

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 (Supreme Buddha)

With origins in ancient Indian religion, and in esoteric Buddhism, Fudō Myō-ō (Sanskrit: Acalanātha) is the form of the supreme Buddha, Dainichi Nyorai, who 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 hand. 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. He is also known as Fudōson and Mudōson.



Kurikaraken (dragon-wrapped sword)

Kurikaraken is the image of a 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). The dragon around it represents the *kensaku* (*ken* means to capture, and *saku* means rope). *Kensaku* 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 used it to pull people to enlightenment. *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 such as 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 Japanese legends. 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 hope of ensuring plentiful rainfall. During the Edo period (1600-1868), the *hikeshi* (Edo period fire fighters) believed dragon tattoos would protect them from fire.



Tora (tiger)

Originating in India and China, the *tora* is an important symbol in Japan. Tigers are of equal power to dragons, and in myths the two animals fought in the fog. 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

With a history of over 1,200 years, *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. Originally only the priest chosen by the *Ajari* (highest ranking priest) could learn how to write or compose the characters. People without this permit were 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

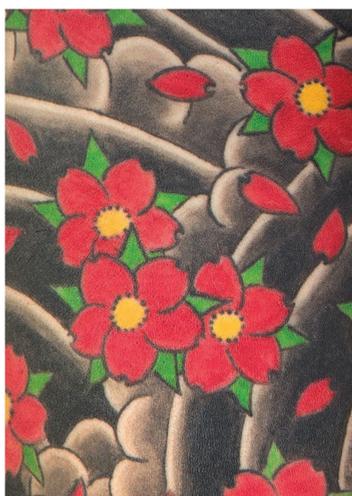
Originating in China as the classic novel *Shuihu Zhuan* (Stories of the Water Margin), the first translation was credited to Nagasaki interpreter Okajima Kanzan (1674-1728) and published in 1757. The stories of the 108 bandit warriors were immensely popular among the common people, and this interest is best shown through the numerous graphic representations of Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), followed by a host of other 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 nineteenth 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.



Kumonryū Shishin

Kumonryū Shishin (literal translation: "Nine Dragoned") is one of the most popular heroes of the *Suikoden*. He is heavily tattooed, which may account for his popularity as a tattoo and woodblock print subject. Kumonryū Shishin is courageous, strong, and a master of martial arts. Originally the son of a wealthy landowner, he gave up this privilege to join the bandits and oppose the 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)

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)

The mythical *karajishi* are 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 peonies, represents feminine beauty and are called the king of a hundred flowers. The safe haven and favored nest of the *karajishi* is said to be under the *botan* flowers. *Karajishi* have one weakness, which is a parasitic insect that burrows in their skin and eventually kills them. The dewdrop of the *botan* is said to kill these insects.



Koi (Japanese carp)

In Japan, the beautifully swimming koi is considered the king of fresh water, often depicted swimming up a waterfall. The koi symbolizes life advancement and success as well as strength, courage and endurance. This comes from a Chinese legend where the koi that climbs the rapids of the Yellow River becomes a dragon. Also a male symbol, koi shaped kites are flown on Japan's Boy's Day Festival. Two koi together can symbolize a happy marriage, with the word koi also sounds phonetically like the Japanese word for "love."



Hō-ō (phoenix)

Often referred to as a phoenix in the West, the *hō-ō* is a composite animal with 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 and is characterized by wisdom and physical beauty.



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. He is considered a gallant warrior and hero to many. 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 Yorimitsu (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 Yorimitsu (Raikō) and, along with Watanabe no Tsuna, becomes one of Yorimitsu'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* (swordsmanship) when he was a boy at the Kuramayama Temple outside of present day Kyoto. Though worshipped by some, *tengu* are not always benevolent and are even 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. A *rōnin* 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 devious tricksters and shape shifters. People who are swindlers and fast talkers are referred to as *kitsune*.

Reinterpreting the *Suidoken* in Los Angeles

Chris Horishiki Brand

Shuihu Zhuan (All Men Are Brothers or Stories of the Water Margin), published in 1592, is considered one of the four classic Chinese novels. The Japanese translation, *108 Heroes of the Suikoden* (Water Margin), found immense popularity among the working class during the Edo Period (1600-1868). Their gravitation to it was most likely a response to a feudal system characterized by rampant greed, corruption, and oppression of the common people.

This novel, loosely based on true stories, tells the greatly exaggerated and whimsically violent adventures of 108 rebellious bandits who, much like the West's mythological Robin Hood, fought together against a corrupt government. Many of the *Suikoden* warriors were described as wearing full body tattoos, adding mystery and bravado to their outlaw status as anti-heroes. Numerous adaptations and translations of *Shuihu Zhuan* were published, eventually culminating in the widely popular illustrated *ukiyo-e* (woodblock print) editions by artists such as Katsushika Hokusai, Toyohara Kunichika, and Utagawa Kuniyoshi.

Kuniyoshi's work in particular, with its intricate full color portraits of lavishly tattooed heroes, helped introduce the concept of the large-scale body tattoo to a mass audience. Kuniyoshi often gave these heroes his own artistic interpretation, depicting them with much grander tattoos and different features than described in the original text. In doing so, he helped to promote the idea of the tattoo as a legitimate art form, an art form collected by the truly brave and heroic outlaw. It was no surprise then that this art form and the idea of elaborate tattooing resonated with the public because *ukiyo-e* prints were the people's art—accessible, created, and priced for the masses. As the collection of woodblock prints increased in popularity, so did the idolization of symbolic heroism, with many individuals choosing to get tattooed themselves.

Since Kuniyoshi's time, many other interpretations of the imagery and stories have come to fruition, and the most common practice of retelling the stories has been in the medium and culture of tattoo. In a modern context, these



Rorihakucho Chojun, Artist: UtagawaKuniyoshi



Kokusenpu Riki 'The Black Whirlwind', Artist: UtagawaKuniyoshi



Ichijosei Kosanjo 'The Strong Woman', Artist: UtagawaKuniyoshi



Gyoja Busho, Artist: UtagawaKuniyoshi



Chitasei Goyo, Artist: UtagawaKuniyoshi

stories have changed into something very American even as they retained their original spirit. As the Japanese continued the Chinese storytelling tradition and made it their own, I hope to expand it in the U.S. through these Japanese and Chicano interpretations. Both cultures are tied to a richness and diversity that defines America, and each culture possesses its own powerful roots in tattooing.

This series stems from the original *ukiyo-e* drawings and text translation. I changed the weaponry, clothing, and environment to fit the times and to tell new stories. While the imagery may appear more violent in nature than the original, no weapons have been added. The weapons are simply modernized—pistols and AKs for swords, shotguns for axes—weapons created and manufactured by larger power structures. Societal disenfranchisement today echoes the sentiments of the original *Shuihu Zhuan*, as a modern American *Suikoden* tells and elaborates the Los Angeles Chicano story.



Kumonry Shishin and Kaosho Rochishin, Artist: Toyohara Kunichika