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**Tetování v Jižní Koreji a postoj společnosti
vůči němu**

Tattoos in South Korea and Society's View of Them

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Podpis

Abstract

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This bachelor's thesis deals with tattooing in South Korea. The beginning of the work presents the world history and development of tattooing. Finally, the history and development of tattooing on the Korean Peninsula and later in South Korea is detailed. This thesis researches the relevant sources in order to fulfill the aim of the thesis, which is to find out the current attitude of Korean society towards tattoos in South Korea.

Abstrakt

Název práce: Tetování v Jižní Koreji a postoj společnosti vůči němu

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Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá tetováním v Jižní Koreji. Začátek práce představuje světovou historii a vývoj tetování. Následně se podrobně věnuje historii a vývoji tetování na Korejském poloostrově, a později v Jižní Koreji. Tato práce zkoumá relevantní prameny, tak aby došlo k naplnění cíle práce, což je zjištění současného postoje korejské společnosti vůči tetování v Jižní Koreji.

In this place I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Andreas Schirmer for his patience, help and kindness throughout the thesis writing process.

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Transcription

In this thesis, Korean terms are transcribed into the Latin alphabet in accordance with the McCune–Reischauer system of romanization.

Introduction

Tattooing is a form of body modification that has been present in human societies all over the world for centuries. It has been used for protection, but also as a punishment. Some admire tattoos for its artistic character, and some detest it for damaging the purity of human skin. Tattooing has a vibrant history and different significance based on the cultural, societal, and geographical environment. It can be found in legends, myths, traditions and even history texts.

Korean history dating back to Samhan period mentions the practice of tattooing under multiple names and interpretation. It spread both secretly among the common folk and for institutional purposes. The records prove that tattooing indeed existed throughout Korean history, however only few people know about the existence of this practice in Korean culture. For a long time, the interest of both public and researchers in this part of Korean folklore was insufficient.

Until the turn of the century, tattoos were not socially acceptable in South Korea, hardly anyone openly showed tattoos if they had any. However, in the last two decades interest in this topic has been growing as tattooing culture started to quickly develop among young Koreans and it is becoming more common to see people showing their tattoos openly in public places. The evolution of tattooing culture caught the interest of countless and several studies were contributed to this topic. Though, only few focused on the birth process and functions of tattoos in Korea.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine, analyze and clarify the history of Korean tattooing and the perception of the contemporary Korean society on the practice of tattooing and the issues related to the practice.

This thesis is divided into five main parts. The first chapter explains the definition of the tattooing practice. The second chapter summarizes the world history of tattooing from the earliest records found around the world to the current perception of tattoos across the globe. It introduces the beginnings of tattooing and its development. The third chapter explains the pre-modern history of tattooing on the Korean Peninsula and its uses and development. The fourth chapter is focused on the manifestation of tattoos during the 20th and 21st century in Korea and the institutional regulations. Finally, the fifth chapter provides information from articles, statistics and interviews that create a current perception of tattooing by Korean society.

1 What is tattoo?

Tattoo is a form of permanent body modification created by inserting tattoo ink into the second layer of the skin usually with a tattoo machine or needles. The marks are made by tattoo artists using a variety of different methods, including the traditional hand-tapped technique using sharpened bones or needles, or modern technique using tattooing a machine or singular needles.

Depending on the individual getting a tattoo, tattoos can be decorative or symbolic. Nowadays, tattoos are widespread for artistic, cosmetic, sentimental, memorial, religious, and spiritual reasons, as well as to symbolize belonging to or identification with specific groups, such as criminal gangs, ethnic groups, or law-abiding subcultures. Tattoos can express a person's feelings about things, animals, places or other people.

In the past, tattoos mostly served as rites of passage, marks of status and rank, symbols of religious and spiritual devotion, decorations for bravery, marks of fertility, pledges of love, amulets and talismans, protection, and as punishment, such as marks of outcasts, slaves and convicts. Except for the punitive reasons, tattoos still serve for all of the above mentioned purposes.

2 History of the tattoo custom

2.1 Prehistoric evidence

2.1.1 Written records

The earliest written evidence of tattooing practice appears in ancient Chinese texts, such as early prose, historical works, later dynastic histories, dynastic penal codes, and other works. Some of them date back as early as 1000 BCE. A text from the third or fourth century BCE *Zhuangzi* mentions the people of Yue who shaved their heads and tattooed their body by cutting their flesh and rubbing pigment into it. Yue who inhabited the southern parts of China and north of Vietnam branded their bodies in protection from the monsters and mythical creatures. However, the work that provided very pivotal information about Chinese tattoos comes from much later. It is the *Youyang zazu*¹ by author Duan Chengshi who lived during the much later ninth century CE and had a great interest in tattooing (Reed, 2000). Permanent body marking was stigmatized to a great extent during ancient times in China and people who bore these

¹ Also known as *The Miscellaneous Morsels from Youyan*. It contains a variety of Chinese and foreign legends and hearsay, as well as reports on natural events, short anecdotes, and tales of the fantastic and mundane, as well as notes on medicinal herbs and tattoos (Wikipedia 2022).

decorative marks were often viewed as barbaric and uncivilized. According to some scholars, Chinese people have used tattoos to brand criminals on their faces on a regular basis. This was done to warn the society of their wrongdoings. Chinese texts from before 300 BCE also talk about Japanese men decorating their skin with tattoos (Lock).

As for Europe, Greek sources dating back to the fifth century BCE are the first to describe tattoos (Deter–Wolf et al. 2016: 19–20). Soldiers of the Roman Empire were tattooed with the mark SPQR (Senatus Populusque Romanus, that is “The Senate and People of Rome”) and dots that served as a means of identification. Tattoos may have been perceived as a show of prestige by the Greeks at first, but the markings came to be seen as a sign of slavery and degradation by both the Romans and the Greeks over time (Rychlík, 2008). Allegedly, Greeks adopted the idea of punitive tattoos from Persians in the sixth century BCE, who marked criminals, slaves, and defeated enemies. Known example of this is the Athenians tattooing owls on defeated Samians, who then returned the favor by tattooing warships onto defeated Greeks. Ancient Greek historian Herodotus indicated that many ancient cultures that the Greeks and Romans encountered saw tattoos as marks of pride (Archaeological Institute of America, 2013). Another potential culture that introduced tattoos to the Greeks was Ancient Egypt, where tattoos were mostly used for decorative purposes.

2.1.2 Anthropomorphic art and tattoo tools

Evidence suggests that the inscription of the skin originated at least as early as the Upper Paleolithic period. This can be found in ancient art – stone engravings, sculptures, paintings, and other depictions of the human body created in prehistoric times – and instruments used to make these permanent markings. Many of these, unfortunately, cannot be proven to represent permanent body decoration. One of the most possible signs of tattoos existing during the Late Stone Age are the partial or complete three–dimensional human effigies. However, there are many differentiating scholarly opinions on the actual meaning behind the marks, gashes and lines found on these figures.

More evidence is found in Thracian² women with tattooed dots, dashes, and concatenated chevrons on their thighs, arms, neck, chin, and on the bridge of their foot depicted on Greek vases from the fifth and fourth centuries BCE (Renaut 2017: 259). Additionally,

² An Indo–European speaking people who inhabited large parts of Eastern and Southeastern Europe in ancient history (Wikipedia 2022).

ancient textual sources (e.g., Herodotus and Strabo) support the existence of a prominent female tattooing tradition in the Balkans in antiquity.

Numerous humanlike prehistoric figures that stem from the cultures of Okvik and Punuk people of Alaska and Siberia around the Bering Strait show that the tattooing practices of Inuit people date back to at least 50 CE. These statuettes bore deep marks on their faces and bodies that very likely represent tattoos and furthermore imply the ceremonial and protective purposes of these adornments (Krutak 2017: 262 – 265).

Figures depicting tattoos have been discovered all over the world. Some of the oldest ones being discovered in Europe and China.

Sharp needles and ochre pigment found in caves in southern France is by some considered a proof that tattooing has been performed in Europe since the late Paleolithic period (Zidarov 2017: 145). Bone needles may have been used for tattooing in the Balkans by the residents of a settlement near Pietrele, Romania during the Late Copper Age (4500–4200 BCE). Whereas more evidence for the use of needles combined in combs as tattoo implements has yet to be discovered, the ongoing investigation of the Pietrele collection has uncovered more evidence for the likely use of not just individual needles as tattoo implements, but also needles packed in combs (Zidarov 2017: 145).

Ancient Egypt has yielded some of the world's oldest tattoo instruments. Egyptians used needles made from rectangular pieces of bronze folded inward at one end and hammered into shape. These were then fastened securely together to cover large areas at once and fixed to a wooden handle. Most likely, soot was utilized as a pigment (Dawson 2021).

As opposed to Egyptian use of metal needles, Polynesian Maori traditionally used tattooing tools made from sharpened bone attached to a wooden handle. Cuts were made in the flesh before the ink made from burnt wood was drummed into the skin with small mallets (Dawson 2021). Polynesian tattooing has a long and illustrious history that dates back to more than 2000 years ago (Gemori 2011).

Another Polynesian tribe from the Borneo Island called the Dayak have been practicing tattooing for centuries using needles fashioned from the thorns of orange trees. A mixture of soot and sugar is used to make the ink (Dawson 2021)

2.1.3 Tattoos found on mummies

Preserved human skin provides the best evidence for the antiquity of tattooing, as well as the only direct archaeological proof. Hundreds of ancient naturally and intentionally mummified

tattooed human bodies have been discovered all over the world, including the American Arctic, Greenland, Siberia, Western China, the Philippines, Africa, Europe, Mexico, and the Andes, among others. Concrete evidence of these marked bodies extends only back to the fourth millennium BCE (Deter–Wolf et al. 2016: 20)

The oldest found tattooed mummy belongs to the naturally preserved body of an Iceman known as Ötzi whose remains were discovered in the Tyrolean Alps in 1991. His date of death is presumed to be around 3250 BCE (Kutchera and Müller, 2003: 705–708) and his body carries 61 tattoos consisting of lines on different bodily parts (Samadelli 2015: 756). These markings have been heavily examined and based on their placement and found diseases of the Iceman, they are possibly remains of therapeutic treatments (Kean et al 2013). It is reasonable to conclude that there existed other individuals with markings such as Ötzi’s who underwent this practice and therefore implies the existence of tattoos to be even more ancient (Deter–Wolf et al 2016: 21).

Another tattooed mummy was discovered in Chile in 1983 and was originally deemed to be even older than Ötzi by some experts. The specimen, however, was discovered to be around 500 years younger than the Iceman. The mummified man was described to have a dotted moustache–like tattoo on his face (Deter–Wolf et al 2016: 22).

The oldest mummies recovered in Egypt have been recently dated to 3349–3018 BCE, making them roughly contemporary with the Alpine mummy Ötzi. Out of the six Gebelein mummies, one female and one male were revealed to have permanent markings. The female figure has a bended line on her upper right arm and four S–like motifs on her right shoulder, while the male body has two tattoos identified as horned animals on his upper right arm (Friedman 2017: 11–13).

The most intricate and artistic ancient tattoos have been discovered on the mummified bodies of the Pazyryk people³ who inhabited the Altai–Sayan Mountain region in East–Central Asia. Preserved tattoos have been identified from several ancient burial sites. It was assumed that only noblemen and noblewomen bore tattoos as a sign of superiority, but as further sites were unearthed, it was discovered that even common people received permanent markings. These mummies were found bearing complex black and bluish tattoos depicting animals, mythical creatures and flower–like designs (Pankova 2017: 66–79).

The Tarim Basin desert in Central Asia has revealed some of the ancient world’s most mysterious tattooed mummies – Tarim mummies. One of them being a woman of unspecified

³ Pazyryk culture is a Scythian nomadic Iron Age archaeological culture that dates to 6th to 3rd centuries BCE.

culture who lived between 1000 and 600 BCE. The marks are similar to those of the Pazyryk mummies found on the border of China and Russia suggesting her origins to be Eurasian (Archaeological Institute of America, 2013).

2.2 Tattoo history of the Common Era

The tattoo spread across ancient Egypt and Rome until it was outlawed by Emperor Constantine after his conversion to Christianity. Constantine felt that the human image was a representation of God and that it should not be soiled or distorted in any way. Inscribing the skin with ink has never been entirely endorsed by any of the three major monotheistic religions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam). Tattoos were outlawed among Christians by Pope Hadrian I in 787, but the practice of tattooing the body persisted in secret (Pesapane et al 2014: 145). There is an existing line of evidence of Christians getting tattoos as a proof of their faith (Mena 2017).

After the James Cook maritime excursions of the 18th century, permanent body markings were reintroduced into Western culture and officially labelled as *tattoo* which comes from the Sāmoan word *tatau*⁴ (Ellis 2006: 698, Hunter 2020). Cook brought Tahitian tattoo artists named Ma'i with him back to England. Moreover, many of his sailors came back with marks on their bodies which resulted in tattoos being associated with seamen and sailors and led to its spread to seaports around the world⁵.

In the nineteenth century, tattooing was still mostly linked with sailors and criminals, though in the second half of the century it spread among some members of the upper classes, including royalty⁶. For the royals, tattooing had become a mark of wealth towards the end of the nineteenth century⁷.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that tattoos have always been present in Western society and therefore have not been presented to Europe only with James Cook finding them in his voyages. Only the term *tattoo* was introduced, not the practice itself (Hunter 2020).

⁴ The Samoan, Tahitian, and Tongan languages all use the term *tatau*. It forms the English term *tattoo*, as well as the German *Tatowierung* and the French *tatouage*, when transliterated. Before Captain James Cook's usage of the Tahitian phrase (which he spelled *tattoo*) in 1769, *puncturing*, *punctuating*, and *rasing* were used to describe marking the skin with indelible pigment (Ellis 2006: 698)

⁵ This part is based on an article published on website Zealandtattoo (2017).

⁶ Some of the European royals who sported tattoos were: Kings Edward VII and George V of England, King Frederick IX of Denmark, King Kaiser Wilhelm II of Romania, King Alexander of Yugoslavia and King Alfonso XIII of Spain and even Russian Tsar Nicholas II joined in adorning his body with permanent ink (Wikipedia 2022).

⁷ This part is based on an article published on website Cloak and Dagger.

In the New World⁸, tattooing was common among indigenous peoples in North America, and it had much of the same cultural, spiritual, and symbolic value as it did in other societies. Tattoos of Aztec, Maya, and Inca in Central America had elaborate designs that expressed achievements of the individuals, but the marks could have also served as a punishment (Green 2003: 20–21).

Later in North America, tattooing in the United States became widespread during the Civil War among the soldiers, on both sides of the conflict, who marked themselves with patriotic images. And just like in Britain, among sailors who adorned their bodies as a way of self-expression and a way of identification had they died at sea. Although tattooing was already presented in the 1850s in circuses and travelling shows that exhibited tattooed “freaks” – Native Americans, men, women, families, and even tattooed animals (Govenar 1982: 30). During the late nineteenth century, heavily tattooed women started to become very popular in circus performances. *Tattooed Ladies* had almost their entire bodies inked – apart from their faces, necks, hands, and a few other parts.

Tattoos have grown in popularity with the invention of the electric tattoo machine around 1880, which quickened the process and decreased the pain. The clientele diversified, apart from sailors and soldiers, even civilians, and some members of the “high society” decorated their bodies with tattoos (Govenar 1982: 30).

In Southeastern Asia tattoos had originally artistic and spiritual meaning and have often been bound up with religion. The marks frequently served as a form of protection against all kinds of harm. In Thailand, Buddhist monks give and receive tattoos. And the Ainu people, aboriginal inhabitants of northern island of Japan are known for tattoos around their lips.

The now famous Japanese colorful full body decorative marks flourished in the 18th century. First, among commoners who did not have money for fine clothing and wanted to somehow adorn their bodies. In the early mid-nineteenth century, an illustrated work of fiction entitled *The Water Margin* was imported from China and the images influenced the tattoo world, both the Japanese and Western alike, greatly. When woodblock images of heroes from the story were made, the popularity of tattoos rose steeply (Green 2003: 17–19). In the first half of the 20th century, Emperor Meiji banned the Japanese *irezumi* tattoos of gods, mythical creatures, and other images from popular tales, for the fear of Japanese being seen as barbaric by Westerners, but they continued to spread in the underground circles. Moreover, European

⁸ The continental landmass of North and South America. Term used during exploration of America in the 15th century.

and American sailors were charmed by the *irezumi* tattoos, and while in Japan, they often had *irezumi* tattoos inked (Sanders and Vail 2008: 12).

Around the mid-twentieth century, tattoos were seen as deviant in the public eye, practiced in an unhygienic environment and tattoo consumers were seen as outcasts and even potentially dangerous. However, by 1970s tattooing had become part a mainstream feature of Western fashion (Sanders and Vail 2008: 18–19). The clientele grew from sailors, bikers, and gang members to middle- and upper-class members. Tattooing styles have changed, and new ones were introduced. New tattooists used variety of sources to create designs. Many were influenced and inspired by fantasy and science-fiction illustrations, traditional Japanese and Polynesian patterns, tribal tattoos, abstract art, and much more. Adorning one's body became popular among celebrities and tattooing started to be presented as “art” and tattoo practitioners as “artists”.

In several areas around the world, traditional tattooing is still practiced. In Nepal, Hinduist gods and goddesses, flowers and birds are ever-present tattoo subjects. In India, dots and symbols form patterns that serve as all kinds of protection, ensure fertility or to repel evil (Green 2003: 19–20). The tradition of Coptic Christians of getting pilgrimage tattoos still lives on in Jerusalem, where the tattoo artists continue their 700-year family tradition (Mena 2017). Furthermore, many youngsters of the Polynesian island are reclaiming their traditional tattooing practices, one of them being *moko* of the Māori people that is still growing in demand (Tepapa 2011).

In some parts of the world, tattoos are still seen in a negative way by the public. But tattoo industry is still growing, the number of tattoo artists and customers increases by day. According to a 2022 statistic published on the page Modern gentlemen, individuals who had at least one tattoo measured the following; 40% aged 18–34, 36% aged 35–54, and 16% aged over 55 (Cvetkovska 2022).

3 Pre-modern history of tattoo custom on the Korean Peninsula

Tattoos have certainly existed in Korean culture and the records date back to the Samhan Period. However, the interest of researchers in regard to this topic was not sufficient and therefore there are not many academic papers about this part of Korean culture. First one to write a full-scale study about the Korean tattoo customs was Cho Hyōnsōl in 2003. He wrote *A Poem on the Origins and Variations of East Asian Tattoo* (*Tongashia munsinŭi yuraewa kŭ pyōnie kwanhan shiron*), which summarizes the general history and East Asian history of tattooing. Fortunately, another scholar felt the need to review purely Korean tattoo folklore and that was Yi Tongch'ōl

who composed *Patterns and Characteristics of Korean Tattoo Folklore (Han'gung munsin minsogŭi yangsanggwa t'ŭkching)* in 2007. And in 2013 Kim Hyŏngchung compiled *A Study of the History Development and Modern Meaning of Korean Punishment Tattoo (Han'guk'yŏngbŏlmunsinŭi palchŏn sawa hyŏndaejŏgŭimie taehan)*.

3.1 Korean terminology: *munsin* vs *tattoo*

In the earliest records the mark left after inscribing ink into the skin was called *munsin* (문신), however, in modern Korea the word *tattoo* is used much more frequently. The word *munsin* literally translates to “letter engraved on the body” (Park, 2016: 74), as the first syllable is the *gŭlwŏl mun* (文), meaning “writing” or “letter”, while the second is the *mom sin* (身), meaning “body”. An examination of how *tattoos* and *munsins* were perceived took place in Korea in 2008 and it was found out that most consumers consider the two to be different. They connected *tattoos* with positive images like being unique, sexy, outgoing, beautiful, decorative, free, and fashionable, whereas they generally related *munsins* with negative images like being scary, violent, frightening, threatening anti-social, masculine, or repulsive (Song and Park, 2008: 260–261). The original term manifested in Korean society, and it became unavoidably linked to criminals and gangs who frequently tattoo themselves as will be explained in the following pages. The modern term *t'at'u* was directly incorporated from English and is therefore connected more with the artistic side of the practice. Since the word *munsin* carries negative context, for better understanding, I am using the neutral word *tattoo* in the following text about the Korean history of tattooing.

3.2 Samhan (100 BCE – 280 CE)

The earliest records of tattooing practice on the Korean Peninsula appear in historic Chinese literature *Samgukchi* (The Record of the Three Kingdoms), *Huhansŏ* (History of the Eastern Han Dynasty) (Cho 2002: 151–173, Park 2015: 74, MacFarlane 2020: 2, Glietsch 2020: 7, Kim 2013: 28–29) and *Tongichŏn* (Biographies of the Eastern Barbarians⁹) in *Weizhi* (Book of Wei) (Kim 2013: 28–29).

The literature above mentions the custom of tattooing one's body in the province of Mahan, Chinhan, and Pyŏnhan of Samhan¹⁰. In the *The Records of the Three Kingdoms* is a section about people of Mahan “Their men sometimes tattoo their bodies.” and about the people

⁹ A text with descriptions of people on the Korean peninsula and in Manchuria (Kim 2013: 28–29).

¹⁰ Mahan, Jinhan and Pyŏnhan were three political entities, known collectively as the Samhan.

of Chinhan and Pyŏnhan, “The men and women who live close to the Wa¹¹ also tattoo their bodies.” (Byington 2009: 144, 147). *History of the Eastern Han Dynasty* also mentions the people of Mahan “Their southern borders are near the Wa, so there are also some who tattoo their bodies.” and the people of Chinhan and Pyŏnhan “Their country lies near the Wa, so they tend to tattoo their bodies.” (Byington 2009: 150–151). According to the records, numerous people had tattoos and both texts cited above implicate those tattoos were naturally adopted in Korea due to the near proximity of Mahan and Pyŏnhan to Japan across the sea (Kim 2013: 28–29), where tattooing was already widespread.

Similarly to Japan, tattooing customs in Korea were mainly used as a form of magical charm or talisman by fishermen and divers in the country’s southern regions. There are two main reasons in East Asian culture that explain why people got protective tattoos. First was to prevent attack while working at the sea – to scare away large fish and water birds. The second was a protection against kyoryong¹² (Yi 2007: 337–338). The latter reason is explained in detail in Vietnamese mythology. According to the folklore, dragons are said to charge at those living in the highlands or near the sea. People in these areas began to engrave tattoos of dragons or sea monsters on their bodies to avoid further harm and to prevent these attacks. Dragons apparently despise and assault those that are not like them, but upon seeing dragons tattooed on human bodies, they would consider them one of their kind and cease the attacks (Yi 2007: 339).

Similar records have been found in Japan, Vietnam, China, and parts of Korea. It is presumed that Koreans would get dragons and underwater sea monsters inscribed onto their skin to prevent attacks while working (Yi 2007 339–240).

Records in the book by Kim Kwangŏn (1994) state that symbolic tattoos continued to be used for protection later on, although for different reasons than during Samhan Period: a red circle placed on the forehead during infectious disease spread in Kwangwŏn province, as a symbol of the heavens placed on the soles of a woman after giving birth in the North P’yŏngan province. This was both to ensure protection, safety and recovery, some records even state that in the Chŏllanam province, it was a custom to have one’s father’s name tattooed on private parts to cure and prevent hemorrhoids (Yi 2007: 340).

Many records and documents of the following time period, between the end of Samhan states and beginning of the Three Kingdoms Period, have been lost and none of the existing

¹¹ Wa is oldest recorded name of Japan.

¹² A type of Chinese dragon that resembles a snake.

annals mentions tattooing. Leaving us with only speculations and unanswered questions about the tattoo custom in Korea at the time. However, it is impossible to conclude if the custom disappeared entirely. (Yi 2007: 340). The arrival of Chinese culture and legal systems to the Korean peninsula is a possible reason for the disappearance of literary mentions of tattoo customs (Kim 2013, 31). Major factors for the extinction of tattoo culture are believed to have been Buddhist and Confucian philosophies, which were incorporated into Korean society from China.

The phrase in the *Classic of Filial Piety*¹³ “Our bodies – to every hair and bit of skin – are received by us from our parents, and we must not presume to injure or wound them. This is the beginning of filial piety” teaches not to harm or fail one’s parents or the gifts they have given to their children. Therefore, damaging the body inherited from one’s parents was regarded as a betrayal of filial piety. Meaning that tattooed person lacks respect for their parents. (Kim 2013: 31, 37).

3.3 Koryŏ Dynasty

The tattoos that appeared during the Koryŏ Dynasty had a completely different purpose. Compared to tattoos of Samhan which were considered witchcraft used for protection, Koryŏ tattoos mainly served as a punishment.

The first record to mention tattooing during Koryŏ Dynasty is a Song Dynasty ambassador in a report about his visit of Koryŏ in 1123 called *Koryŏ Kyŏnggyŏng* (Yi 2007: 340). The primary Korean literature to mention tattoos during that time is *Koryŏsa* (The History of Koryŏ) (Yi 2007: 341, Kim 2013: 32).

Koryŏ punishment tattoos were characterized by letters etched on the body that described the nature of the crime. The term *chajahyŏng* was most commonly used to describe a tattoo executed by scarring and engraving the name of the act on a criminal’s face or arm with ink. This type of tattoo was typically used in combination with a repetitive offense (Yi 2007: 341, Kim 2013: 32). The severity of the tattoo punishment can be attested by the Koryŏ historical records related to the Myoch’ŏng Rebellion.¹⁴ Those who took part in the rebellion and demonstrated resistance were exiled to an island in the middle of the sea with the letters *Sokyŏngyŏkch’ŏk* (Rebel of the Western Capital) carved on their foreheads. At the time, tattoo punishment was considered the second harshest after the death penalty. During the reigns of

¹³ Chinese Confucian classic discourse that provides advice on filial piety; how to behave toward senior figures such as a father, an elder brother or a ruler.

¹⁴ A rebellion led by monk Myoch’ŏng against the Koryŏ government (Wikipedia 2022).

King Ŭijong (1146–1170) and King Myōngjong (1170–1197), the penal tattoo was also used as a retribution for treason, conspiracy, or false allegations against political opponents, as well as violations of significant national enforcement legislation (Yi 2007: 341–343). Punishment tattoos were also utilized in the instance of a stolen cow, ox, or horse, because these animals were crucial for society in both agricultural and military objectives (Kim 2013: 32).

3.4 Chosŏn Dynasty

3.4.1 Punitive tattoo

During the Chosŏn Dynasty, tattoo punishment was even more common than during the Koryŏ Dynasty. It was commonly used for a variety of offenses, but mainly for those who committed theft (Yi 2007: 350). Confucianism, particularly Neo–Confucianism, which was initiated during the late Koryŏ dynasty (Eckert et al 1990) became the dominant political philosophy and had a significant influence on the general ruling ideology, as well as the law and the state’s national political structure. Additionally, the adaptation of the Chinese Ming dynasty’s “Ming Code” (Taemyŏngnyul) verified Chinese influence on Chosŏn’s criminal law system (Kim 2013, 34). The “Ming Code” mirrored the Koryŏ dynasty’s punishments in many ways, including tattoo punishment. Tattoos were strongly prohibited during the Tang and Ming dynasties and were only ever used as a form of punishment (Kim 2007: 34).

According to *Annals of the Chosŏn Dynasty* records of punitive tattoos appeared during the reign of King Sejong (1418–1450) (Kim 2013: 37). The “Ming Code” regulated the placement of the tattoos on the arm or wrist, however, both in China and Chosŏn, the penal tattoos were often placed on the forehead to intensify the effect of punishment (Kim 2013: 37). Various characters were used for the engravings, depending on the crime (Yi 2007: 351). Tattoo punishment often preceded the death penalty and was strictly monitored since tattooing was prohibited under national law (Kim 2007: 34).

People with engraved characters were unable to engage in ancestral rites, attend funerals and mourning services or visit temples and participate in community festivities, and it was difficult to live a regular life since the mark could not be erased. Moreover, if the individuals were caught trying to cover up the mark with bandages or hats, they were subjected to further punishment. The act was temporarily halted as King Sejong pointed out the harshness of the punishment (Kim 2013: 38, Yi 2007: 351). However, tattoo penalty was reinstated during the King Sejo (1455–1468)’s rule as the number of thieves and states property theft increased.

Engraving the mark proved the most effective punishment in preventing these crimes (Kim 2013: 38, Yi 2007: 352).

Additionally, during the reign of King Yōnsan'gun (1494–1506), tattooing of the slaves belonging to the *yangban*¹⁵ was revived under the national law and acquired institutional recognition. The inscriptions were generally placed on the slaves' cheeks to prevent them from fleeing and to mark them as their master's "property" (Kim 2013: 39).

The tattoo punishment served more as a way to showcase the absolute power of the ruling monarch, rather than protecting the individuals of the society. Criminal law of that time, including penal tattoos, served mainly as a way to intimidate and guard the public (Kim 2013: 41). It was fully abolished and disappeared during the reign of King Yōngjo (1724–1776) in the late Chosŏn Dynasty (Kim 2013: 39, Yi 2007: 366).

3.4.2 *Yōnbi* tattoo

Along with the punishment tattoo, another type of tattoo custom emerged during the Chosŏn dynasty. It developed privately among the general population and was secretly passed along (Kim 2013: 40–41). If it were to be revealed in public, people with the tattoos would be condemned and criticized by society (Yi 2007: 366).

This gesture known as *yōnbi* served as a symbol of love and affection between two (or more) people. By carving the other's name into one's flesh, individuals showed their loyalty and determination (Kim 2013: 39, Yi 2007: 353). The term first appeared in Yi Kyukyōng's *Oju yōnmun jangjōn san'go* (Random expectations of Oju)¹⁶ chapter "On Evidences of Making Blue Tattoos" (Kim 2013: 40–41, Yi 2007: 353).

The term *yōnbi* in connection with tattooing can be explained in two different ways. First is seen as corresponding to the Chinese characters 聯臂 (Kim: 2013: 39), with the first character (聯), *yōniül yōn* (or *ryōn*), meaning "connect", while the second (臂), *p'al pi*, denotes the body part between the shoulder and wrist. The overall, metonymical meaning of this "connecting arms" is ultimately: "getting to know each other". Another explanation sees the term *yōnbi* as corresponding to the characters 燃臂 (Ŭich'ōn 2016: 165) which would translate as "burning the arm". Here, the second character is the same as above (*p'al pi*, "arm"), while

¹⁵ Aristocracy, well-educated scholarly class of male Confucian scholars who were part of the ruling elite in Korea prior to 1945 and during the Republics period of Korean history.

¹⁶ "A total of 60 books, 60 books, and a total of 1417 items, with a vast content of history, art (literature, music), life history, religion (Buddhism, Taoism, feng shui , mechanics), livelihood (agriculture , fishery, commerce), natural science (astronomy, biology and medicine)" (Encyclopedia of Korean Folk Culture 2010).

the first syllable (燃), *t'al yŏn*, means “burn”. Both versions indicate the usual placement of the mark on one’s arm. While the character 聯 points to a positive deeper meaning of connecting two lovers through the identical mark, the character 燃 points neutrally to the specific technical act, but might also point negatively to the pain of getting the tattoo, similar to the pain of getting burned.

Annals of the Chosŏn Dynasty record an adultery case involving a woman named Ŏudong (or Ŏŭrudong), a Korean dancer, poet, and writer, who had relationships with many men, including royal relatives, court officials and slaves. She often made the men engrave her name on their bodies and she herself had six *yŏnbi* tattoos on her body, presumably of the men she adored the most out of her numerous affairs. Ŏudong ended up getting executed by hanging (October 18, year 11 of King Sŏngjong), after getting divorced, thrown out and sent to exile, while many of the men she was involved with were set free (Kim 2013: 40, Yi 2007: 353–355).

Further Chosŏn literature discloses these tattoos were practiced by many to leave physical evidence of their love and promises. Yi (2007) reports this tattoo was frequently used by *kisaeng* (기생), ordinary lovers and later even among sworn brothers and sisters and persons who wished to vow an oath. *Annals of the Chosŏn Dynasty* apparently have records suggesting that *Yŏnbi* tattoos were used by lesbian court ladies who inscribed character for “friend” onto their skin as a sign of affection (Song 2011). It is believed the custom was adopted from Japan where high-ranking prostitutes reportedly pledged their love in the form of tattoos (Yi 2007: 366).

4 Modern period of Korean tattoo

4.1 Gang custom tattoos

During the 20th century, tattoos became associated mainly with organized crime. While Korea was under Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), tattoos started to emerge in the Korean gangs, influenced by Japanese *yakuza*¹⁷. The gangs of both countries often worked together at the time in Busan and the individuals were recognizable by their marks (Rhiannon 2021). The tattoos of Korean gang members were mainly inspired by Korean traditional art (Clarke et al 2021) and were meant to symbolize friendship, companionship, and loyalty among the gang members and commitment to the organization (Glietsch 2020: 20, Song 2011).

¹⁷ Members of transnational organized crime syndicates originating in Japan.

Korean crime rings created their own custom tattoos, the most famous being the seven-star pattern tattoo on the chest of the Seven Star Mob members, and the two intertwined dragons on the upper arms of the Double Dragon Mob members (Glietsch 2020: 20). Just like the ancient warriors used tattoos to scare the enemy, gangsters often chose overwhelming and powerful images of dragons, tigers, or warriors to engrave on their skin to intimidate others (Song 2011). There are very few gang members who bear no tattoos in the 20th and 21st centuries, even more accentuating the negative views on tattoos in South Korea. Glietsch (2020), however, suggests that it is not the mob associates themselves who spread the appalling stigma around tattoos, but rather the society that assumes the marks originated with criminal activities of the gangs, connecting them with the unlawful behavior.

4.2 Comfort women

During the Japanese colonial rule, young women were abducted to serve as “comfort women” for Japanese soldiers. They were raped, beaten, tortured and in many cases brutally killed. One of the few survivors, Chŏng Oksun, has shown the world her scarred and tattooed body as a proof of the torture she overcame. Her body is covered in tattoos – inside her mouth, on her chest, stomach and private parts – that she received while being interrogated after failed escape attempt (Park 2013, Fisher 2015).

A Korean documentary¹⁸ highlighted the legal battle of “the only Korean-Japanese former comfort women to sue the Japanese government”, Song Sing-Do. “The knife scars left on her sides and thighs and the tattoo on her arm that read “Kaneko” (her name at the comfort station) bore witness until the end of her life to the things Song Sin-do had suffered,” (The Hankyoreh 20 Dec 2017).

In 2022, the Korean drama *Naeil* (Tomorrow) depicted a story of “comfort women” in several of its episodes. Some of the characters received tattoos from Japanese soldiers, one of them having words “Chosŏn whore” inked onto her skin.

But there was also a different type of tattooing practiced, as shown by the example of Kong Chŏmyŏp, also a former comfort woman, who sports three dots tattooed on her arm, which she and her three friends tattooed on each other to as a reminder of their friendship (Korea JongAng Daily 17 August 2015).

¹⁸ Documentary called “My Hear is Not Broken Yet”, directed by Ahn Hae Ryong from 2007.

4.3 Tattoo regulations

Throughout the ancient, medieval, and early modern periods of Korean history, tattoos have been subject to surveillance and control by national law. Tattoos during the Koryŏ and Chosŏn dynasties have been prohibited by law and only practiced as a way of punishment under strict state regulations. Individuals with tattoos were shunned by the society and deprived of many parts of regular life. During the period of Japanese rule in Korea, the stigma around tattoos only grew as mostly gang members and criminals adorned their bodies this way.

Tattoo custom today, however, serves a different purpose and does not generally intend to harm the recipient or society. Although, because of the negative stigma attached to tattoos and, more specifically, tattooed people, the tattoo custom frequently conveys a discriminatory culture in South Korean society (Kim 2013: 44). Kim (2013: 44) suggests the existence of discrimination and cultural policies in the present to be somewhat similar to the function of punishment tattoos in past. Such distinctions can be seen in the form of tattoo regulations and policies in South Korean society, which affect the lives of many individuals. Tattooed people may face restrictions on the job market, such as when hiring police officers or government officials, as well as prohibitions on entering public saunas or bathhouses and difficulties with the mandatory military draft in Korea, among other things (Kim 2013: 44).

Police officers need to pass a physical examination in order to be accepted. What often occurs is that tattooed candidate is rejected due to the marks on his body, as police officers are a symbol of public power and serve as a role-models. Having tattoos is still considered a symbol of criminal behavior by many and therefore contradicts the qualities the police officer is supposed to have (Kim 2013: 45).

Due to this repeating occurrence of prejudice against tattooed applicants, The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) of Korea declared in 2005 that the failure of recruitment due to tattoos was unreasonable and discriminatory against tattooed candidates. The NHRC then urged the National Police Agency to include new correctional measures in their laws. In 2006, the National Police Agency announced that they would revise the enforcement rules of the Police Officers Acts, allowing people with tattoos to pass the physical examination to become police officers, starting in 2007 (Kim 2013: 44 – 45).

Regulations are put in public places like bathhouses and saunas. In 2011, the National Police Agency in Korea prohibited all people with full-body tattoos from entering public bath houses as part of their counter measures of organized gang activity, since gang associates quite often visit these facilities. Violating the terms can result in fines for “causing anxiety” to other

visitors or minor criminal offence. Many bath houses and saunas have displayed signs saying, “No entry for tattooed people,” as the owners believe that tattooed people make other customers uncomfortable and might make them leave (Kim 2013: 47).

According to Kim (2013) these differentiating policies against tattooed individuals lead to negative self-perceptions and present opportunity for discriminatory tendencies, eventually leading to a violation of the constitutional right to pursue happiness and personal rights.

4.4 Tattooing law

To be specific, there are no tattoo-laws in South Korea as of now. However, tattooing is considered as invasive medical practice - due to the risk of infection caused by needles and ink - by the Korean Ministry of Health and therefore can be performed only by licensed doctors (Cho 11 November 2016). Making South Korea the only developed country where tattooing is illegal unless you are a medical doctor (Carrington 2021). Under a ruling of the Supreme Court of South Korea that has been in place since 1992 tattooing without a medical license is punishable in fines up to 50 million won and prison terms of usually two years. (CBC news 2022). In 2016, the ban was upheld in a 7-2 vote by the nine-judge panel of the Constitutional Court (Kwon 2022).

Most recently in March of 2022, the law was deemed constitutional again in 5-4 vote by the Constitutional Court in Seoul with the justification that tattooing causes safety hazard and potential dangerous side effects. The exact verdict saying: “The limited medical knowledge and skills involved in tattooing cannot ensure the levels of treatment that medical professionals can provide, treatment that may be needed before or after the procedure” (Seo and Park 2022).

In the last decade Korean associations such as the Korea Tattoo Association (KTA), the Korea Tattoo Federation and the labor Tattoo Union have been challenging the law and advocating for the rights of artists, submitting materials for revisions of the law to the National Assembly, organizing peaceful protests and demonstrations and arranging workshops related to the legalization.

2022 upholding of the ban was condemned by tattoo artists. The decision was described by leaders of Korean tattooing associations as “almost a joke,” “retrograde,” and “not reflecting the reality,” (Kwon 2022, CBC news 2022). Mister Song, founder of the KTA, and mister Kim, founder of the Tattoo Union, advocate that tattoo legalization in South Korea would create safer, more sanitary environments for both artists and their customers and would open over

200 000 jobs and help the spread of the Korean culture boom (Cho 11 November 2016, Chung 13 May 2022).

On the side of the tattoo artists is also a South Korean politician Ryu Hochŏng who launched a campaign for the legalization of tattoos in the early 2021. She expressed “there should be no restrictions for expression of artists,” and that “the current laws don’t even stop non-licensed tattooist from operating,” (Carrington 2021).

5 Korean society’s perception of tattoos and tattooing

The previous parts of this thesis were mainly focused on the history of tattooing around the world, the history on the Korean peninsula and explanation of the stigma connected to tattoos. The following part puts together information from Korean and Korean English press, interviews with Korean tattoo artists, statistics, and a few articles to create an overview on how differently parts of Korean society perceive tattoos and tattooing.

Due to its cultural environment South Korea has been considered as a “non-tattoo society” since the Samhan period. Although, tattoos still appear throughout Korean history, usually in connection with crime and punishment, as explained in the previous chapters. Other than for punishment purposes which were regulated by the government, tattoos have been prohibited for centuries in Korean society and as such, it was difficult for tattoo culture to develop until a few decades ago.

Furthermore, Korean society has followed Confucian body views for centuries, which has naturally established negative perceptions of tattoos in terms of perspective and tolerance. (Kim 48). One of the values of Confucianism is respecting one’s body granted by the parents and damaging the body with tattoos means demonstrating one’s unfaithfulness and ungratefulness. Therefore, the origins of the negative perception on tattooing in South Korean society can be traced back to the start of practicing Confucianism.

During the Japanese occupation, tattooing started to be used by Korean mobs and gangs under the influence of Japanese yakuza and tattoos became linked with criminal activity as gangsters openly displayed their tattoos to show off their gang affiliations (Kwon 2022). However, today the mob affiliates do not usually walk the streets flaunting their tattoos in revealing clothes, intimidating civilians. The association of crime with the art of tattooing is not fed by gang members themselves anymore (i-D 2016), but the stigma still remains.

There is a significant difference between the perception of tattoos by the older generations and the views on the practice held by the new generation. Generational gaps are not foreign to any society but are especially visible in the South Korean population and

tattooing can be considered one of the topics where we can see massive dissimilarities in thinking of the different generations. Whereas the former generations grew up with Confucian views of the body internalized in their consciousness, the latter generation is quite free from it in comparison.

The eldest members of South Korea grew up in a closed society with minimal chances to experience foreign cultures. They lived in times when tattooing was already strongly stigmatized by the preceding generations based on its former use as a punishment. And while the current eldest members of Korean society were only children, tattoos began to spread among the outlaws, gangs, and criminals. Today's Korean parents and grandparents simply perpetuate the stigma their ancestors held, often unaware of the reasons behind it except for the Confucian beliefs. Unless they are open-minded they feed the negative perceptions and pass them onto their children. (Yi 2007: 367-368, Kim 2013: 48-49)

“For a long time, Korean people have not liked tattoos. Old people particularly dislike it,” said an old man when asked about tattoos (i-D 2016). “Everyone with tattoos must be aware of the historical context and how we may be perceived. We can't simply call some people old-fashioned. We can instead show people that getting tattoos does not have to mean anything bad—a change happens over time,” says one of the South Korean tattoo artists, Ati, who is very well aware that older generations grew while gangs used tattoos to identify themselves (Park 2020).

On the other hand, the new generations are comparatively free from the Confucian perception of one's body given by their parents. The young stray from the virtues of Confucianism that greatly values family bonds, importance of community over individual and social cohesiveness. They are developing new values, different from their elders, desiring to be different and express themselves and their individuality rather than conform like their seniors have (Park 2015: 75, 88).

For some young Korean people, tattoos are often not only meaningful and beautiful art, but also a means to stand against the societal norms and a way to rebel against the older generation's idea of respectable beauty and mainstream Asian beauty ideals and standards (Schroeder 2021). Others used to view tattoos as something bad and unnatural growing up, but since a lot of people are getting tattoos nowadays, they do not have the same perception anymore (DKDKTV 2018).

In an interview conducted in 2018 by a YouTube channel DKDKTV, Koreans were asked what they think about tattoos. An older woman said she does not like them but has had a semi-permanent eyeliner tattooed on herself. She said that since it looks the same as drawn on, it is

okay. Some young people said they are completely okay with tattoos and would like to get a small one done. Some said they used to view tattoos as something bad and unnatural growing up, but since a lot of people are getting tattoos nowadays, they do not have the same perception anymore. And all the young interviewees said their parents would not like it if they got a tattoo (DKDKTV 2018).

According to a Macromill Embrain's Trend Monitor's survey of 1000 men and women conducted nationwide in South Korea in 2014, 68.8% of participants felt that perception of tattoos is more positive than in the past. About 63% said that tattoos are part fashion and 47.5% said that tattoos are a common sight, more accurately 55.2% of participants in their 20s and 51.2% of participants in their 30s felt that tattoos are common in their surroundings. More than half (54%) of partakers thought of tattoos as a way to express oneself.

Another survey took place in 2018 with the same number of participants. 70,9% of participants felt that tattoos are viewed more positively than in the past. 65.2% of partakers felt that tattoos are more common around them, which is 17.7% more compared to the 2014 survey.

Third survey was organized in 2021 and this time, 80.1% of participants expressed that perception of tattoos is more positive compared to the past. 70.2% said that tattoos are commonly seen and 68.5% think that tattoos are a way to express oneself.

In June of 2021, Gallup Korea research Institute, directed a survey with 1002 participants over the age of 18, who were asked questions concerning tattooing and its illegality in South Korea. Overall, 51% of participants are in favor of legalizing tattooing and 40% are against. Specifically, 81% of those in their 20s, 64% of those in their 30s and 60% of those in their 40s are pro legalization. On the other hand, people over the age 50 were generally strongly against the legalization: 46% of those in their 50s and 59% of those over the age of 60. Another issue questioned was whether tattoos on TV should be covered or blurred. Overall, 47% of interviewees were pro coverage and 47% said there is no need for coverage. Over half of people in their 20s, 30s, and 40s support exposure and over half of those over the age of 50 answered that tattoos must be covered (Gallup 2021).

In the end, there are obvious differences between the perceptions of people based on their generation. Older generations still frown upon tattooing and disapprove of young people getting them, but they have no other option than to tolerate this developing culture. Based on the changing outcomes of the surveys explained above, the perception of tattooing in Korean society is getting more positive. While in the past, individuals used to get tattoos in places normally hidden or easily concealed, nowadays people sport tattoos that are clearly visible and not easy to cover (Park 2015: 76). For this reason, the public is getting used to seeing tattoos

and the attitudes toward tattooed people are not necessarily only negative. The Korea Tattoo Association estimates that more than 1 million people in South Korea have tattoos (Kwon 2022).

Even though tattooing is slowly getting accepted in Korean society and young people say they do not perceive tattooing as something bad, this usually applies to people with small or only a few tattoos. People who are heavily tattooed are still scorned by the society and usually form their own groups where they feel free to express themselves and are not burdened by the stares of others.

Great number of individuals with visible tattoos do not feel comfortable using public transport and prefer the anonymity of taxis to avoid contemptuous stares and occasional comments from strangers (i-D 2018, Schroeder 2021). These people are not allowed in most of the public baths and saunas and there have been cases where a tattooed customer was asked to leave a cosmetic shop.

As a person with tattoos myself I can attest that Koreans tend to look at me more than at my non-tattooed Western friends. I realized that usually older people have a noticeable displeased expression on their faces whereas younger people rather, seem just interested. The reactions also differ depending on the region. People in Seoul are more open-minded and their stares at my tattoos were shorter while people in Daegu, for example, tended to stare longer and seemed more "angered" by my tattoos.

Conclusion

Korean tattooing culture has been quickly developing in the last two decades even though the practice of tattooing is still illegal under the Korean medical law. Development of new techniques and equipment together with the impact of social media has allowed the attitude toward tattooing to shift greatly in the positive direction. There has also been a noticeable increase in numbers of Korean tattooists. Korean tattoo, which is surrounded by an abundant negative stigma of being used by outlaws and as a punitive measure, is developing into means of self-expression by the young generation.

Tattooing on the Korean peninsula, first recorded in Chinese history texts *Sanguozhi* and *Hou Hanshu*, among others, was used as protection against evils and harm by fishermen and sailor of the states Mahan, Chinhan, and Pyŏnhan of Samhan. During the Koryŏ and Chosŏn dynasties, tattoos have served as a government regulated punishment for criminals and slaves. Chosŏn dynasto also saw to creation of the lover's tattoos named *yŏnbi* that showed the devotion of individuals to each other by engraving a mark onto their skin.

In the 20th century Korean gangs, influenced by the Japanese yakuza, started to use tattoos as a way to permanently show their devotion to their organization, feeding the negative stigma created around tattoos in the previous centuries. There have also been cases of involuntary tattooing of Korean women during the Japanese occupation.

The negative perception of tattooing still remains in Korean society, especially among older people, and restrictions prohibiting tattooed individuals from entering spas, bath houses and even churches are still in place. Moreover, the law that only permits medical professionals to practice tattooing was upheld again this year.

However, as a result of cultural and social change, that is particularly seen among the younger generation, the perception of tattooing is shifting toward the positive outlook. The practice is also being transformed as a fashion trend among the youth of South Korea. The positive change in views on the permanent marks is seen in the outcomes of surveys completed in recent years.

It is said that tattoo custom is becoming a symbol of self-expression and individuality, pushing towards the goal of legalization that many people and tattoo artists in South Korea fight for.

The aim of this thesis was to analyze and examine the chronological presence of tattooing in the history of South Korea and with the help of the historical overview and sources concerning the current situation, determine the perception of tattoos held by Korean society at this time.

In conclusion, there exist different views on the tattooing practice, usually determined by the generation one belongs to that are based on the environment and surrounding the generation grew up in. Tattooing is becoming more common in the Korean society and the Korean tattoo culture is quickly developing and it is therefore possible to presume that the perception of tattooing is going to continue to change in a positive direction.

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