Paper Title: Depicting Tradition and Identity: Tattooing in Downtown Tokyo

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Abstract
The Tokyo shitamachi, or ‘downtown’, is both a territorial space and a conceptual construct: a space evoking a collective memory – nostalgia for the past – and an historical identity. It is a place and space seen as representative of ‘traditional’ Japan. Shitamachi residents are also looked upon as maintaining ‘traditional’ practices along with old social norms. This paper explores how the large scale decorative tattoos known as horimono fit within this notion of ‘shitamachi’.

Tokyo’s shitamachi has played a significant role in the history of tattooing in Japan. From small love pledges found on prostitutes of the Yoshiwara licensed quarters in the 17th century to the large scale horimono etched on the backs of workmen and firemen from the early 18th century, early roots and subsequent proliferation of horimono can be traced to the shitamachi area. Horimono were once indicative of, and celebrated as, an affirmative shitamachi identity. Nevertheless, they generally are viewed quite differently in contemporary Japanese society.

Based on historical criminal associations, predominantly that of punitive tattooing, along with a present-day yakuza penchant for horimono, there is a notable aversion towards the tattooed body. Yet, there remains a concentration of tattooists, or horishi, in the shitamachi area who continue to utilize hand tools and traditional designs and motifs. Furthermore, two Shinto shrine festivals – the Sanja Matsuri and the Torigoe Matsuri – held annually in the area, provide a rare space in which these conflicting ‘representations’ of horimono converge. At these festivals extensively tattooed men and women may
participate alongside non-tattooed counterparts in propelling spirits in portable shrines through the streets, in a blessing of the local neighbourhoods. Such public display of horimono and the tattooed body attract large numbers of both locals and tourists, participants and visitors who seek to catch a glimpse of a traditional shitamachi character.

This paper considers tattooing practices in the shitamachi area, along with an ethnographic examination of horimono as experienced in the public sphere of annual shitamachi festivals, to elucidate contemporary relationships between horimono and Tokyo’s shitamachi. I argue that particular focus on the relationships forged through and embodied in processes of becoming and being tattooed implicate horimono in the formation of a multifaceted fabric of social and personal identities.