

The Korean Tattoo Culture

An Historical Overview on the Development and Shift of Perception on Tattoos
in Korean Society

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the development and shifts in perception of the tattoo practice. For centuries, the negative image of tattoos has been manifested in Korean society and has only shown visible changes in the past two decades. In recent years, the topic of tattoos in South Korea has become notably more popular and broadly discussed. To give a structured and detailed historical review of the tattoo custom in Korea, two articles in Korean by Kim Hyöng-jung (2013) and Yi Tong-ch'öl (2007) served as main sources. By conducting a semi-systematic review with a qualitative approach, the accessed data was examined, compared, and synthesized. The results show that the tattoo practice, although still not fully accepted by all, has gradually developed into its own culture in contemporary South Korean society.

Keywords

Tattoo, Tattoo history, Tattoo punishment, Korean Society, Koryö, Chosön, Korea

Sammanfattning

Syftet med denna studie är att analysera utvecklingen och det varierande synsätt på tatueringar. I århundraden har den negativa bilden av tatueringar festats i det koreanska samhället och bara under de senaste två decennierna har en märkbar förändring skett. De senaste åren har tatueringar blivit mer populära och diskuterade. För att ge en strukturerad och detaljerad bild av tatueringar i Sydkorea har två artiklar på koreanska använts som huvudkälla, Kim Hyöng-jung (2013) och Yi Tong-ch'öl (2007). Genom en semi-systematisk översikt med en kvalitativ metod har insamlad data blivit granskad, jämförd och sammankopplad. Resultatet visar att tatueringar fortfarande inte är helt accepterade av alla men att de gradvist har utvecklats till en egen kultur i Sydkoreas samtida samhälle.

Nyckelord

Tatuering, Tatueringens historia, Tatuering straff, Koreas samhälle, Koryö, Chosön, Korea

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
1.1. Purpose and aim	1
1.2. Theoretical Framework	2
1.3. Method	3
1.4. Sources	3
1.5. Structure and Scope.....	4
1.6. Notes on Transcription and Translation	5
2. Background.....	5
2.1. The origin of the tattoo custom	5
2.2. Terminology in Korean	6
3. Korean tattoo history: Pre-modern period	7
3.1. Koryŏ Dynasty	9
3.2. Chosŏn Dynasty	12
3.2.1. Punishment tattoos	12
3.2.2. The Chosŏn <i>Yŏnbi</i> tattoo	16
3.3. Meaning and effect of tattoos during the Koryŏ and Chosŏn dynasties	19
4. Korean tattoo in the modern period	20
4.1. The tattoo custom among gangs during the 20 th and 21 st century	20
4.2. Tattoo regulations in contemporary South Korea	21
4.3. Changes in the social and cultural perception toward tattoos	24
4.4. Health risks.....	27
4.5. Conflict between Korean tattoo artists and the tattoo law.....	31
5. A new era of the tattoo custom in contemporary South Korea	33
6. Conclusion.....	37
Bibliography	40

1. Introduction

1.1. Purpose and aim

The tattoo is one of the most ancient forms of body modification. This practice has been admired for its artistic character on one hand and viewed as a sign of crime and misdemeanor on the other throughout history. The tattoo practice carries its own unique and significant meanings and history dependent on the social, cultural and geographic positions worldwide, originating from various legends and traditions. While the tattoo custom has become a modern art form and way of self-expression in many parts of the western civilizations, societies such as Korea are still undergoing a process of getting accustomed to this new trend-setting phenomenon.

The Korean tattoo history dates as far back as the Samhan period, spreading both secretly and for institutional purposes throughout Korean history under various names and administrations, including their numerous functions therein. Despite the rather old history of the tattoo custom in Korea, it was not until a little over a decade ago when the attitude and perception towards tattoos began to shift towards a more positive direction, in comparison to the negative stigma comprising it up until this day. The social acceptance of tattoos in contemporary South Korea is still controversially perceived, building on old traditions and beliefs, conflicting primarily between the younger and the older generation as well as institutional regulations. However, a social and cultural movement has started to form and determine a new future for tattoos and tattooed individuals in South Korea.

The evolution of the tattoo practice in Korea has fascinated many and has contributed several research studies on the topic in the recent years and continues to capture the interest of many. This study aims to examine, analyze and clarify the shift of perception towards the tattoo custom and its significance in contemporary South Korean society through social and cultural change by constructively portraying a chronological order of the tattoo history in Korea. The main questions focus on explaining the perception of tattoos in Korean society from pre-modern history to contemporary society and how and why the attitude towards tattoos has changed in terms of social and cultural aspects.

1.2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study focuses and discusses the tattoo phenomenon in Korea through the lens of historical development and social and cultural change. In order to create a structured and detailed overview of Korean tattoo history, historical facts as well as social and cultural aspects that impact the attitude towards tattoos in various ways are being considered in this study.

A culture can broadly be summarized as a set of ideas, beliefs, norms, and behaviors shared by or common to a group inhabiting a geographic location (Varnum and Grossmann 2017, 2). Varnum and Grossmann (2017, 1-2) describe human culture as non-static – making changes of political and social attitudes and norms as well as changes of institutions political and economic systems inevitable. Thus, cultural change can be generally characterized by shifts in ideas, norms, and behaviors of a group of people over time which can run parallel with cultural evolution and social ecology (Varnum and Grossmann 2017, 2).

Social change initially leads to an alteration in cultural and social institutions and structure through shifts in human interactions and relationships over time (Dunfey 2019). These alterations can furthermore derive from “contact with other societies, changes in ecosystem, technological change, and population growth and other demographic variables”, as well as “ideological, economic, and political movements” (Form and Wilterdink 2019). Social change may be characterized as a short-time or long-time development and is often described to be either cyclic in short-term changes or one-directional in long-term changes but can also occur simultaneously (Form and Wilterdink 2019). The change in cultural patterns and social structures, caused through social change, can also entail “increased awareness and understanding, attitudinal change, increased civic participation, building of the public will [and] policy change that corrects injustice” (Animating Democracy 2020). Research on this sort of impact of social change, along with attributes of social justice, social activism and civic engagement contribute to a clear analyzation and clarification of the tattoo phenomenon in this study. The latter components are used by the author of this thesis as means to underline the impact of social change in regards to increasing opportunities for parts of society that are more limited economically, politically and socially, as well as strengthening and pushing actions towards equality, inclusion, justice, access and fair treatment for all members of society, concerning tattoo-related businesses and individuals (Animating Democracy 2020). Thus, the theoretical framework of this study attempts to explain Korea’s tattoo custom as

part of social and cultural change through a shift of cultural norms, relationships, and institutions.

1.3. Method

To conduct a firm foundation and portrayal of the tattoo custom in Korea throughout history, a semi-systematic review, or narrative review, approach has been taken. This review is expected to “identify and understand all potentially relevant research traditions that have implications for the studied topic and to synthesize these using meta-narratives” (Snyder 2019, 335). The semi-systematic review is used to present an historical timeline and overview, as well as the current state of knowledge on the Korean tattoo custom, by comparing, analyzing, and synthesizing various published works on the topic, while trying to critically evaluate the texts. As a few of the reviewed secondary sources include quotes from primary sources with firsthand evidence and the author of this thesis has gained personal experience of South Korean tattoo culture during her stay in South Korea, the credibility of statements in the articles was easier to assess. For that purpose, along with the semi-systematic review, a qualitative research approach, based on interpretivism and constructivism, has been applied to synthesize and analyze the findings (Slevitch 2011, 76).

1.4. Sources

The main gathering of data in this paper was conducted through secondary sources, namely academic articles in journals, reviews, and other online articles, which describe, interpret, and synthesize primary sources (Streefkerk 2018). Academic journals and articles were mainly accessed through databases (DiVA, DBpia, KISS, Research Gate, Stockholm University Library (online), Google Books). Furthermore, online articles and tattoo-related websites were accessed through keywords in the Google or Naver search engine. Sources were compared and analyzed in order to find similarities and thereby strengthening their authenticity. Works of Korean as well as non-Korean authors, in both the English and Korean language, were incorporated to give a broader perspective on the topic and complete missing information, often lacking in English sources that were analyzed.

As there are no equally detailed descriptions about the history of Korea's tattoo custom, neither in English nor other western languages, to the authors knowledge, two research works by Korean authors had to be fully translated, analyzed and compared in order to access efficient information on the topic: "Han'guk hyōngbōl munsin-ŭi paljōnsa-wa hyōndaejōk ŭimi-e taehan sogo" (A Study on the History of the Development and Modern Meaning of the Korean Punishment Tattoo), 2013, by Kim Hyōng-jung, and "Han'guk munsin minsog-ŭi yangsang-gwa t'ŭkching" (Appearances and Characteristics of Korean Folk Tattoos), 2007, by Yi Tong-ch'ŏl.

Due to their volume and extensive use of Chinese characters as well as complicated Korean terminology, which was often a challenge for the author's own understanding, the translation process stretched over a longer period, limiting further research in certain areas on the topic.

1.5. Structure and Scope

This study begins by depicting general attributes and characteristics of the origin of the tattoo custom worldwide, focusing on the derivation of the term "tattoo" and its meaning. The following chapters provide an introduction into the Korean tattoo history and its significance in pre-modern Korean society, especially during the Samhan period, the Koryō and Chosōn dynasties and the 20th and 21st century up until present day. The sections thereafter analyze and outline the social and cultural impact of the tattoo custom in contemporary South Korean society and give an overview of health risks involved in tattooing and the conflict between tattooists and government authorities. Finally, a discussion of the present-day situation will be made based on the theory of social change, which will be followed by the conclusion.

However, due to time constraint and limited research material (in English), certain topics could not be explored or analyzed further in this paper. In scope of this study, two extensive and elaborate academic journals had to be translated from Korean in order to obtain necessary facts and information about the pre-modern Korean tattoo history, due to the fact that no English resources were available. This translation required more time than originally anticipated and limited the overall time span to work on this study. Furthermore, since the topic on tattoos in Korea is in the height of its evolution at the present time, it is still a heavily discussed topic making it difficult to draw full conclusions. Therefore, the study only covers events leading up to the year 2020.

1.6. Notes on Transcription and Translation

The transcription of Korean terms in this study is according to the McCune-Reischauer romanization system, with the exception of widely known personal or geographical names. The names of authors listed in the bibliography primarily follow the McCune-Reischauer transcription method unless an English translation is already attached to the source material. Translations of academic journals and other articles have been compared to English material and/or checked by a native speaker or experts in the Korean language to ensure correct and accurate translations. Titles of Korean articles or academic journals in the bibliography have been translated by the author of this thesis unless an English title was already presented or the English translation by the original author was not correctly translated.

2. Background

2.1. The origin of the tattoo custom

The tattoo custom is the oldest known form of permanent body modification and can be traced back to the late Stone Age, almost 6000 years BC, when tattoos were first discovered on a mummy in the Alps, speculated to be used as form of medical treatment, and later (4000 BC) also in Egypt, where it was limited to women only (Sanders and Vail 2008, 9; Everts 2016). The tattoo practice continued spreading from the Middle East to the Pacific Islands through India, China, and Japan from 2000 BC and became a well-established artistic and decorative form by 1000 BC in tribal societies in New Zealand (Sanders and Vail 2008, 9-10). Tattoos were also discovered in ancient Greece and Rome where it was practiced as a punitive and proprietary action, marking criminals with the name of their crime in form of a tattoo, and continued being a practice linked to crime in Western civilization later (Fisher 2002, 92). The custom has since become a practice found all around the world, carrying various meanings and importance, not only to the estimated 120 million tattooed individuals nowadays but also to various social structures worldwide (Everts 2016, 24-26).

2.2. Terminology in Korean

The origin of the word “tattoo” as we know it today, derives from the Polynesian word “tatau”, literally meaning “to tap or mark something” (Nyssen 2018). However, the word and act itself carry a deeper meaning and can also be translated to “artistic” (Park 2015, 72). The Polynesian tattoo tradition is not only visually beautiful with its many diverse and unique shapes, signs and symbols, but is also a spiritual practice expressing each individual’s personality and identity, performed with traditional tools. It shows “status in a hierarchical society as well as sexual maturity, genealogy and one’s rank within the society” (Zealandtattoo 2020). Although the tradition of Polynesian tattooing has existed for more than 2000 years, the word “tattoo” was first introduced in Europe in 1771 after explorer James Cook, captivated and mesmerized by the Polynesian tattoo art form, returned to Europe from his voyages from New Zealand and Tahiti, bringing a Tahitian tattoo artist called Ma’i, and thereby the tattoo custom, back with him (Zealandtattoo 2020).

This practice often symbolized not only a type of protection against evil spirits but also represented strength in battle and was a custom often found and linked to European sailors as well (Zealandtattoo 2020).

The Korean tattoo tradition, on the contrary, has undergone a quite different development in Korean history and society. The Korean word for tattoo, “*munsin*” (문신), originated from the Chinese characters (文身), meaning “letters engraved on the body” (Park 2015, 74). Although the word is similar in meaning to the Polynesian one and was once considered to serve as a form of protection and luck, the act of tattooing was never recognized as a real type of art in Korean society. Several other terms have been used for the practice throughout history and will be discussed more thoroughly in the following chapters of pre-modern tattoo history.

Furthermore, the term “*t’at’u*” (타투), originating from the western terminology (*tattoo*), was established in society during the 21st century when the tattoo custom began to transform into a new fashion statement and trend, and will be further examined in chapter four in this study.

The general view on tattooing has been perceived as negative by Korean society up until this day. However, the change of perspective of the young generation is apparent and a new cultural wave is at large.

3. Korean tattoo history: Pre-modern period

The first records of the tattoo custom in Korea appeared in the Chinese Literature *Records of the Three Kingdoms* (K. *Samgukchi*, Ch. *Sanguozhi*), the *History of the Later Han* (K. *Huhansǒ*, Ch. *Hou Hanshu*), and the “Biographies of the Eastern Barbarians¹” (*Tongichǒn*) in the *Book of Wei* (*Weizhi*), providing evidence that the tattoo customs had been practiced in the tribal confederacies Mahan, Jinhan and Pyŏnhan of Samhan² (Kim 2013, 28-29). Although the tattoo folklore during this period is limited in detail and not widely known, there are some records in the abovementioned literature that show influence from Japan and China. It was recorded that a number of people from Mahan and Pyŏnhan had tattoos due to the close connection to Japan across the sea, from where the tattoo custom was naturally adopted in Korea (Kim 2013, 28-29).

This tattoo practice served primarily as a type of magic charm or talisman, used by fishermen and divers in the southern part of the country, similar to the Japanese.

The Japanese believed that they could avoid danger or harm from dragons and sea monsters through the power of the tattoos on their bodies. Similarly, in Korea, the fishermen believed that if they engraved tattoos on their body, they would be protected from dangerous animals like snakes, crocodiles or other dangerous creatures, and prevent attacks from large fish when diving or fishing (Kim 2013, 29; Yi 2007, 338). Therefore, according to Korean researchers, the tattoo custom, which was prevalent among Japanese people, seems to have been copied and adopted by fishermen in the southern parts of Korea. This purpose of the tattoo folklore in the East Asian cultural sphere is even more evident in the Vietnamese mythology. The mythology describes harmful attacks of dragons on populations living in the mountains or near the sea (Yi 2007, 339). In order to avoid more harm and prevent these attacks, people in these regions began to engrave tattoos of dragons or sea monsters on their body. According to the mythology, dragons would hate anyone or anything not of its own kind and attack, but upon seeing the engraved dragon tattoos on the human bodies, the dragons would no longer attack them because it would regard them as its own kind (Yi 2007, 339).

Tattoo customs of this sort have been found in Vietnam, Japan, the Xia Dynasty and lastly also in parts of Korea.

¹ with descriptions of people on the Korean peninsula and in Manchuria.

² Mahan, Jinhan and Pyŏnhan were three political entities, known collectively as the Samhan (Carter J. Eckert et al. 1990, 18)

There are also records in the Ethnography book by Kim Kwang-ŏn, 1994, stating that the usage of symbolic magical tattoos continued into the modern time, albeit in different forms than those during the Samhan period: e.g. when a contagious disease went around in the mountain region of the Kwangwŏn province, a red circle was placed on the forehead, and a symbol of the heavens was placed on the soles of a pregnant woman's feet when she gave birth in the North P'yŏngan province of the Chosŏn dynasty to ensure safety, protection and recovery (Yi 2007, 340).

During this time, several terms for the act of tattooing were recorded in East Asia, such as *immok* (입목, 入墨), *chaja* (자자, 刺字), *chach'ŏng* (자청, 字文), *kyŏngmyŏn* (경면, 黥面) and *munsin* (문신, 文身), and all of them roughly describe the practice of engraving letters or patterns on the skin with ink by scarring and picking the skin with certain tools (Kim 2013, 27-28).

The following time period between the end of the Samhan states and the beginning of the Three Kingdoms Period (57 BC to 668 AD) leaves many questions and speculations concerning the Korean tattoo custom given the fact that records and other documents seemed to be lost or had disappeared. In the historical annals about the Three Kingdoms Period, such as the “History of the Three Kingdoms” (*Samguk sagi*), compiled by Kim Pu-sik in 1145 and the “Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms” (*Samguk yusa*) by the Buddhist monk Iryŏn (1206-1289) there is no indication of existing tattoo practices during that period (Eckert et al. 1990, 37, 103).

One reason for the disappearance of literature on tattoo customs in Korea, is considered to be the introduction of Chinese culture and legal systems to the Korean peninsula (Kim 2013, 31). Korea and China shared collaborative relations in various sections of society³. Greatly inspired by Chinese culture, Korea began establishing legal institutions modeled on the Chinese basis, as well as adopting Buddhist and Confucian ideologies during the Three Kingdoms Period (Kim 2013, 30). The latter is deemed to be the most prominent reason for the disappearance of tattoo culture (although the causes may be several).

The Confucian ideology, which began to bloom during the Chinese Spring and Autumn Period (ca. 771 to 476 BC) when many philosophies and religions were born, was a philosophical idea that described the feudal system of that time, and was characterized by

³ The Chinese Sui and Tang dynasty's civilization culture and institutional system was introduced in the Three Kingdoms Period as well as the legal systems of the Tang dynasty during the Unified Silla Period.

harmony, prosperity and filial piety (*hyŏ*), the basis of love, duty and devotion (especially towards one's parents and the state), embodying the basis of benevolence⁴ (Kim 2013, 31). These moral principles were not only strongly reflected in society, administration, and education but also primarily in the family structure. In accordance with the *Book of Filial Piety* (*Hyogyŏng*), the phrase “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”, refers to beginning of filial piety which instructs not to hurt or fail one's parents and what they have given us (Kim 2013, 31; Fan 2015, 140). By receiving a tattoo, which initially and intentionally harms and damages the body (that a parent gives their child), a tattooed individual undoubtedly shows lack of respect towards his or her parents and becomes invalid in consideration with the discourse of filial piety.

Therefore, any type of moderation or damage on the body, including tattoos, was and still is, to a certain degree, regarded as a form of disobedience and thereby, a lack of filial piety towards one's parents. This negative outlook on tattoos, fueled by Confucian ideas⁵, condemned the tattoo custom to become an immoral act, associated with disloyalty, immorality, and criminals. The invalidation of the tattoo practice during this time, led by the Confucian ideology and cultural atmosphere, leads experts to believe that the tattoo custom must have become a hidden culture that was secretly passed on among ordinary people during the Three Kingdoms Period until it became legalized as a form of punishment in the Koryŏ dynasty (Kim 2013, 31-32). The question whether the tattoo custom completely disappeared or was continued as a hidden culture is therefore disputed.

3.1. Koryŏ Dynasty

During the Koryŏ dynasty, the first records of punishment tattoos were recorded in literature *The History of Koryŏ* (*Koryŏsa*) (Yi 2007, 341). These types of tattoos did not have similar traits to the ones previously discussed during the Samhan period but served as a punishment

⁴ The general view on Confucianism describes hierarchical order of society, strong emphasis on family relations, strong teacher-disciple relation, importance of community and collectivism, as well as a critical approach to individualism and a gender division and discrimination of women, including morality and high values of education.

⁵ Following the “Theory of the Civilized and the Barbarians”, Confucian scriptures describe a tattoo custom among the “Orangkae” (savages/barbarians) drawing an association between tattoos and criminals (Kim 2013, 30-31).

for criminals. The punishment tattoos of Koryŏ were characterized by letters, describing the type of crime, engraved on the body (Yi 2007, 341).

The most commonly found punishments during the Koryŏ dynasty can be broadly categorized by judicial corporal punishments, like *t'aehyŏng* (答刑: whipping someone with bamboo strips/rod) and *changhyŏng* (杖刑: beating someone with wooden staves; worse than *t'aehyŏng*), imprisonment like *tohyŏng* (徒刑: forced labor for criminals) and *yuhyŏng* (流刑: criminal being send far away into exile), and the Capital punishment (Death Penalty) (Kim 2013, 32). The term *chajahyŏng* (刺字刑), describes a tattoo performed by scarring and engraving the name of the crime on a criminal's face or arm with ink, and was most frequently used. This kind of tattoo was usually imposed hand in hand with a cumulative sentence⁶ (Kim 2013, 32). Records on the penalty tattoos known under the names *kyŏngmyŏn* (黥面) and *chamyŏn* (刺面) are also widely spread throughout the Koryŏ dynasty and are believed to originate from the criminal justice system of the Chinese Tang and Song dynasties (Kim 2013, 32).

In records related to Myoch'ŏng's rebellion found in the *History of Koryŏ (Koryŏsa)* the cruelty of the penalty tattoo during that time is further portrayed. It states that those who participated in the rebellion and showed resistance would be send to exile – to an island in the middle of the sea with the letters “*Sogyŏng-yŏkchŏk*” (Rebel of the Western capital) engraved on their forehead (Yi 2007, 365). Furthermore, the penalty tattoo was additionally utilized as a punishment for treason, conspiracy or false accusations against political opponents as well as violation of major national enforcement ordinances under the reigns of King Ŭijong (1146-1170) and Myŏngjong (1170-1197) (Yi 2007, 342).

According to the Koryŏ prohibition law “*Kŭmnyŏng kwangye*” (禁令關係) the most commonly practices in relation to punishment were considered hunting, logging and slaughter (Kim 2013, 32). During this time, animals like oxen and horses were considered particularly important and essential in both agricultural society and as tools for war purposes, contributing and supporting society. Therefore, the act of theft or slaughter on these animals was strictly forbidden and thus, the one's guilty of charge often received the tattoo punishment, regardless of their status or class in society, to prevent an increase in crime rates linked to theft and slaughter (Kim 2013, 33). In *The History of Koryŏ*, (Volume 85 of the Criminal Law Record

⁶ A sentence for two or more crimes to run consecutively.

II (高麗史 卷八十五 刑法志 二 盜賊捕 盜附)), it is additionally stated that if a person steals or butchers work animals, he or she will receive a penalty tattoo, carving letters on his/her face in form of a tattoo, and if the penalty is determined, will furthermore be sent far away to another province into exile (Kim 2013, 33). This form of punishment was also implemented if the person condemned to exile tried to escape.

Therefore, records imply that this form of punishment was not easily imposed, but rather an aggravated punishment law for culprits of theft, slaughter, or escapees (Kim 2013, 33).

Additionally, this punishment was not only imposed on the stated offenses, but spread to become a practice inflicted on slaves, who, for the most part, were neither serious criminals nor people to commit many criminal acts, but often prisoners of war or commoners, serving (private) households of noble families (Kim 2013, 33).

Throughout several reigns of kings, the tattoo history of Korea was introduced to the Koryŏ dynasty and the tattoo penalty began to be used to great extent on slaves. The idea of tattooing slaves was enforced in order to prevent them from escaping their owners (Kim 2013, 33).

The origin of these slave-tattoos was first recorded in King Kwangjong (949-975)'s first reform – *The Slave Review Act* (*Nobi-an 'gŏmbŏp*, 奴婢按檢法), a law of the emancipation of slaves, in 956, which was “designed to restore to free status the many commoners enslaved during the chaos of the Later Three Kingdoms”⁷ (Eckert et al. 1990, 64).

However, this act caused many frictions and growing social problems between the nobility and slaves, leading slaves to accuse their owners of wrongdoing in both local and central areas and slaves starting to violate, invading or fleeing their owner's home (Kim 2013, 33).

The implementation of the tattoo punishment system on slaves and criminals, commonly enforced as a cumulative sentence, continued to transform Korean tattoo custom into a functioning legal and institutionalized punishment, leading into the Chosŏn dynasty, differentiating it strongly from its former character.

⁷ By emancipating the slaves, the economy and military power of the owners (nobles) who lost their slaves would be weakened but Kwangjong's government now had the people on their side (and nobles against it) (Eckert et al. 1990, 64).

3.2. Chosŏn Dynasty

3.2.1. Punishment tattoos

Entering the Chosŏn dynasty, a strong centralized bureaucracy with a monarch as its top ruler, similar punishments and ruling systems as well as ideologies concerning tattoo practices as in the Koryŏ dynasty were repeated and continued (Kim 2013, 34). Confucianism and in particular Neo-Confucianism, introduced in the Late Koryŏ dynasty (Eckert et al 1990, 102), became the dominant political ideology and had strong influence on the basis of the general ruling ideology along with the law and national political system of the state (Kim 2013, 34). Furthermore, Chinese influence on Chosŏn's criminal law system was confirmed with the adaption of the so called "Ming Code" (*Taemyŏngnyul*, 大明律) of the Chinese Ming dynasty (Kim 2013, 34). The "Ming Code" shared many similarities in the types of punishments (*t'aehyŏng*, *changhyŏng*, *tohyŏng*, *yuhyŏng*) that were previously found in the Koryŏ dynasty, and showed also similar traits in the tattoo punishments, often recorded under the terms *kyŏngmyŏn* and *chamyŏn*, that were strongly shaped by the criminal law system of the Song and Koryŏ dynasties (Kim 2013, 34). These terms, among others, were frequently recorded during the Chosŏn dynasty. In the *Annals of Chosŏn Dynasty* (*Chosŏn wangjo sillok*) the first data on punishment tattoos could be found in correlation with the time when King Sejong (1418-1450) reigned and theft and robbery were fairly common crimes in society (Eckert et al. 1990, 125; Kim 2013, 37).

The tattoo punishment documented in the "Ming Code" describes the act of engraving letters in the area between elbow and wrist, both in China and the Chosŏn dynasty. However, in practice, the letters were often engraved on the face to increase the effect of the punishment by making it more visible to the entire public (Kim 2013, 37).

Up until that point, tattoos had become strictly forbidden by national law and were only to be regarded as a form of punishment (Kim 2013, 34). Legalization and regulations of the tattoo punishment during the Chosŏn dynasty were firmly formulated in the *Kyŏngguk taejŏn*, the

National Code of Chosŏn⁸, published in 1471 under the reign of King Sŏngjong, with influence from foreign laws (e.g. Ming Code) (Han 2014, 169; Kim 2013, 34-35).

The punishment of thieves, robbers and other criminals is legislated and specified in the records of the *Kyŏngguk taejŏn* and is described as follows:

“A person who does not get the death penalty as a result of being a robber or thief shall be convicted of robbery or theft according to law and get the letters *Kangdo* (強盜) engraved on their body, and if convicted a second time, he/she shall be hanged. Those whose sins do not lead to the death penalty as a result of being a so called *Waju* (窩主, owner of a small hideout who harbors criminals) will get the letters *Kangwa* (強窩) engraved and their wife and children will be sent to an outskirt area, and shall be hanged if a crime is committed a third time. Those who commit crimes of theft will be sent to exile to the far end of P’yŏngan and Yŏngan island or the House of Correction, or respectively to other provinces to remain a slave there for life. In general, those who got letters in ink engraved on their bodies will be incarcerated and the engraved place will be covered and sealed⁹, and the criminals will be released only after three days” (Kim 2013, 35).

Tattoo punishments of this sort were strongly influenced by the “Ming Code”, adopted by the *Kyŏngguk taejŏn*, and would often precede the death penalty, emphasizing their severity (Kim 2013, 35).

In this regard, King Sejong (1418-1450)¹⁰, T’aejong’s successor, (Eckert et. al. 1990, 108) himself judged these punishment tattoos to be too cruel and thus, suspended them for a time being (Kim 2013, 38).

⁸ This Code “compiled previous statutory codes, such as the Administrative Code of the Joseon (Joseon Gyeongguk jeon compiled by Jeong Do-jeon) and the Six Codes of Governance (Gyeonggyeuk jeon prepared by Jeong Do-jeon with Cho Jun), and provided the fundamental administrative structure and functions of the Joseon Dynasty.” (Han 2014, 169)

⁹ The tattoo was wrapped (or otherwise covered up) with a bandage and to ensure that the criminal does not take off the bandage was embroidered with an official seal (Kim 2013, 35).

¹⁰ Although Ministry of Justice (Han 2014, 360) issued a statement on how to prevent theft or escape from exile by establishing rules applied to first, second and third time offenders (the tattoo punishment came shortly after the death penalty) under King Sejong’s 17th year of reign) (Kim 2013, 37).

However, other forms of punishments along with the tattoo penalty were once again revitalized and implemented in the 11th year of King Sejo (1455-1468)’s reign to decrease theft and other forms of crimes and became a conventional punishment after the reign of King Sōngjong (1469-1494) (Eckert et al. 1990, 108, 130; Kim 2013, 38). The reason for its return in the time of King T’aejong and Sejong was mainly a result of the increasing number of thieves and the frequent theft of government property.

Additionally, tattoos engraved on slaves of the Yangban (aristocrats), similar to the ones documented in the records of the Koryō dynasty, began to be revived again under the state’s official law and gained institutional approval during the reign of Yōnsan’gun (1494-1506) (Kim 2013, 39). Slaves, often recognized as “property” of the Yangban, were not only marked with tattoos if they tried to flee (or fled) but also to prevent them from escaping before they ever did (Kim 2013, 39). The following examples illustrate possible tattoo punishment acts executed on slaves of Yangban masters. The first example concerns a male slave, serving a Mr. Yi from Naktong, who got the letters “*Nakdong-Yi-no* (낙동이노, 駱洞李奴)” engraved on his body. The second shows a similar case – a female slave serving a Mr. Park from Chaedong, who got the letters “*Chaedong-Pak-pi* (제동박비, 齊洞朴婢)” engraved (Kim 2013, 39). By engraving the information of the home location, the owners’ surname and the differentiation of a male (*tono*) and female (*tobi*) slave on the slave’s right or left cheek, the penalty tried to hinder the slaves from escaping their masters.

The tattoo penalty, although banned for a short period in the reigns of King T’aejong and King Sejong, was finally abolished in 1740, the 16th year of King Yōngjo (1724-1776)’s reign, along with the destruction of tools needed to perform the punishment to prevent their further usage (Kim 2013, 39). The reason for this abolition was linked to the impossibility of recovery and the traumatizing life a tattooed person suffered if it turned out that he or she was misjudged or wrongly sentenced (Kim 2013, 38).

The following section will demonstrate the most frequently recorded letters that were engraved on the bodies of criminals or slaves during the Chosōn dynasty, in comparison to the Koryō dynasty.

A quick overview of the most commonly engraved letters implemented through the punishment tattoo from the Koryō dynasty shows a strong relation to crimes of theft. Records in the “Ming Code” state that if a person steals grains from a granary by him or herself, or

other citizens of the general public steal the entirety of the storage, they would be punished by getting the letters “*Togwanjŏn*” (盜官錢, thief of the granary)¹¹ engraved on the right arm (Yi 2007, 350). Furthermore, those who stole someone else’s belongings in broad daylight, got the letters “*Ch’angt’al*” (搶奪, theft of privately owned goods) engraved, and first-time offenders of theft would get the words “*Chŏldo*” (竊盜, theft) engraved on their right arm (Yi 2007, 350-351).

These records of the Koryŏ dynasty show a more limited number of letters used for the tattoo punishment, whereas the ones documented from the Chosŏn dynasty are more various and detailed.

The following table summarizes the most commonly engraved letters found in relation to the tattoo punishment of the Chosŏn dynasty. These types of punishments were generally placed on the cheeks (right, left, or both), the arms (left, right) or the face and were implemented as a measure to cease the increasing acts of robbery, theft, escaping slaves or other crimes (Yi 2007, 351).

This table presents the transcribed terms of the crime, including the Chinese characters, and their meaning.

Table 1: Term and meaning of crimes during the Chosŏn dynasty

Term of Crime	Meaning
<i>Tonaebujaemul</i> (盜內府財物)	Theft of privately owned goods
<i>Togwanmul</i> (盜官物)	Theft of government property
<i>Chŏldo</i> (竊盜)	Theft (engraved on common thieves)
<i>Chŏlwa</i> (竊窩)	Person who received and kept stolen goods
<i>Kangwa</i> (強窩)	Person who received and kept stolen goods (taken by force)
<i>Kangdo</i> (強盜)	Robber (by use of force)
<i>Togŭmwŏlli</i> (盜禁苑梨)	Theft of pears from the Secret Garden (in the Royal Palace)
<i>Chae-u</i> (宰牛)	Slaughter of oxen
<i>Chaema</i> (宰馬)	Slaughter of horses

¹¹ Since grains were more valuable and often used as a sort of payment during that time, theft of such products would bear harsher punishment.

<i>To-u</i> (盜牛)	Theft of oxen
<i>Toma</i> (盜馬)	Theft of horses
<i>Tosaru</i> (盜殺牛)	Theft and slaughter of oxen
<i>Tosalma</i> (盜殺馬)	Theft and slaughter of horses
<i>Tono</i> (逃奴)	Escaped male slave
<i>Tobi</i> (逃婢)	Escaped female slave
<i>Tomang</i> (逃亡)	Escaped (sometimes only the letters “escape” would be engraved on slaves or escapees)

3.2.2. The Chosŏn *Yŏnbi* tattoo

During the Chosŏn dynasty another type of tattoo custom appeared alongside the punishment tattoo. This new custom developed privately and secretly among the general population in the Chosŏn society, whereas the punishment tattoo was enforced as a national regulation and control.

This practice, called “*Yŏnbi*” (聯臂), was a pledge of love or devotion between two (or more) people and showed strong signs of loyalty and determination by engraving the name of one’s loved one on each other’s body (Kim 2013, 39).

The term *Yŏnbi*, marking one’s personal bond on the arm, first appeared in *Random Expatiations* (*Oju yŏnmun changjŏn san’go*), written by Yi Kyugyŏng, a late Chosŏn Dynasty *Sirhak* (“Practical Learning”) scholar (Eckert et al. 1990, 188; Yi 2007, 353). The *Random Expatiations*, which was compiled in 1810, was a 60-volume encyclopedic work that covers history, art (literature, music), religion (Buddhism, Taoism, Feng shui, Epidemiology), livelihood (agriculture, fishery, commerce/trade) and natural science (astronomy, biology, medicine, geography) (Kim 2012, 273-274; Chŏng 2020).

According to “On evidences of Making Blue Tattoos” in *Random Expatiations*, ordinary families’ prodigals in Korea demonstrated their determination to each other by pecking each other’s arms with needles and smearing it with black ink tinged with blue, resembling a mark, to express their lifelong commitment (Kim 2013, 40-41). This practice left physical evidence of promises or resolutions among the youth of the Chosŏn dynasty – not to betray or forget each other.

Along with the punishment tattoos, enacted at national level, the *Yŏnbi* tattoo was secretly practiced and handed down by individuals in the general society. However, if openly revealed, the one bearing this kind of tattoo would be severely criticized, condemned, and punished by society and law.

One of the most prominent figures connected to the *Yŏnbi* tattoo custom is found in the *Annals of the Chosŏn Dynasty*, a compilation of the history of each reign starting from 1392 until the end of the Dynasty, in the 11th year of King Sŏngjong's reign (Kim 2012, 211-212; Eckert et al. 1990, 125). The woman in question, named Ŏudong (or Ŏrudong), was a Korean dancer, poet, writer and daughter of Pak Yun-ch'ang, an official of the Bureau of Diplomatic Documents under King Sŏngjong's reign (1469-1494; a grandson of King Sejo) of the Chosŏn dynasty (Kim 2013, 39; Eckert et al. 1990, 136). She came to be part in one of the most distinguished cases of adultery in Korean history. Ŏudong was married to King Taejong's grandson Yi Tong, a rank four officer and part of the royal family (Kim 2013, 40). Through her marriage with Yi Tong, she became not only a noble lady with the title *Hye-in*, but also the daughter-in-law of King Sejong's brother, Prince Hyoryŏng (Kim 2013, 40). Due to the fact that Yi Tong and Ŏudong only had one daughter, named Bŏnjwa, but no son, Ŏudong had to suffer the disregard and cold treatment of her in-laws. It was, however, soon rumored and reported that Ŏudong was having an affair with a silversmith¹², and was consequently thrown out, (divorced) and sent back to her parent's house along with her daughter (where she was not accepted either) (Kim 2013, 40).

Her affairs continued and a notable part of her scandal was above all, the overlapping incest (in the Confucian understanding) in her relationships¹³.

Ŏudong, who came to be known for the *Yŏnbi* tattoo custom, often made the men she loved get a tattoo of her name "Ŏudong" on their forearm (or other places on their body) by pressuring them or getting their approval willingly, whilst she engraved the names of the men on her arm or back, pledging their love for one another (Kim 2013, 40).

Her affairs were numerous, but it was recorded that only six of them were preserved on her body as *Yŏnbi* tattoos (Kim 2013, 40). These "Love" tattoos are believed to be a strong vow of love and devotion to the men she adored the most and felt special towards.

¹² It was, however, also stated that Yi Tong himself was involved in having affairs (Wikipedia, 2020).

¹³ Among them, her adultery with Yi-Gi, the great-great-grandson of Chŏngjong of Chosŏn (son of King T'aejo and brother of T'aejŏng), and with Yi-Nan, grandson of King Sejong were particularly striking (Kim 2013, 40).



Figure 1: Two lovers engraving Yŏnbi-tattoos on each other during the Chosŏn dynasty (Kim 2004)

The *Annals of the Chosŏn Dynasty* document that Ŏudong's punishment was long discussed and states that she was eventually sent to exile and sentenced to death by hanging (October 18, year 11 of King Sŏngjong), while many of the men who committed adultery with her (whom she named in trial) were freed from their sins because they did not have any tattoos to prove their relation to her, and were able to go back to their previous posts (Kim 2013, 40; Yi 2007, 353-355). Ŏudong died presenting a case of sexual freedom without distinguishing between high- and low-class citizens.

However, these Love-tattoos, showing affection to another person, were not only limited to the case of Ŏudong. Further literature of the Chosŏn dynasty reveals that this tattoo custom was found among other relationships between men and women as well (Yi 2007, 357). The *Yŏnbi* tattoo custom was often practiced by *Kisaeng*, female entertainers, and became a custom among ordinary lovers, between (sworn) brothers and sisters and others who wanted to take an oath with one another during the Chosŏn dynasty (Yi 2007, 359).

This tattoo custom became a way of leaving physical evidence of people's promises and oaths of love, brother- and sisterhood and devotion and was transmitted and practiced in the general society, whereas the punishment tattoo remained a legislative practice on the national level. It is believed by some experts that these tattoos have their origin in Japan where high-rank prostitutes reportedly made vows of love in the form of tattoos (Yi 2007, 366). Similar to the

Korean *Yŏnbi* custom, the most common way to show one's love and affection was to engrave the name of the loved one on the body in the Japanese phono-syllabic script and the Chinese character "life" (命) (Yi 2007, 366).

3.3. Meaning and effect of tattoos during the Koryŏ and Chosŏn dynasties

In summary, the most evident effect and meaning of tattoos during the Koryŏ and Chosŏn dynasties was to punish, intimidate and frighten criminals and to prevent them from committing and continue committing crimes. Furthermore, because the tattoo would stay on the body permanently and could not be removed, the tattoo penalty, which often preceded the death penalty, condemned the person receiving it for life. Not only was the process cruel, painful, and traumatizing, but this penalty left the receiver to live a life as an outcast of society – being judged, criticized, feared and looked upon in disgrace and shame by the rest of society. Bearing the scars of the tattoo penalty made it impossible to live among ordinary people and led these criminals to live a poor life among themselves, not able to coexist in society but leading them to beg for food and often go back to their criminal ways in order to survive, making them victims of legal and institutional procedures (Kim 2013, 42). Additionally, tattooed outlaws were prohibited from participating in ancestral rites or attending funeral or mourning services as well as other festivities in the neighborhoods and would receive further punishment if they were discovered trying to hide or conceal the tattoo scars with bandages or hats (Yi 2007, 351).

However, there was more to the meaning and effect of the penalty tattoo, both legally and institutionally. Kim (2013, 41) explains that the purpose of the criminal justice system in an autocratic society was not to protect the legal interests of individuals, but rather to defend the absolute power of the monarch and to maintain and retain its ruling system. Therefore, the criminal law was mainly intended as a cautionary weapon to intimidate and simultaneously guard the public people.

As demonstrated in this study, the punishment tattoo during the Koryŏ and Chosŏn dynasties was mainly aimed at crimes of theft, robbery, and slave labor in order to keep safety and order in society. Although this punishment seemed effective in certain ways, it was not successful in the end, as criminals remained to paint society with disruption.

The brutality, severity and inhumanity of the tattoo punishment led to its abolishment for a short period under the reigns of King T'aejong and Sejong and disappeared finally in the late Chosŏn dynasty under King Yŏngjo's reign.

Despite the fact that the tattoo punishment has been long abolished in Korea, the tattoo custom, strongly characterized by its punitive measures, has been perceived negatively in Korean society up until this day. This is furthermore emphasized by the continuing stigma of associating tattoos with criminals, ominous cults, or gang members.

4. Korean tattoo in the modern period

4.1. The tattoo custom among gangs during the 20th and 21st century

Entering the 20th century, tattoos became a custom mainly associated with gangs in Korea. The tattoo custom among gangs began during the time of Japan's colonial rule of Korea (1910-1945) and continues further into the 21st century (Song 2011). This practice was deeply inspired by the Japanese gangs, *Yakuza*, and the traditional Korean art, and is to be found all around East Asia. Gang tattoos commonly symbolize a bond and companionship between their members and express, above all, loyalty to each other (Song 2011). The pain one receives by getting a tattoo also signifies the commitment and sacrifice to the organization itself. This tradition is not only meant to show one's devotion to the belonging gang but also to differentiate between other gangs and to identify one another when confronted. By partially adopting the customs of the *Yakuza*, Korean gangs formed their own customs and styles (Sartorio Teixidó 2017). Styles of such character are visualized in the example of the Seven Star Mob, a famous South Korean gang, who are easily recognized by the seven-star pattern tattooed on their chests (Sartorio Teixidó 2017). Another distinguishing example is the so Double Dragon Gang, who is identified by the tattoo of two dragons curling around each other on their upper arms (Sartorio Teixidó 2017).

As mentioned in the beginning of this study, tattoos often served as a form of magical charm for protection in early history. Similar traits are also found in the origin of gang tattoos. Much like warriors from ancient times who used tattoos to scare off enemies, gang members of the

20th and 21st century often deliberately choose images of tigers and dragons or other threatening designs as a way to intimidate and frighten others (Song 2011).

Korean gang member, Mr. Kim, stated in an interview with British tattooist, Grace Neutral, that South Korean gang members usually do not deliberately showcase their tattoos in public for the sake of showing off or intimidating people, by for example wearing revealing clothes (*i-D* 2016). In Mr. Kim's eyes, being part of a gang brings its own moral compass and rules that need to be followed when doing business (*i-D* 2016). He emphasizes that in order to harm or even kill, one always needs a valid reason, or they are simply frauds (*i-D* 2016). According to him, only one gang member out of 100 does not have a tattoo, highlighting the strong relation between tattoos and gangs and intensifying the surrounding stigma (*i-D* 2016). This is often further accentuated through news outlets openly displaying tattoos in cases related to criminals and gangs, enhancing, and spreading the negative and appalling stigma around both gangs and tattoos.

However, it is important to note, that gangsters themselves are not the ones spreading this association, but rather outside parties. Because many believe that the tattoo custom originated from gang members or other criminal organizations, the association strongly remains even in modern South Korean society.

4.2. Tattoo regulations in contemporary South Korea

Nowadays, tattoos are no longer used as a form of punishment as the ones previously documented during the Koryŏ and Chosŏn dynasties, although technically the main process of engraving patterns or letters in the skin with ink remain the same. This has been the case in most countries all around the world in our modern day and age. Today's tattoo custom, however, carries a different purpose and does not generally aim to harm the receiver or society. Although the attitude of many young people towards tattoos in South Korea has changed, the negative stigma has persisted and continues to be a subject of surveillance and control from the view of state power and the older generation (Kim 2013, 44). In accordance with the negative degradation of tattoos and, above all, tattooed people, the tattoo custom often conveys a discriminatory culture in South Korean society (Kim 2013, 44). Kim (2013, 44) considers this to be a modern form of the tattoo punishment by means of differentiations in society. Differentiations of this sort can be observed in form of regulations and policies against tattoos in South Korean society, affecting the lives of many individuals. Regulations

for tattooed people may vary from limitations on the job-market, for example when hiring police officers or government officials, to prohibitions of entering public saunas or bathhouses or difficulties surrounding the mandatory military draft in Korea, among others (Kim 2013, 45). There have even been cases of tattooed people being prohibited to attend church gatherings, as they are often viewed as some sort of “satanic” being by certain church members (Chan 2016). In the case of Apro Lee, famous South Korean tattoo artists, who aspired to become a monk during a time when he was struggling financially, he too was faced with the dark reality that he would not be allowed to become a monk as a result of his tattoos (Deraison 2020).

Difficulties on the job-market are not only commonly seen in government posts, representing the nation, but also when hiring new police officers, who in order to be accepted, must pass several examinations, among them a physical examination (Kim 2013, 45). The physical examination, however, determines whether the candidate will pass or fail, wherein the latter is often a result of tattoos.

A police officer in Korea is a symbol of public power and should be a role-model in all ways, both physically and appearance wise (Kim 2013, 45). Having tattoos, a symbol of criminal behavior, contradicts all aspects a police officer is supposed to represent and will therefore not be easily accepted or tolerated by the public or colleges. Therefore, police officers carrying the “symbol of criminals” on their body, will often fail the physical examination and will not be permitted to become an official officer. Kim (2013, 45) describes this type of rejection as a clear lack of freedom of expression and right of self-determination in the constitution. This “discriminatory” practice occurred regularly until 2006. In 2005, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) of Korea declared the failing of recruitment due to tattoos to be unreasonable and discriminating against candidates with tattoos (Kim 2013, 45). Therefore, the NHRC urged the National Police Agency to introduce new measures of correction in their laws, but they were not fully realized (Kim 2013, 45). According to the then current law, there are no relevant clauses related to the tattoo topic among the provisions regarding the qualifications and reasons for disqualifications of new police officers (Kim 2013, 45). In light of this, the National Police Agency stated on May 3, 2006, that they would revise the enforcement rules of the Police Officers Acts, making it possible for people with tattoos to pass the physical examination to become police officers, starting 2007 (Kim 2013, 44-45). Such revisions could be additionally taken after models from Western societies where similar cases exist. Although many Western countries consider tattoos as a form of modern beauty, art or fashion, certain regulations for tattoos at workplaces remain. In this context, specific

measurements and guidelines for tattoos have been established for the recruitment of police officers or other government posts in many countries. These types of guidelines can be found in the UK, Canada and Germany where specific and objective tattoo controls are performed by different categories of prohibition (Kim 2013, 46). In addition, the U.K. Metropolitan Police Force specifically examines applicants with tattoos, particularly those on visible areas like the face, arms and hands and those considered reasonable for disqualifications (obscene, violent, fear-generating or racist designs) (Kim 2013, 46). Therefore, it is advisable to introduce similar screening criteria for tattooed police applicants in South Korea instead of enforcing immediate disqualification.

Regulations on tattoos can also be found in common everyday places such as public bath houses or saunas. Since 2011, the National Police Agency in Korea banned all people who had full-body tattoos from entering public bath houses as part of their counter measures of organized gang activity, since gang members frequently visit these facilities (Kim 2013, 47). Since the body is usually exposed in bath houses or saunas, it is unavoidable to simultaneously reveal one's tattoos. As the owners of these facilities believe, the lingering stigma surrounding tattoos can make many Korean people feel uneasy and frightened when confronted with tattooed people or in the worst case, even make them leave the facilities. Therefore, many bath houses or sauna entrances have been marked with signs saying, "No entry for tattooed people" (Kim 2013, 47). Violation against these terms can be fined for "causing anxiety" as a misdemeanor (Kim 2013, 47). In a case from Ulsan (city in the south of South Korea), it was reported that police fined two gang members, who frequently and openly displayed their (dragon) tattoos at a public sauna, with a fine of 50,000 won (410 SEK) for causing people to feel uneasy (Song 2011).

This form of differentiated cultural policies towards full-body tattooed individuals can form negative self-conceptions and present discriminatory tendencies, leading to a violation of the constitutional right to pursue happiness and personal rights (Kim 2013, 47). Even if not often, exceptions can certainly apply depending on the facility. South Korean tattooist, Lyuhwa, explained that tattooed people, including her, are often allowed to enter spa's or bath houses that are commonly visited by foreigners, since they often have tattoos (Chan 2016). This, however, draws another line each individual's personal rights.

4.3. Changes in the social and cultural perception toward tattoos

Although regulations and limitations towards tattooed people in Korean society remain and have affected the lives of many to different extents, a wave of cultural and social change, not least in relation to tattoos, has been painting South Korean society in the last decade. Entering the 21st century, the perception on tattoos of the older and younger generation has developed in different directions significantly. Changes of attitudes can be seen and felt in various parts of society but will mainly be discussed in relation here to tattoos, regarding the topic of this study.

The young generation of South Korea strives for modernity as the country's new identity and concentrates on development, rather than old traditions and beliefs which are being kept intact by the older generation and government policies (Park 2015, 89). In the field of policies, traditional culture and customs are still considered more valuable, creating a more conservative society that, in general, continues to hold on to its traditions, old beliefs and practices.

The future-oriented philosophy of South Korea's youth is going strongly against the constitutional and traditional views of Confucianism, that have influenced the cultural and social sensitivity towards tattoos for long. This furthermore accentuates and strengthens the older generations negative outlook on tattoos, which has been strongly influenced and formed by their Confucian-based mindset and consciousness, that is not easily changed.

The open-minded mentality, acceptance, and willingness of diversity of the young generation has triggered a movement of self-expression and individualism, disconnecting from the older generation. Korean society is heavily characterized by "groupism", which is highly reflected in the Korean language, overall behavior and above all, appearance. Today, more than ever, Korean women, especially, are exposed and vulnerable to South Korea's mainstream beauty ideal culture, which is emphasized by the leading cosmetic surgery industry. Women are often seen as "modest and demure", defined by purity, which through the act of tattooing would be destroyed (Chan 2016). The social stigma lies in fitting in and being part of the bigger picture of society by playing a certain role in a group. As appearance plays an important role in South Korea, it has become an important factor of determining one's belonging in society. Sanders and Vail (2008, 1) suggest that appearance enables people to place other people into categories, assisting in the anticipation and interpretation of behavior and decision making

about the arrangement of social activities. The degree of “how closely one meets the cultural criteria for beauty is key of social and personal import” (Sanders and Vail 2008, 1).

While being part of a group will benefit you in society, going against it is often frowned upon and devaluated by society. In this case, having or being associated with tattoos will exclude that person from the group.

However, although cases of self-expression throughout history have been presented in cases of art, literature and other forms of beliefs and philosophies, only a limited amount of elaborate self-expression is visibly documented. This “lack” of self-expression seems to have inspired and driven South Korea’s youth to command a movement for change, comparable to movements of the 1960s in Western cultures (Park 2015, 87). This movement, defined by expressing oneself and going after one’s own aspirations, creates new communities that strive to be different by breaking down stigmas and boundaries around harsh beauty ideals and many other aspects of South Korean society. By experimenting, finding, and expressing oneself openly, South Korean youth generate new and alternative forms of beauty and individualism, while simultaneously escaping mainstream norms and old traditional Confucian beliefs.

A culture with rapid trends and a strong will to change has been guided by South Korean youth’s practice and expression of alternative clothing, hairstyles and makeup as well as tattoos and other forms of body modification, including many other internal and external factors.

However, the questions as to why the attitude towards tattooist and tattooed people continues being looked upon with contempt and negativity when society has shown clear signs of change, remains. Although reasons may be various, including the obvious generational gap and shift, the most significant causes for the opposing stigma around tattoos in the modern age can be found in the (Korean) terminological use to describe the practice and the illegality of the art itself. As for the former, the traditional Korean term, manifested in Korean society, for tattoo is *munsin*, whereas the modern term was directly taken from the English, *t’at’u* (*tattoo*). Since *munsin* is the original term for tattoo, the term became inevitably associated with criminals and gangs who frequently practiced the custom of tattooing in the early stages of its history and made it more acknowledged in society.

Therefore, the older generation naturally grew up with the term *munsin* and the association to criminal activity and behavior. However, in the past two decades, along with influence from Western cultures, the term *tattoo* has been adopted into the Korean language and pop-culture.

Through a gradual social and cultural change of South Korean society, the meaning of tattoo has also shifted. A study on the consumer's perceptive attitude of the term "t'at'u" and "munsin" was conducted in 2007 and found that South Korean consumers thought the two terms to be different in meaning (Song and Park 2007, 107). This study concluded that many consumers prefer the term "t'at'u" over "munsin" and link different emotions and associations to both terms. Although both *munsin* and *tattoo* share similarity in their act and meaning, consumers stated that they associate the term "t'at'u" with positive images (fashionable, individualism, attractive, charming, sexy and decorative) whereas the term "munsin" is often tied to negative images (violent, anti-social, demonic and threatening) (Song and Park 2007). Compared to the younger generation who use the term *t'at'u* more often nowadays, the older generation continues to refer to *munsin* more frequently, resulting in the distinction between the two terms and thereby the meaning of the custom itself. The word *t'at'u* is considered more a fashion trend and form of art, rather than a practice linked to crime and old beliefs.

The latter reason concerns the legal approach towards the tattoo custom in Korea. In 2001, the South Korean Supreme Court stated that only doctors were legally allowed to tattoo, due to possible health risks related to the process (Sartorio Teixidó 2017). The Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare considers the act of tattooing similar to medical procedures, like acupuncture, and should therefore only be performed by a professional with a medical license (Williams 2017). This law is strongly supported and urged by South Korean medical experts, who are concerned about dangers of health-related reasons caused by improperly trained tattoo artists and lack of hygienic precautions and equipment. Since tattooing is not considered a real or proper occupation but an "illegal" practice in Korean society, the financial, educational, and spatial means are often not available to aspiring artists. Therefore, non-medical-licensed tattooists are forced to run their tattoo parlors secretly underground, promoting their business mainly through social media and other internet forums. Nowadays, government sources estimate that there are more than 20,000 tattooists, and 300 tattoo parlors in the Hongdae¹⁴ area alone, working illegally and underground in Seoul. However, there are no specific and detailed records on tattooed people, tattoo shops or tattoo-related health risks or effects due to the restriction law (Sartorio Teixidó 2017; Park 2015, 75). Tattooists working in illegal tattoo parlors are very vulnerable to prosecutions and can be fined up to 20

¹⁴ Hongdae is an area in Seoul (or Söul) near Hongik University, known for its modern, youthful, and fashionable neighborhood, that embraced underground culture and individualism.

million won (160,500 SEK) or receive prison sentences, although authorities often tend to turn a blind eye on them, according to a South Korean tattooist (Min 2011; Sartorio Teixidó 2017).

4.4. Health risks

The following section will provide a general overview on the health risks related to tattooing, supporting the reasoning behind the tattoo law in South Korea.

Korean doctors and dermatologists justify the law on illegal tattooing with potential health risks, namely hepatitis and HIV infections, caused by unsanitary tattoo equipment (needles, inks, pigments, and tattooist hygiene, etc.).

The overall lack of knowledge and misinformation on tattoos (or permanent makeup) and the medical and health-related risks and complications among the general public has been a large concern in the eyes of medical experts, not only in Korea but worldwide. Therefore, seeking medical help or treatment is often overlooked by consumers suffering from infections, inflammation or other symptoms caused by tattoos. The dermatologist, Jørgen Vedelskov Serup from Denmark, stresses the importance and responsibility as a doctor of telling patients the risks involved in any kind of cosmetic or medical procedure by law, and should thereby also be required when getting tattooed (Everts 2016).

Throughout tattoo history, the knowledge gap between consumer and the tattoo scene, as well as the use of harmful and dangerous types of (tattoo) pigments and dyes, has developed into a great health risk threat. The use of materials with harmful substances, being often the cheaper alternative, is commonly found in close relation to amateur tattoo artists, home-based hobby tattooist or other tattoo-related places that lack the proper hygiene and access to professional equipment. According to a report on the safety of tattoos and permanent make-up by the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, 2016, various harmful and dangerous substances found in inks and pigments are identical to the ones found in car painting, printing inks and plastic coloration, often repurposed from the plastic and textile industry (Piccinini et al. 2016, 9). Although experts are aware of the consequences or existence of these risk factors, proper actions are often overlooked and not regulated to the necessary extent. To establish a safe environment around the tattoo practice, stricter laws around tattoo equipment, hygiene and overall regulations, as well as clear information and education addressed to the consumer

and tattooists in South Korea are in order. These regulations are often already established and enforced on the Western market and their tattoo shops.

While infectious risks caused by tattoos are generally more known, the chemical risks attributed by pigments and dyes not suitable for injection in the human body are less familiar among the public (Everts 2016). The Joint Research Centre (JRC) report from 2016 observed, analyzed, and detected “polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, primary aromatic amines, microorganisms, heavy metals and preservatives” as numerous harmful and contaminated substances found on the European market (Piccinini et al. 2016, 57). Alerts and notices regarding dangerous chemicals in tattoo ink and pigments, that pose serious health risks, have been reported by RAPEX (Rapid Alert System for non-food dangerous products) in the last decade through surveillance on the European market (Piccinini et al. 2016, 53). According to this report, 126 warnings related to tattoos and permanent makeup have been announced throughout 2005-2015 (Piccinini et al. 2016, 53). The most commonly notified harmful chemicals found in tattoo inks and pigments, are primary aromatic amines (40%), polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (30%), such as benzo[a]pyrene (10%), heavy metals (28%), namely chromium, copper, cobalt and nickel, and colorants (2%) (Piccinini et al. 2016, 53). The JRC report states that two thirds of the contaminated inks were found to be produced in the United States, whilst 25% came from China, Japan, and Europe, and another 9% from an unknown origin (Piccinini et al. 2016, 54). Reasons why these dangerous substances have been going unnoticed for so long are linked to the inadequate and lacking information on tattoo products and materials used by numerous improper tattoo parlors and amateur artists. In regard of this issue, tattoo products and equipment are often hiding or missing correct batch numbers, life-date (after opening), durability or information about manufacturers, as well as incomplete lists or records of ingredients in order to go unnoticed to the consumers (Piccinini et al. 2016, 58). Some tattoo parlors or artists can go as far as putting fake or improper labels and incorrect information on the products to make it seem like it is a different or an already existing product on the market (Piccinini et al. 2016, 58).

The following segment will highlight the most frequently occurring health risks in relation to tattoos, permanent make-up, and tattoo removal. Depending on the type of concern or difficulties caused by tattoos or permanent make-up, the time of infection, inflammation or other allergic reactions may vary between effects shown shortly after the procedure, to months or years thereafter (Piccinini et al. 2016, 57). Critical symptoms that may occur through the process of tattooing will be noted in the following list below (Piccinini et al. 2016, 63-75).

- Acute aseptic inflammation
- Infectious risks
 - Bacterial infection
 - Viral infection
- Allergic/hypersensitivity and auto-immune type reactions
 - Allergic reactions¹⁵
 - Underlying Dermatoses reactivated by tattooing¹⁶
- Other secondary effects
 - Pigmentary disorders¹⁷
 - Tumors¹⁸
 - Medical diagnostic and treatment interference
 - Contra-indications to tattoo procedures¹⁹

Furthermore, Nishioka and Gyorkos (2001) discussed potential risk factors for transfusion-transmitted diseases, as well as infectious diseases associated with tattooed patients. Results of the study showed that a vast number of microorganisms have been transmitted by tattooing in various countries. Infections and other diseases transmitted by tattooing were mainly divided into groups of viruses and bacteria. Viral infections include the hepatitis B virus (HBV), hepatitis C virus (HCV), hepatitis D virus (HDV), as well as Papillomavirus (warts), Vaccinia virus and the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), whereas bacterial infections covered impetigo, erysipelas, septicemia, toxic shock syndrome, septicemia, epidural abscess, tetanus, chancroid, syphilis, tuberculosis and leprosy (Nishioka and Gyorkos 2001, 29). However, not all the mentioned viral infections have been proven to be entirely credible due to lacking evidence and unreliable circumstances in where they were found.

In the case of HIV and HCV especially, research and opinions among experts are comparatively split. A case-control study on the risk factors of the hepatitis C virus infection from South Korea and another cross-sectional study from America researched the possible

¹⁵ Eczematous dermatitis, Photosensitivity, Lichenoid and granulomatous reaction, Lymphomatoid reactions, Lymphomatoid reactions, Scleroderma and scars.

¹⁶ Köbner phenomenon, Sarcoidosis, Vasculitis, Lupus erythematosus, Lichen, Other chronic dermatoses.

¹⁷ Hypopigmentation, Hyperpigmentation, Paradoxical darkening.

¹⁸ Pseudoepitheliomatous Hyperplasia, Keratoacanthoma and Squamous Cell Carcinoma, Basal cell carcinoma, Melanoma, Cutaneous lymphoma and other rare skin tumors.

¹⁹ Skin Disorders, Systemic Disorders

transmission risk between tattooing and HCV among blood donors further but could not find a significant correlation that could prove its authenticity (Nishioka and Gyorkos 2001, 29). In the case of HBV, HCV and syphilis, sufficient evidence of transmissions has been found in relation to contaminated tattoo equipment or an infected tattooist (Nishioka and Gyorkos 2001, 30). However, the lacking evidence on the accuracy concerning transfusion-transmitted diseases connected to tattooing has often been linked to the circumstances and environment of the infected patients. The stigmatized associations between tattoos and prisoners, drug addicts, criminals or psychiatric patients, and others, have since long remained worldwide, and especially in South Korea. Individuals categorized by these groups are often exposed to higher risk factors for transfusion-transmitted diseases, such as HBV, HCV and HIV infection and syphilis, due to incarceration circumstances and drug abuse (Nishioka and Gyorkos 2001). Patients suffering from these types of transfusion-transmitted diseases often share similar history of drug abuse, incarceration, and tattoos. This common ground complicates accurate studies on the topic of transfusion-transmitted diseases and tattoos, due to the fact that prisoners (often covered in tattoos and drug abusers) proved higher infection risks for HBV, HCV, HIV and syphilis, than others, which they can have attained during or before the incarceration (Nishioka and Gyorkos 2001, 31). These infections are primarily caused by very poor and unhygienic conditions in prisons or similar locations. Transmission of infectious diseases caused by tattooing are largely resulting in the use of contaminated or indecent material used for tattooing, like needles contaminated by blood or saliva, dyes or pigments, as well as sponges or tissue used for wiping away excess blood from the tattooed areas and poor sterility of tattoo inks (Nishioka and Gyorkos 2001, 29). Depending on countries and regions, as well as different social and economic factors within various populations and the tattooist's health condition itself, these conditions may vary (Nishioka and Gyorkos 2001, 30). Therefore, improper, or contaminated materials and equipment, both in tattooing and drug use, can entail a remarkably high risk of transmissions of infectious diseases.

Additionally, in correlation with potential risks of transmissions of infectious diseases, tattoos have become one of several conditions for deferral of blood donations in various countries (Nishioka and Gyorkos 2001, 31). Countries such as Canada, USA and Australia have a blood donation deferral if a donor has gotten a tattoo in the preceding 12 months, whereas countries like Sweden, Singapore and South Korea (originally 12 months until 2019) have a blood donation deferral timespan of six months (Nishioka and Gyorkos 2001, 31). Following the numerous reports and alerts regarding health risks deriving from tattoo inks, several measures, and decisions against the use of these harmful materials have been made, according to

European guidelines. Actions like withdrawal and ban of sale and advertisement of the products on the market, and opposing the use of improper materials, were among the top priorities (Piccinini et al. 2016, 53). Additionally, measurements such as rejecting or denying import at border control and voluntary recalls from the consumer by the importer have been implemented, as well as a complete destruction of the fake or harmful products (Piccinini et al. 2016, 53). The Council of Europe proposed several regulations and policies regarding the safety around tattoos and permanent make-up in 2008, including a list of 62 chemicals that should be prohibited in the use of tattoo and permanent make-up products, and measurements requiring correct information about the product in question (name, batch number, manufacturer, best-before dates, etc.) (Everts 2016).

In summary, in order to prevent any type of health-related risks caused by tattooing, measurements and information on chemicals, labelling, hygiene, packaging, as well as minimum date of durability, conditions of use and warnings, batch numbers, lists of ingredients and proper aftercare ointments are required (Piccinini 2016, 16-17). Clarification, education, and up-to-date information on potential health risks need to be frequently updated and further screening and regulations need to be taken in order to create a safe environment for the tattoo custom all around the world, where the effects of such regulations have shown great in the tattoo scene.

4.5. Conflict between Korean tattoo artists and the tattoo law

The South Korean tattoo law, permitting only licensed and qualified doctors to perform tattooing was primarily implemented as a measure to prevent serious health risks. Although the reasoning behind the law may be valid and justified in theory, Korean tattoo artists are not in agreement with this restriction.

Due to the tattoo law, many Korean tattoo artists encounter difficulties and challenges when establishing and maintaining their own studios and careers, making services often more expensive due to potential risks for the artists livelihood. Furthermore, many tattooists are required to move shops every couple of years and keep a low profile with their profession in order to evade complications with police or other authorities (Min 2011). This matter especially implies when authorities do not only carry out patrols and controls on their own accord but also when they are reported to the authorities or police by other tattoo artists who

take this vulnerability of other “illegal” tattoo parlors as a way to eliminate the rising competition (Chan 2016).

In the eyes of South Korean tattoo artists, the medical tattoo law is both outdated and unreasonable due to the fact that the tattoo practice is considered an art form that requires a certain artistic skillset that doctors often do not possess (Min 2011). A study from 1999 underlines this by suggesting that the tattoo practice should be included in art education because it is strongly characterized by artistic expressions, rather than focusing on medical procedures or purposes (Park 2015, 75).

Since there is no proper tattoo education or training in Korea, many artists work without a tattoo license. Therefore, qualified, and experienced tattooists who have been trained overseas, have begun educating new tattoo artists in the last decade and help them receive international licenses and release forms for the customers (Min 2011). Tattoo artists like Philip Spearman (Korean-American) helps fellow tattooists with his Korean mentorship programs where he educates on “better supplies and equipment and keeping them up-to-date with industry standards” (Min 2011). Additionally, tattooists learn and take inspirations from social media platforms, like Instagram, YouTube, or other tattoo-related forums. This form of education is highly needed and necessary in the steadily growing tattoo scene in South Korea. Due to increasing interest and demand of customers, changes in the restricting laws and more updated regulations concerning sanitation standards, alike the ones in Europe, are necessary. For years, Korean tattoo artists have fought for their rights and initiated numerous attempts to legalize the tattoo practice in South Korea. In 2003, the Korea Tattoo Association was established by Song Kang-söp and has been playing one of the leading roles in campaigning for legal rights for tattooists in South Korea, along with its 3,000 members (Williams 2017). The website of the Korea Tattoo Association states that the purpose of the establishment is to promote friendship and unity among members, to maintain their own hygiene and moral rules, to change social awareness, to prioritize the rights and interest of the members as well as enhancing the quality and status of tattooing by promoting information and to contribute to the development of Korea’s tattoo scene.

Starting in 2004, 2008, and 2012, former lawmaker Kim Chun-jin sponsored and supported the tattoo-legalization bill in the 17th, 18th, and 19th National Assembly but with no success (Williams 2017). The founder, Song Kang-söp, has not only called for permission on semi-permanent tattoos in front of the National Assembly, but has also taken part in the “Tattoo, beauty and art, and legalization” conference organized by International Federation of Health Implement in 2017 and made a proposition to the government on “social justice of tattoo and

the need to legalize semi-permanent make-ups” in the same year (Williams 2011). Song has justified the actions stating “by legalizing tattoos, the nation also can create 220,000 jobs, spread the Korean culture boom of Hallyu²⁰ further, and create the economic effect of up to 1 trillion won while maintaining the public health and hygiene” (Williams 2017). In late 2019 another proposal on the tattoo law was presented by the representative Pak Chu-min who stressed that the act of tattooing which has made remarkable progress in artistic, economic, and professional development was freely practiced worldwide by professionals without medical license in the field of arts. Furthermore, Pak emphasizes that most people interested in getting tattoos want them for reasons related to art and beauty rather than medical purposes. The business, now commonly performed by non-medical staff, should thereby receive stronger management and supervision to contribute to the operation of tattoo business and the promotion of public health (Korea Tattoo Association 2019). In response to health risk concerns, resulting from unlicensed tattooists, Pak proposed that actions for alternatives and realistic step-by-step policies need to be implemented to ensure a safe public health system (Korea Tattoo Association 2019). However, so far most of the attempts to change the current law have been to no avail and little progress has been made.

The Korea Tattoo Association continues to enlighten and inform the public in various ways and provides various statements that are in favor for a legalized and proper tattoo industry and culture, declaring their injustice. These articles, openly viewed on their website, state and ensure that according to law all citizens have the right to pursue happiness and possess dignity and value as human beings. Furthermore, all citizens have the freedom of choice of occupation and shall be obliged to work, while the state shall make contents and conditions of the duty of labor into law in accordance with democratic principles.

5. A new era of the tattoo custom in contemporary South Korea

Tattoos have become an aesthetic icon, both visual and textual (Kosut 2008, 98) and have had the effect of simultaneously evoking admiration and curiosity as well as fear and disgust throughout its history worldwide (Kosut 2008, 82). Kosut (2008, 98) describes tattoos as

²⁰ Hallyu, or the Korean wave, is a term coined in 1999 and describes the dissemination of Korean popular culture in the world, especially Korean dramas, films, pop music and Korean cuisine.

being part of “individuals negotiating their selves and bodies, as society simultaneously pushes and pulls in divergent directions”. This constant push and pull, additionally effects the continuous reflexive dialogue between the body, self-identity, and society itself (Kosut 2008, 99).

The new chapter of the tattoo culture in South Korea has already begun and continues to grow steadily. This increasing interest in tattoos has been triggered partly by the ever-growing consumption of mass media and the constant pressure from society and influence from traditional Confucian beliefs and values in society (Park 2015, 75). In a culture where status, achievement, the pressure to succeed and the belonging to a group are of great importance, the thought and sense of rebelling or acting out is gradually becoming more common among those who feel overwhelmed and seek alternatives. According to Fisher (2002, 91-92), the practice of tattooing is both social and physical and can be seen as a form of body modification that may be linked to a form of resistance to symptoms of a culture in a capitalist economic system, that commodifies the body and is still heavily influenced by Confucian status conceptions. This desire or need to otherness and self-expression has also been influenced by numerous personalities of society. This has been especially the case in relation to South Korean celebrities, like pop singers or groups, actors or athletes who have publicly presented themselves with tattoos, making many headlines over the last decade. Although tattoos will often be blurred or covered up on TV, pictures or videos of tattooed celebrities are openly scattered across various internet platforms. Through the strong influence of Western and South Korean celebrities, tattoos have become popularized as fashion statements and more culturally accepted (Min 2011). The South Korean pop culture has not only a strong following but also great impact on the South Korean youth in general. A culture that is partly based on groupism, taking influence from prescribed standard ideals, and always keeping up with trends more than any other country, would only naturally adopt this new “trend” of tattooing. Celebrities, openly displaying their tattoos, have had, knowingly or unknowingly, a significant impact on the changing attitude towards tattoos in South Korea, since they often are the trend-setters in society. Albeit many of them had to endure criticism and disapproval from fans and the general society, they have opened the doors for new opportunities and have given the young generation confidence to explore alternative ideas for beauty concepts and self-expression (*i-D* 2016).

Along with being a source of inspiration and individualism, viewing tattooing as a form of art or “rebellious” movement, the strong impact of celebrities has led many young people to copy the celebrity’s tattoos, fashion, style, or makeup and thereby turning the tattoo practice into a

new fashion trend (Min 2011). This “copycat” phenomenon is especially common among Korean teenagers who go to many lengths to access products related to their favorite idols. However, it has to be taken into consideration that this “copycat” culture, following trends to great extent, has led to cases of minors²¹ wanting to get tattoos, being influenced by celebrities they idolize, which has resulted in the arrest of several tattoo artists in 2013 and an increasing crime rate among teenagers who steal to get money for their tattoos (Park 2015, 75).

Nonetheless, tattoos have become a sign and movement of self-expression in contemporary South Korean society. Kosut (2000, 79) defines the tattooed body as a distinctively communicative body, that partly characterizes the identity of the wearer as well as the culture in which the wearer lives and instigates dialogue about the perplex relationship between body, self-identity and society. Additionally, a person’s identity, self-definition, and interaction with others in society is strongly affected by their appearance (Sanders and Vail 2008, 1).

The new art of tattooing in contemporary society can be viewed as new interpretations of ancient body modification practices that nowadays reveal people’s mindset in modern life and confirm that body and self-identity are interconnected (Kosut 2000, 99). As part of cultural change, both individualism and collectivism play a significant role. In a society like South Korea it is not uncommon for individualism to correspond with an increase in collectivism while simultaneously being independent of each other in certain aspects (Varnum and Grossmann 2017, 3).

The tattoo custom in South Korea has gradually increased individualism through self-expression, while simultaneously showing another increase in collectivism by creating a certain dependence on specific social networks related to the tattoo scene.

Contemporary tattoos have not only become a symbol of luck, power or one’s own beliefs and values (Park 2015, 75), but also a way to enhance, reclaim and redefine the body (Kosut 2000, 99).

These days, the majority of people getting tattoos in South Korea are students in their twenties (Park 2015, 75). The reason lies in the prohibition of underage tattooing and the restriction of self-expression during middle- and high school years, especially, since the main focus for students should be on the preparation for the university entrance exam during that time (Park 2015, 75). This sort of restriction can be found primarily in the appearance, for example specifying certain regulations concerning the length of hair, hair dying, jewelry or makeup,

²¹ Tattooing is allowed at a minimum age of 18 years old.

among others (Park 2015, 75). Therefore, the journey of self-expression as well as finding oneself and one's aspirations often begins after graduating from high school.

Park (2015, 79-80) found that tattooed people in South Korea believe their tattoos to have some kind of significance, whether it may be a sign of personal faith or values, or a symbol of specific memories, or simply another form of expressing beauty and art. Another study concluded that the most popular designs among men and women are animal patterns (30.2%), among which the dragon (10.3%) is most common, followed by character patterns (24.1%), geometric patterns (13.0%), natural patterns (10.3%), plant patterns (4.7%), mixed patterns (2.5%) and artificial patterns (2.2%) (Park 2015, 74). Additionally, the most popular positions for tattoos resulted in being the upper arm (26.6%), most favored by men (38.2%), followed by the shoulder (10.8%), the back (10.5%), the wrist (10.0%), the calf (7.5%), and the lower back (7.0%), most common among women (17.7%), and breast (6.3%) (Park 2015, 74-75). As a result of the Korean wave, *hallyu*, that has spread and promoted Korean pop culture worldwide over the past decade, many international students, or tourists have started to get tattoos during their stay in South Korea. South Korean tattoo artists, Aerok Kim, stated that many foreigners will get Korean culture-related symbols or their names in the Korean alphabet (*Han'gŭl*), including American military men who often get talisman-type of tattoos (Min 2011).

Furthermore, while the tattoo restriction law is currently still pending, South Korean tattoo artists are strongly forced to resort to social media and other internet platforms in order to promote their business, since it is too risky to display their shops and advertisement openly in the streets. South Korean tattoo artists have been able to gradually build and develop their own tattoo culture by means of social media and create their own unique tattoo styles and establish a tattoo community over the past decade. Since many tattooists started off as artists of some sort (drawing, painting, designing, etc.) the South Korean tattoo scene has become remarkably artistic and creative, focusing on individual styles and designs of each tattoo artist, often incorporating a mixture of new and old as well as traditional Korean art and history. Although every individual has their own reasoning and understanding behind their tattoos, most are believed to stem from some sort of self-expression (Park 2015, 80) and many see it as a form of "eternal art for someone's eternity" which can describe someone's tattoo as their own stories and feelings (Devon 2019). Due to its many unique artists, the tattoo scene in South Korea has become a worldwide phenomenon all over social media and has over 1,000 tattoo-related online forums in Korea alone where people get inspiration and information about tattoos (Park 2015, 75). The South Korean tattoo scene has especially experienced a

large boom on the internet platform, Instagram, where thousands of Korean tattoo artists portray and promote their art, capturing the interest of many people worldwide. Furthermore, the growing tattoo culture in South Korea could be another great contributing factor for South Korea's cultural and economic development and expansion overseas. Korean tattoos could stand alongside South Korean media, fashion, cosmetics, cuisine, music or plastic surgery, currently distinguishing and promoting Korean culture worldwide, and help building South Korea's constantly growing tourism industry as well as foster further culture exchange with other nations. Through the tattoo legalization, South Korea's tattoo-related black market would decrease significantly.

6. Conclusion

As has been demonstrated in this study, the tattoo practice is gradually becoming its own culture in South Korea. The data from Korea attest to Kosut (2008, 98)'s observation that the tattoo practice is a complex historical, contemporary, and cross-cultural phenomenon that simultaneously conveys personal, cultural, and social meanings in various ways. As a result of the rapid development of tattoo technology and equipment as well as the large impact of social media, the number of tattoo artists in Korea has increased greatly over the past decade and an attitudinal shift towards the practice is more noticeable than ever. The Korean tattoo practice, which was functioning as a punitive measure in pre-modern history has developed into a movement of self-expression and self-determination.

The beginning of the tattoo custom in Korea, first recorded in the Chinese historiographic literatures *Sanguozhi* (K. *Samgukchi*) and *Hou Hanshu* (K. *Huhansŏ*), was employed as a type of magical talisman for fishers in the states Mahan, Jinhan and Pyŏnhan of Samhan, and served as punishment practices on criminals and slaves during the Koryŏ and Chosŏn dynasties. During the Chosŏn dynasty another type of tattoo (*Yŏnbi* tattoo) was secretly practiced as a way to show devotion and love between two or more people creating a strong bond between them.

Entering the 20th and 21st Century, tattoos were commonly seen among gangs, permanently marking their skin with various patterns and designs to show belonging and devotion to a certain organization, and simultaneously creating the stigma that is often associated with tattoos nowadays. Although the negative stigma around tattoos, especially among the older

generation, and regulations on the job-market and other public spaces (bathhouses, spas, churches, etc.) remain, the current issue lies in the tattoo law, permitting only medical-licensed professionals to give tattoos, due to possible tattoo-related health risks. However, under the influence of social and cultural change, especially among the younger generation, the tattoo custom in South Korea has experienced a more positive outlook and character shift, whilst also transforming into a new fashion trend among South Korea's youth. This positive character shift can be further enhanced through active civic engagement and social activism, strengthening the strive for social justice on the topic of tattoos in South Korean society. By actively seeking social, political and economic change by participating in tattoo-related public debates and organizations, potential economic, social and political opportunities for the tattoo industry in South Korea could increase.

The young generation, embodying youth rebellion by breaking down barriers, is trying to create and live by their own values and beliefs, while embracing individuality and their own sense of beauty based on originality and freedom. This new movement represents a new subculture where the art of tattooing is a big symbol with great impact. The tattoo has become a new symbol of the social justice movement striving towards equal rights and the pursuit of happiness for every individual of society in South Korea and continues to steadily grow with every step and action taken.

As a result of these social and cultural changes by the young generation, the tattoo custom has already started to become a new symbol of individualism, self-expression, art and youth, which could reach its potential goal in the near future by continuing to strive for its legalization.

Furthermore, through a comparison with historical data accessed in this study other observations can be made. Dating as far back as the Samhan period, tattoos were engraved on the body to serve as a protection in form of a "magical" talisman can see certain similarities in today's practice of tattooing when tattoos are used as representing symbols of luck, power (for oneself) or other personal beliefs and values. Even the *Yŏnbi* tattoo custom is actively embraced by many people wanting to engrave the names or important dates of their loved one's on their body. This can be interpreted as a continuation or repetition of history, understood in its own new and modern approach of the tattoo custom in Korea and thereby suggesting a union of old and new. While the tattoo practice is considered more a fashion trend and a way of self-expression nowadays, it is also an art form that lets the wearer choose their own interpretation but remains to share similarities in its origin.

This study aimed to illustrate a chronological structured overview of the tattoo history and culture in Korea while examining the underlying cause of its controversial stigma. Further comparison and examination between the tattoo practice and other popular practices, like cosmetic surgery in South Korea, could raise interesting discussions in regards to influences of Confucian and/or other traditional beliefs, a question which has been addressed in restricted scope due to time limitation in this study. Additionally, further research on the topic of the current and future restrictions could be elaborated deeper as well as the psychological impact and possible consequences thereof in relation to tattoos and society could contribute an even more detailed and in-depth analysis of the tattoo culture in South Korea. More research and notes on the tattoo practice in North Korea and other forms of body modifications, like piercings, in comparison could establish a more complete study on the practice on the Korean peninsula.

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