward tattooed people that I had had gone. This was the first time that I met tattooed people, but I didn’t think I would be tattooed at that time.

Risako’s experiences in England and later in Canada had a great impact on her attitude toward tattoos, and prompted her to get tattooed: “Some of my

teachers and friends in Canadian high school had tattoos. Two out of three acquaintances were tattooed. When I went to the concert, for instance, I saw many young people with tattoo. It became a natural scene to me.”

Her first tattoo, which she received at the age of seventeen, is on her right upper forearm. It is an abstract image that she designed and looks like a cross:

I don't like a certain image that everyone can easily tell what it is. The first design was similar to a cross. One of my friends has asked me, “Is this image from England?” This image probably came from my experience in England. I am not a Christian, but I still remember all the hymns and phrases in the Bible that I learned. Because the people I met my first time in England happened to be Christians, I was influenced by them.

At nineteen, she had a second tattoo done on her stomach. The second tattoo is a Sanskrit letter, a symbol of the god of snakes, which came from an amulet her grandmother had given her. When she saw the god of snakes on the amulet, she wanted to have it for her tattoo: “I was born in the year of the snake. I thought, ‘This is my god! It might protect me.’” She wanted to place it on the center of her body because she respects the sacredness it represents, the spiritual connection, and life-affirming support. No one can see the tattoo on her stomach:

It makes my tattoo more mysterious, and I feel it actually protects me. I wondered whether I should choose the back or front. It didn't look cool if I had it on the back. So I chose the front. I wanted this god on the center of my body.

Risako never showed her god of snakes tattoo to me, although she openly showed the rest of her tattoos. She said she does not want to display the god of snakes tattoo because of its sacredness. Risako feels she is protected by the sacredness of the amulet but also connected to her grandmother, family, and ancestors.

The last one, on her back, was also designed by her. It is an abstract design but looks like a pair of seahorses. “When I tried to design my third tattoo, I came up with something symmetrical. I did not intend to draw a pair of seahorses, but yeah, it looks like it.” She wanted to get this tattoo to celebrate her twenty-first birthday.

**Attachment to Others**

While tattoos express uniqueness and independence, they also represent a sign of attachment or connection to other people. Hiro is a twenty-three-year-old male student who learned English as a second language. He has a red and black tattoo of the sun in Haida style (native Canadian art) on his right calf. Hiro had his tattoo for only a few months before the interview. He chose the design of the sun in the Haida style and had it tattooed on his right calf because:

The sun is the source of the universe and symbolizes the center of power. I am also playing an important role as a leader among our cohort. So I wanted to get this design as a symbol of myself.

He found several different images of the sun while searching for his favorite tattoo design, but did not like most of them. That was the work of native Canadian art. "This design that I chose is not too showy, but not too simple. It just fits me."

Hiro also has some Japanese friends with tattoos. Although he enjoyed seeing other people's tattoos while he was in Japan, he had never considered that he would actually be tattooed. "I wouldn't have been interested in having a tattoo if I had been only in Japan, because I rarely saw people with tattoos in daily life," Hiro said.

When Hiro was a child, his parents were divorced, and he was forced to live away from his mother. His father had to work hard to support the family, and Hiro normally stayed with his grandparents. He missed his mother very much. Because of his cheerful nature, however, Hiro has many friends and is always the center of attention among them. "I'm not a religious person, but I think that God didn't give me a happy family, but my positive character instead." His tattoo is a symbol for himself. He also mentioned that his tattoo was for others. Hiro's tattoo is proof to himself that he overcame his loneliness in the past, and is a magnet that attracts other people.

**Affirming Sexuality**

Toshi, twenty-two-years old, is a male college student in Victoria and has been in Canada for over five years. Toshi has two tattoos, but has been tattooed three times, all in Canada. His first tattoo was a devil because it came from his nickname, "Devil." He did not like the image, so he covered it up with a chrysanthemum. "I liked my nickname when I got my

first tattoo, but didn't care for it later." As for the design of the chrysanthemum, he said, "It is a symbol of Japan."

The other tattoo is tribal, which is composed of thick lines. Toshi did not speak of a particular reason for getting the tribal tattoo. He just liked it. When he chose this design, he thought it looked cool: "Whenever I felt I wanted a tattoo, I got one." But he is not perfectly satisfied with his tribal tattoo anymore. Now he is more interested in Japanese art and design, and has found that he wants tattoos related to Japanese tradition and culture. Toshi revealed his next project: "I want to have one more tattoo next to the chrysanthemum. I am thinking of getting our family crest for a new one. It will be the last one."

Toshi discovered he was homosexual when he was about twelve years old. He was shocked and struggled with his sexuality while he lived in Japan. He wanted to drop out of the high school, but his parents forced him to continue. He stayed until he was eighteen, but then ran away. Because he did not have any money, Toshi became a male prostitute for several weeks. "It was fun to meet other gay people. Looking back now, however, I think I did some stupid things." He went home after several weeks of prostitution. Toshi and his parents discussed his situation at great length. His parents suggested that Toshi study abroad and he agreed with them. It was after Toshi came to Canada that he saw tattoos on many people. He has been attracted to tattoos since this introduction.

### **Body Locations and Designs of Tattoos**

In all interviews, the participants carefully considered getting a tattoo, and it was a serious decision for them. They were particularly concerned about how tattooed people are treated in Japan. Even though they all openly show their tattoos in Canada, they reported that they would hide the tattoos when they go back to Japan. Sachi even considered the possibility of going back to school in Japan before she decided to have a tattoo. Choosing body locations and designs for tattoos is a significant decision and perhaps depends on where these tattooees' personal interactions take place.

The choice of body locations appears to correspond to the reasons the participants have given for their tattoos. Risako has a tattoo on the upper arm. She chose the location because of the tattoo design she created: "I thought that the shape of my tattoo design would fit on the arm." She first elaborates her ideas to design tattoos and then thinks about where on the body to place it. In Shoko's case, inferior feelings about her body were a

major reason: “I had a little bit of inferiority with regard to my breasts. By getting tattooed, I can cover the inferiority that I have.” Her butterfly tattoo on the right breast is small enough to be covered by a bra, and it is a way of overcoming her sense of inferiority, but allows her to maintain her beauty consciousness. As for the tattoo on her earlobe, Shoko thought the location was unique:

I started with getting ears pierced. I’ve worn a couple of earrings. I am too lazy to change them every day. I was also thinking how I could be outstanding by getting tattoos. I like to be outstanding. I wanted to be tattooed on a unique location that people rarely chose. That’s on the ear! It’s hardly seen on the ear, right? Nobody’s been tattooed on the earlobe except for me.

While female informants tend to be tattooed for cosmetic reasons, Hiro considers his tattoo as a public symbol. Hiro decided to be tattooed on his calf because he wants attention when he is in public. “I usually wear short pants, and people can see my tattoo. I thought I could get more attention from others. I like to be the center of attention.” He wishes to receive interactions with others because of the tattoo. Unlike Hiro’s intention, Toshi does not want to show off his tattoos in public. His tattoos are strictly private. Toshi chose to have tattoos on his back and ankle. He indicated that he consciously thought about the easiest parts of the body to hide his tattoos. He thought it was common to be tattooed on the back and that it looked cool. Besides, nobody can see tattoos on the back under his clothes.

The designs that all the interviewees chose are Western in style. Even though they appreciate the traditional Japanese style of tattooing, all the interviewees hesitate to have it. Hiro said, “Of course, I think Japanese tattoos are great, but they don’t fit my character. So, the Japanese design is not my style, but this Haida tattoo that I chose perfectly fits me.”

Risako wanted abstract designs, which are only black. She did not like colorful tattoos, because she was afraid that the colors of tattoos would fade and change, depending on her skin color and condition. The colorful tattoos also reminded her of the *yakuza* style. Shoko also saw the Japanese traditional style of tattooing as *yakuza* culture. In contrast, Toshi expressed his interest in Japanese tattoos although he hesitates to have one. “It would be more expensive to get it.” Although he likes Japanese style, realistically, he does not think that he will have it done.

The number of tattoos also reflects the reasons the participants have for their tattoos. Sachi and Hiro said, "One is enough for me." Risako said, "I haven't found which location on my body, nor do I have any reason to get a new one." Shoko stated that she would do something else, instead of having tattoos. Toshi wanted to get one more tattoo and insisted it would be the last one.

### **Public Reactions**

All the interviewees experienced different public reactions in Japan and Canada. Although they define their tattoos as important marks of uniqueness, independence, and self-alternation, they anticipate that they would either hide their tattoos from the public or would pretend that these were temporary tattoos when they go back to Japan. The act of being tattooed is associated with tattooees' social event experiences as well as personal identities.<sup>21</sup> Body locations and designs may reveal the tattooees' social locations (i.e., forms of communication and distance). Sachi explained that a tattoo on the ankle looked sexy, but also that it was easy to hide by wearing pants and socks.

I would not hesitate to go to a public pool in Japan. Many people with temporary tattoos (stickers) are seen there lately. My tattoo might be acceptable, but I wouldn't go to the pool where my mother used to go. She wouldn't want me to go there with her because of my tattoo.

Hiro also anticipates that he would hide his tattoo in Japan, depending on the workplace or other situations, although he seeks attention from many people in Canada:

Thinking about Japanese society, it would be easier to hide the tattoo on the calf than on the arm. A tattoo on the arm could be more easily seen by others. They can still see the tattoo through shirts. A tattoo on the calf, however, will be hardly seen if I wear trousers.

Many Japanese that Hiro has encountered had negative images about being tattooed. He talked about one of his tattooed friends living in Japan. The

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<sup>21</sup> Sanders, "Tattoo You."

friend has a tattoo on his shoulder. Though his tattoo was only outlined, he was not allowed to enter a public bath. Hiro also thinks the tattoo on his calf could be an obstacle when he seeks a job in Japan: "Suppose I go back to Japan, I will have to wear trousers at my workplace." In Canada, on the other hand, tattoos seem to be more acceptable than in Japan:

In Canada, even some policemen have tattoos. What they are doing is a good thing, for example, to keep cities safe. I think having a tattoo doesn't matter as far as they are normally working....We can freely go and enter tattoo studios in Canada as if we were shopping at a convenience store. Everybody said to me, "Great!" I was so happy to hear it. In Japan, however, people think they have to visit tattoo studios secretly.

Shoko was not allowed to donate blood because of the tattoo on her earlobe. They suspected people with tattoos might be possibly infected with HIV virus. She has also seen the sign, "*Irezumi okotowari* [No tattoos allowed]," in the fitness clubs. Meanwhile, the shift of images and feelings toward tattooing among Japanese people is found. Because of the popularity of temporary tattoos, many people cannot tell whether her tattoos are real or temporary. When Shoko was asked whether her tattoos were real or not, she replied, "Oh, this is temporary." No one was suspicious about what she said.

#### **Tattooing and Filial Piety**

The Japanese believe that hurting one's body goes against the cultural code of filial piety: "Don't intentionally hurt the body which has been given to you." Three of the participants knew of this lesson but claimed that being tattooed did not mean hurting the body. Nevertheless, even though they insisted that having a tattoo did not break cultural codes, they did consider what their parents would think about the tattoos. Sachi, the first-year biology major, said, "My mother cried on the phone when I told her that I got tattooed." Risako, the art major college student, had not told her parents yet. She was waiting for a good time to talk about her tattoos with them.

Well, I haven't told my parents yet, but am sure I will after I become independent. Now I am financially depending on my parents. Thanks to them, I can study in Canada. If I get a job, I will



tell them. But my parents already know I got the tattoo on the stomach. When I told them about this tattoo, they said, “We are relieved to hear the location. Nobody can see it.” I thought their comments were strange. Why is the tattoo on the stomach okay for them? It didn’t make any sense to me. But I couldn’t complain to my parents at that time, because they are my parents who raised me. I have *on*, or a debt of gratitude. For now, I am keeping my tattoos a secret, but will tell them when I become independent.

Shoko explained how her family and others saw her tattoos: “My mother was sort of disappointed with what I did. Although my family didn’t really blame me, I was scolded by other people.” Shoko also asserted that being tattooed did not go against filial piety. She showed me a burn scar on the back of her hand:

People often say, “Don’t hurt the given body on purpose.” But in my case, my parent was the first one that hurt my body. If parents hit their child, it means hurting the child, right? Although they are likely to verbally say, “Don’t hurt your body,” my parent was the first one that hurt my body.

There was an incident with her father. Shoko’s father placed a big moxa<sup>22</sup> on her hand to chastise her when she was a little child:

My father used more moxa than usual on the back of my hand. I was a little child, and couldn’t stand it. My hand was shaking, and I wanted to drop it from my hand. When I dropped it, my father hit me and put the moxa on my hand again. I thought, “Is this man really my father? I am your daughter!”

Shoko’s childhood dream was to become an actress, but she gave it up because of the scar that her father left. “Somehow, I gave up protecting myself from ‘hurting my body.’ The scar was a big deal, compared with tattoos.” She continues:

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<sup>22</sup> Moxibustion is produced by placing on the skin and igniting a cone of moxa, a tuft of soft combustible substance popularly used in the Orient.

I may not have cared about “hurting my body” since the incident. Although I don’t mean to hurt myself on purpose, I am not particularly careful about hurting my body. I would have never felt sorry for my parents even though I had hurt my body.

### **Tattoos as Self-Confidence and Empowerment of Life**

In his interview, Risako commented about the connection between his tattoos and self-esteem:

I feel more confident. I have what I want to do in the future. I can clearly explain my opinions or ideas to people. Besides, I have strong reasons for my tattoos. Without strong reasons for my tattoos, I cannot explain them to Japanese people who would ask me why I have tattoos. I am fully confident that I can persuade those people, because I have my own reasons.

At the beginning of the interviews, all of the participants said that their tattoos were a part of their fashion statements. As the interviews proceeded, however, I found that their reasons for tattoos were not simply to satisfy their fashion consciousness. By being tattooed, the participants tried to express and manifest their sense of self. They indicated that they felt more confident than before, and their tattoos represented a strong self-esteem and empowerment in their lives. The marks inscribed on their skin, therefore, became symbols that encouraged self-confidence.

“My tattoo is already a part of my body,” Sachi said. “I don’t think it’s an accessory like rings or earrings. It’s not a fashion, either.” She does not treat her tattoo as anything special. It is a part of her life: “Of course, I have taken care of it, but didn’t mean to have a particular wish or dream on my tattoo.” Shoko focused on the pursuit of beauty and said that her tattoos served a function, just like other parts of her body such as eyes, mouth, or nose. Moreover, the tattoos are a way of expressing herself: “I want to have my own style, which no one else has.”

### **Meanings of Tattoos in the Context of Identity-Construction**

The tattoos of these Japanese interviewees express multi-faceted meanings that combine their Japanese and Canadian environments. They reflect historical, social, and culture-ideological manifestations. The interviews show that their tattoos are not only a form of art or fashion, but also an urge for self-definition. In each instance, their tattoo experiences are

part of the process of identity-construction. For these Japanese tattooees, their tattoos are significant signs to convey their messages to others and to society.

Their tattoos reflect the presence of Western cultural consciousness. The acceptance of being tattooed may liberate the Japanese international students, but also creates new conflicts and tensions. The Western value of individuality is strongly expressed: self-esteem, respect, and independence. The Japanese tattooees also reveal their resistance, vacillating between Japan's traditional views and new values of the West. Their vacillation refers to conflicts and contradictions that result from cultural resistance and acceptance. This is an important indicator to tease out the complexity hidden in a form of self-expression and to explain the tension created by the process of globalization.

The study suggests that the Japanese students value their experiences of being tattooed, in addition to their experiences of being abroad. Being tattooed makes sense to the Japanese tattooees as a means to articulate the clusters of their experiences and social practices. "In order to communicate disorder, the appropriate language must first be selected, even if it is to be subverted."<sup>23</sup> Tattoos are their language, symbols, and signs of self-expression and self-determination, expressing a hybrid sense of the self, combining their home cultural identities and their Western cultural experiences. Each participant interprets social currents, experiences conflicts and contradictions, and creates his/her own understanding about the culture and society where he/she is living. While their tattoos might symbolize rebellion or resistance against authority or the norms of society, their tattoos also express an understanding, respect for, and acceptance of their home culture.

Symbolic self-expression of immigrant students is a complex phenomenon emerging at the intersection of cultural meanings. Self-expression among international and immigrant students may be misleading. Such symbols may signify deeper cultural meanings and reflect clashes of conflicting meanings. In terms of cross-cultural issues, researchers should be able to examine this complexity of self-expression among international students even if it takes on deceptively familiar cultural forms. This study contributes to exploring a new sense of cultural hybridism among international students from where they are actually located in the course of everyday interaction.

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<sup>23</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, p. 88.