

Introduction to Japanese motifs

Japanese cultural traditions are multifaceted and complex, with many tracing their lineage to the cultural iconography and mythologies of China and India. Changing and developing over centuries within Japan, these cultural legends, myths, stories, and belief systems continue to be affected by regional differences and historical context. And while there are many different approaches and interpretations to understanding the motifs and traditions within Japanese culture, we present the definitions exhibited here as largely accepted within the Japanese tattoo world.



Fudō Myō-ō

With origins in esoteric Buddhism, Fudō Myō-ō (Sanskrit: Acalanātha) is the form of the supreme Buddha, Dainichi Nyorai, that fights evil and evil passions. Sitting in a halo of fire, Fudō Myō-ō holds a sword to defeat evil in his right hand and a rope that leads people to salvation in his left. Fudō Myō-ō is depicted with an angry face and often with a blue-black body color, but there are blue, red, and yellow Fudō Myō-ō renditions as well. He is also known as Fudōson and Mudōson. Fudō Myō-ō is often accompanied by attendants, Seitaka Dōji and Kongara Dōji, two of the Eight Boy Attendants (Hachidai Dōji).



Kurikaraken

Kurikaraken is the image of the dragon wrapped sword of Fudō Myō-ō. Some say the sword represents *Etō* (E indicates the ability to see the truth, and *tō* means sword), yet the term *Etō* is not exclusive to Fudō Myō-ō. Associated with wisdom and virtue, this sword is sharp and conquers evil but is not a weapon.) The dragon swirling around the sword represents the *Kensaku* rope. *Kensaku* (*Ken* means to capture, and *saku* means rope) is the name of the five colored rope carried by Fudō Myō-ō. On one end there is a half vajra and on the other a ring called *Kan*. In ancient India this rope captured animals, and Fudō Myō-ō uses it to pull people up to enlightenment. Fudō Myō-ō is not the only deity who carries *Kensaku*. Kurikaraken is seen alone engulfed in flames, next to or even in the hand of Fudō Myō-ō. Kurikaraken motifs have been used historically to adorn many military objects, including swords.



Ryū (dragon)

The *ryū* is one of the most recognizable symbols of Asia. The dragon is said to have originated as a deified snake in Indian mythology and occurs frequently in countless Japanese legends and tales. In Buddhism, the dragon is led by Ryū-ō or Ryū-jin, one of the Hachibu-shū, the eight deities that protect Buddhism. The dragon is often represented as a god of the sea with power over rain and storms. In certain regions of Japan, farmers worship dragons in hopes of ensuring plentiful rainfall. During the Edo period (1600-1868) in Japan, the *hikeshi* (Edo period firefighters) believed that dragon tattoos, symbolizing the deity of the sea and water, would protect them from fire. While the era of the tattooed firefighter ended long ago, the dragon endured and is one of the most popular Japanese tattoo motifs today, both in Japan and in the West.



Tora (tiger)

Originating in India and China, the *tora* is an important symbol in Japan. Tigers are of equal power to dragons, and the two animals fought in the fog many years ago. The tiger is a strong warrior symbol as well as an animal of the Chinese zodiac. Tigers are often depicted with bamboo, and this association is considered the best pairing. According to legend, the one animal a tiger fears is the elephant, an animal said to be unable to enter a bamboo forest.



Bonji

Bonji has a history of 1200 years with the introduction of Esoteric Buddhism in Japan. Now a dead language, *bonji* are written characters that were developed in ancient India and brought to Japan. When Esoteric Buddhism was established, *bonji* became the writing form to symbolize the work of the Buddha and the deities. In the doctrine of Esoteric Buddhism, *bonji* are extremely important and are of equal value as Buddhist statues and paintings. *Bonji* follows very strict traditions. Only the priest chosen by the *Ajari*, highest ranking priest, can learn how to write or compose the characters. In the doctrines of Esoteric Buddhism, people without this permit are not allowed to copy *bonji*. This rule has been broken, and we currently see *bonji* in many forms, such as on clothing or in tattoo art.

Suikoden

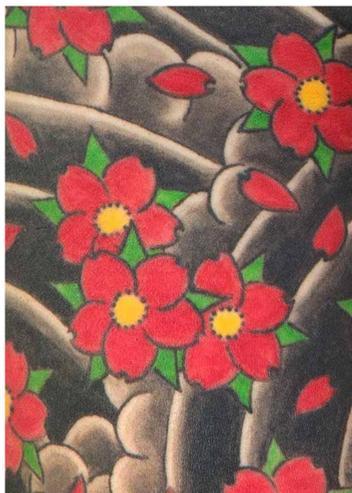
Originating in China as the classic *Shuihu Zhuan* (Stories of the Water Margin), the first translation was credited to Nagasaki interpreter Okajima Kanzan (1674-1728) and published in 1757. The stories of the 108 bandit warriors were immensely popular among the townspeople, and this interest is best shown through numerous graphic representations by Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), followed by a host of woodblock print artists. The set published by Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797-1861) in 1827 became the most noteworthy and is thought to represent his commercial breakthrough as an artist.



Numerous adaptations and translations of the *108 Heroes of the Water Margin* were published throughout the 19th century. Japanese artists applied a liberal hand to the representation of these Chinese warriors, adding tattoos to give the figures a sense of valor, menace and excitement. Besides boosting the popularity of the tattoo, these Japanese prints served as reference for tattoo designs during the Edo period and continue to provide inspiration today.

Kumonyū Shishin

Kumonyū Shishin (literal translation: "Nine Dragoned") is possibly the most popular of the *108 Heroes of the Suikoden*. He is heavily tattooed which may account for his popularity as a tattoo and woodblock print subject. Kumonyū Shishin is courageous, strong, and a master of all martial arts. He is the son of a wealthy landowner but gives up this privilege and joins the bandits to oppose a corrupt government. He is eventually killed, ambushed and struck down by arrows during the Battle of Yu-ling barrier.



Sakura Fubuki (cherry blossoms and wind)

It is stated that life that dies in the winter is reborn in the spring. The *sakura*, the iconic cherry blossom of Japan, represents spring and the living of life. Conversely, samurai saw the cascading petals falling from the *sakura* flowers, in beautiful glory, as a gallant symbol of the transience of life.



Karajishi Botan (Chinese lion and peony)

Karajishi are from the ancient Orient and became known as lions in China, where there are no naturally occurring lions. They are considered to be the king of a hundred animals and, because of their intrepid nature, became a popular symbol of the samurai. In Japan, they ward off evil and are symbols of protection. *Botan*, or peony, represents feminine beauty and is said to be the king of a hundred flowers. Thus the pairing of the king of the beasts and the king of the flowers is significant and well-matched. The safe haven and favored nest of the *karajishi* is said to be under the botan flowers. *Karajishi* have one weakness, a parasitic insect that burrows in their skin and eventually kills them. However the dewdrop of the *botan* is said to kill these insects, making the *Karajishi* and *Botan* symbiotic.



Koi (Japanese carp)

In Japan, the *koi* is considered the king of fresh water and swims in a beautiful manner. In many paintings and tattoos, *koi* are depicted swimming up a waterfall. This comes from a Chinese legend where the *koi* that climbs the rapids of the Yellow River becomes a dragon. The *koi* symbolizes life advancement and success as well as strength, courage and endurance. It is also considered to be a male symbol, with *koi* shaped kites flown on Japan's Boy's Day Festival held on May 5 every year. Images of two *koi* together can symbolize a happy marriage, and the word *koi* also sounds phonetically like the Japanese word for "love."



Hō-ō

Often referred to as a phoenix in the West, the *hō-ō* is a composite animal. It has a bird's beak, a swallow's chin, a snake's neck, a turtle's shell, a fish's tail, the front of a *kirin* and the back of a deer. Many artists often rendered the *hō-ō* as a beautiful bird. The feathers of the *hō-ō* come in five colors: red, yellow, black, blue, and white. The *hō-ō* is both male and female, *Hō* is male and *ō* is female. The *hō-ō* symbolizes good luck and happiness.

Hebi (snake)

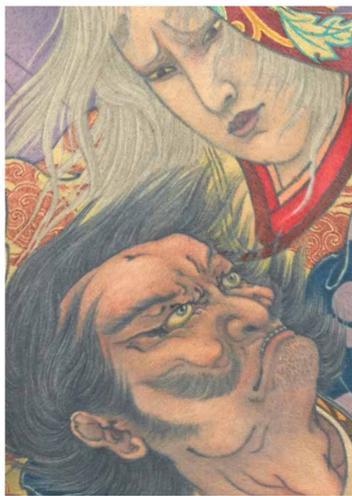
In Japan, the *hebi* is a symbol of good luck and prosperity. Snakes are also seen as deities such as Ugajin, a deity with a snake body and a human head. Benzaiten, one of the Seven Lucky Gods, is associated or often accompanied by a white snake. A snake is also one of the animals of the Chinese zodiac.





Taira no Tomomori

Taira no Tomomori (1152-1185) was a famous general of the Heike (Taira) clan. He died at Daimotsu Bay during the Battle of Dannoura in 1185, where the Heike Clan was vastly outnumbered and subsequently defeated by the Minamoto Clan. His death is legendary: he cleans his ship, puts on two suits of armor for weight and plunges into a watery grave. It is said that the faces that naturally occur on the crabs in that region are the spirits of the defeated Heike forces. Despite his loss and suicide, Taira no Tomomori is considered a gallant warrior and hero to many Japanese. Tomomori is a prevalent theme in the Edo period (1600-1868) popular arts of tattoos, woodblock prints and kabuki theater. In the kabuki theater version, he wraps himself in rope attached to an anchor, and this scene is often recreated in tattoos.



The Modoribashi Story

Watanabe no Tsuna (953-1025) was a famous Kamakura era (1185-1333) warrior and one of the four guardian attendants of Minamoto no Yoritomo (Raikō). According to legend, he fights a demon called Ibaragi-dōji at the Rashō-mon gate in Kyoto. The demon flees after losing an arm to the sword of Watanabe no Tsuna. Later the demon returns and steals its own arm back.



Oniwakamaru

Oniwakamaru is a historical warrior often represented in the full flush of youth, whether it is in a tattoo, theater performance, or woodblock print. At the age of fifteen, this apprentice of the Mount Hiei warrior monks purportedly killed a giant carp; this scene, set at the bottom of Bishamon waterfall, remains extremely popular in Japanese visual culture. Oniwakamaru eventually grows up to become Musashibō Benkei, a disciple of Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159-1189).



Kintarō

Kintarō is the childhood name of Sakata no Kintoki, a famous samurai. He is said to be the son of Raijin (god of thunder and lightning) and a mountain witch. His red skin comes from his father, and he is often portrayed with a large axe, a symbol of lightning. There are many depictions of Kintarō subduing a large koi. As an adult he becomes a vassal of Minamoto no Yoritomo (Raikō) and, along with Watanabe no Tsuna, becomes one of Yoritomo's four guardian attendants.



Tennyo

Tennyo, known as *hiten* in Buddhism, are heavenly beings usually portrayed as beautiful women with flowing robes. They are the subject of many stories and plays.



Tengu

Tengu are mountain spirits often portrayed with red skin and long noses. The *karasu* (crow) *tengu* have beaks instead of long noses. *Tengu* have mystic powers, including the ability to fly and are often shown with wings or holding feather fans. According to legend, the *tengu* taught Ushiwakamaru (childhood name of Minamoto no Yoshitsune 1159-1189) the art of *kenjutsu* when he was a boy at the Kuramayama temple outside of present day Kyoto. Though *tengu* are worshipped by some, *tengu* are not always benevolent and are evil and mischievous in some stories. People who are arrogant and immodest are often referred to as *tengu*.



Samurai

The samurai were the highest ranking of the warrior class in medieval and early modern Japan. They were renowned not only for swordsmanship and battle skills but also for their dedication to their lord and to a strict set of codes (*Bushidō*). The term samurai literally means "one who serves." The ethics and legend of the samurai live on in many aspects of Japanese culture today, including Japanese tattoo. *Arōnin* is a samurai without a master.



Kitsune (fox)

The kitsune is considered to be the sacred messenger of *Inari*, the God of Harvests. These foxes are often depicted with keys or *hōshu* (a ball shaped gem with flames said to have the power to grant wishes) and are considered to be benevolent. In other Japanese mythology, they are sneaky and devious tricksters. People who are swindlers and fast talkers are referred to as *kitsune*.



Chitasei Goyo

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Gyoja Buscho

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Kudomaru Kuniyoshi

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Kumonryu Shishin Kaosho Ryehishin

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Phoenix Hokusai

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