Tattoos in South Korea

"Forget handbags and shoes, tattoos are your new go-to accessory" claims an article in Glamour magazine (Temple 2016). The article goes on to highlight the influx of A-list celebrities flaunting their tattoos and gives advice on how the reader can achieve a similar look through the use of temporary tattoo (Temple 2016). This is a departure from a time when body art was associated with gangs and the socially deviant (Streübel & Jones 2017). Perhaps it was the mass commercialization of tattoos that made it accessible to everyone and therefore changing the demographic of the tattoo community (Kang & Jones 2017). As with any other art form, the popularity of tattoos has ebbed and flowed as the social context has shifted (Streübel & Jones 2017). Recently, South Korea has experienced a social revolution as both the economy and the entertainment industry have caught the attention of the rest of the world (O'Neill 2108). Albeit this shift towards modernity, tattoos are legally only allowed to be practiced by medical professionals (Korean Tattoo Association). Regardless of this, the South Korean tattoo industry is growing and a portion of this growth led by women (Chan 2017). Women in South Korea are reclaiming their bodies and the roles associated with their gender through pursuing a profession that strays from what society deems is acceptable (Chan 2017). The tattoo industry is an opportunity for the South Korean economy to complete a social revolution that is comparable to South Korea's economic transition.

Tattoos in America got their origin when Captain James Cook brought over the art form from the Polynesian Islands (Braunberger 2000). The original wearers of tattoos were almost all men, likely sailors or people in that industry (Braunberger 2000). Not only were women actively encouraged not to get a tattoo, many women did not want to associate with the subculture (Braunberger 2000). Tattoos on men usually mean crime or a lower class which meant the

meaning was even more negative for a woman to have a tattoo (Braunberger 2000). Even cosmetic tattoo procedures had to be advertised without explicitly describing the process as getting a tattoo (Braunberger 2000). Women who did have tattoos during this time period were associated with traveling freak shows (Braunberger 2000). The 19th century traveling circuses and carnival sideshows would advertise tattooed women as having been kidnapped and "forcibly tattooed by savages" (Braunberger 2000). Tattoos were not seen as a choice but as a consequence of elements of someone's life. This started to change as tattoos hit the mainstream media. An analysis of current discussion surrounding tattoos today show a consistent emphasis on the "seedy side of tattooing's history" (DeMello 1995). The separation from the past signals the economic stability of America today. It has become "stylish" or "trendy" to go against what the norm is because people are no longer struggling to survive but instead have the freedom to control their identity (DeMello 1995). The middle class has fully embraced tattoos as a way to demonstrate their "humbleness" in a time when they might be achieving great economic success (Kang & Jones 2007). The legality of tattoos in South Korea illustrates an economy that might not have reached that level of economic success but is still in the process of growing.

South Korea has one of the fastest growing economies in the world (O'Neill 2108). It's recent economic transformation has caught the attention of other major players on the world stage, giving South Korea a spot among the "Next Eleven" or economies expected to be a powerful force (O'Neill 2108). Government and business leaders are capitalizing on the recent attention and making efforts to spark a "Fourth Industrial Revolution" by investing in ground-breaking innovations to be revealed within the next decade (InvestKorea). But the rapid growth has placed immense pressure on South Koreans as they try to balance changes happening to their economy and changes happening to their social norms with the introduction of access to the

world mainstream. Conspicuous consumption has become a means for survival in a competitive job environment and for women this means their bodies "have entered the public sphere" (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang 2012, 67). No longer is the face and the body a person choice of aesthetic but the physiognomy of someone's face can signal "youth, vitality, and upper class looks" (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang 2012, 73). The "right face" signals friendliness and thus an indicator of success in a social work environment when the qualification of employees are becoming increasingly marginal (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang 2012, 73). While plastic surgery might bring women closer to the mainstream, tattoos give women the opportunity to liberate themselves from South Korean standards.

Although gender is a social construct, women in many cultures practice physical forms of change in order to maintain the order of womanhood. In South Korea, the "culture of conformity" is linked to the demand of cosmetic surgery procedures (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang 2012, 67). Lighter skin and more dainty features portray a woman who does not partake in intense physical labor and may be considered more upper class (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang 2012, 67). Tattoos give women the chance to overturn what society has "culturally written over" their bodies (Kang & Jones 2007). For female tattoo artists like 02percent02, the profession started out as art as a coping mechanism from depression (Abelman 2019). Ellie, a 23 year old South Korean tattoo artist, points out the difference in acceptance of tattoos between men and women (Chan 2017). Women, unlike men, are expected to be "modest and demure" which goes against the bold outward expression of a tattoo (Chan 2017). Therefore, a woman getting a tattoo can be perceived as an act of rebellion while a man getting a tattoo "reinforces traditional notions of masculinity" (Kang & Jones 2007). Women actively choosing to get a tattoo symbolizes women reclaiming their bodies from a set of social rules that were not created with consideration

of women advancement (Kang & Jones 2007). This is different from other coping mechanisms that can be more hidden, like mental illnesses or self-destructive behavior, because tattoos are proudly placed on the surface of the body (Kang & Jone 2007). Tattoos in South Korea are a form of resistance to tradition and is opening up the possibility of progress in new ways.

The Korean Tattoo Association in a statement points out South Korea is one of the few countries that do not let non-medical professionals practice tattoos (Korean Tattoo Association). It continues to describe how this law prevents the development of an art form that could contribute to tourism and culture (Korean Tattoo Association). Instead these policies are forcing consumers to retreat to blind spots of authority to get tattoos at the risk of serious danger (Korean Tattoo Association). According to the Korean Tattoo Association, 500,000 tattoos were done in one year in South Korea and yet there are only 10 legally qualified tattooists in the nation (Korean Tattoo Association). The legality of tattoos makes it difficult for not only the consumer to seek out a safe place to get a tattoo but it also places immense stress on tattooists to keep their business alive. Most of whom have to not only navigate the judgment they receive for having tattoos but also survive as business owners in an economy that does not want them to succeed. It is estimated that 300 tattooists are arrested annually for practicing without a medical license (Korean Tattoo Association). South Korean tattoo artist, Mirae, recounts stories that she had heard of tattoo artists reporting their competitors to the police (Chan 2017). Considering its presence in international media, whether that be through celebrities or social media, this is another way for South Korea to claim its territory on the world stage. The precarity of the industry should prevent a community from forming but this is not the case.

With this many obstacles, one might wonder how tattooist exist in this environment. South Korean tattoo artists have not only survived but thrived. This is in part due to the nature of

tattoo industry in general. Many tattooists go through an apprenticeship program and South Korea is no different. Kang Un, a 37-year-old tattooist and resident of an underground tattoo parlor, claims he has trained almost 500 active artists (GlobalPost 2009). The result of this network of learning is a distinct tattoo style that has attracted tattoo enthusiasts from around the world to South Korea (Korean Tattoo Association). The Korean Tattoo Association proudly claims watercolor tattoos as a Korean invention, a style popular on social media (Korean Tattoo Association). Inked Magazine, a popular source for tattoo enthusiasts, rounded up the top 25 South Korean artists and its distinction from other styles becomes evident (Adamakos 2019). While traditional western tattoos can be identified by bold lines and even bolder content, South Koreans seem to favor images that are more lighthearted, like dainty flowers and cartoonish cats, but with the same maturity and artistry one might find in different styles of tattoos (Adamakos 2019). In a way South Korea is embracing its tradition by incorporating techniques that produce images that cannot be further from any connection to crimes or violent activities. This is in a way a representation of a middle class who now wear tattoos as a symbol of their status. With the attention that South Korean tattoo artists are receiving on social media, tattoos can be another way for South Korea to illustrate its culture onto the world stage.

Progress of the South Korean tattoo industry is similar to how the tattoo industry in America got its start, the mainstream media. Today, Instagram serves as a storefront for tattoo artists who legally cannot market their artwork in public in South Korea (Abelman 2019). 02percent02 was able to practice tattoos internationally after receiving recognition for her boldly colorful tattoos on Instagram (Abelman 2019). Her residency at the famed Gristle Tattoos in New York would not have been possible if it were not for her following on social media (Abelman 2019). With no storefront, tattooists have to rely on interested clients direct messaging

them via social media (Abelman 2019). It is getting harder to avoid tattoos in everyday life for South Koreans. Tattoo artist, Kang Un, describes the perception of tattoos changing following the 2002 World Cup in South Korea, where many of the famous soccer players revealed their tattoos (GlobalPost 2009). The same effect can be said with the rise of Korean popstars with very visible tattoos. With every positive contribution mainstream media has made for the tattoo industry, there are also instances that backtrack on these small steps forward. Kwak Yu-Suk, an official at the Military Manpower Administration, justified the decision to have those with two-thirds or more of their body covered in tattoos in alternative service as a safety issue, insinuating that these same people are more dangerous (GlobalPost 2009). According to Kwak Yu-Suk, tattoo wearers have a higher "accident rate" (GlobalPost 2009). Nini, a 22 year old South Korean tattoo artist, speaks of her family's concern of how people would treat her after she started receiving tattoos (Chan 2017). Her parents' concerns are likely to stem from the common practice of public bathhouses and spas to turn away patrons with tattoos (Chan 2017). To be restricted from a common social practice and even mandated military service in South Korea signals its grip on Neo-Confucian ideals.

The visibility of tattoos in South Korea is increasing but there is still more progress to be made. "Tattoo culture is like fashion," states Mirae, a South Korean tattoo artist states (Chan 2017). Current tattoo artists have to fight for that understanding, that tattoos are more than a procedure that involves a needle but also a form of art (Korean Tattoo Association). One way to differentiate art from a medical procedure is the individuality of the process (Korean Tattoo Association). Everyone has a different personality and therefore everyone's experience and result will be different (Korean Tattoo Association). To further the comparison to fashion, progress is made through recognition made possible by social media (Abelman 2019). In any culture there is

an “ongoing, complex need for humans to express themselves through the appearance of their bodies” (Kang & Jones 2007). And this is reflected upon analysis of people with tattoos. For many with tattoos, they claim that getting a piece of body art is a way to express their uniqueness (Streübel & Jones 2017). It was even found that both men and women who got a tattoo experienced “significantly lower appearance anxiety and dissatisfaction” (Streübel & Jones 2017). Through tattoos, the body is expressed in a form that also communicates struggle against social norms while also creating community and social commentary (Kang & Jones 2007). For women that live in a society that puts so much emphasis on physical appearance, this can be seen as an alternative.

The business opportunities in the tattoo industry are becoming more apparent (Streübel & Jones 2017). In America, the industry produces an annual revenue of $722 million (Streübel & Jones 2017). The Korean Tattoo Association predicts the semi-permanent makeup makes about KRW 1 trillion and tattoos makes about KRW 200 billion annually (Korean Tattoo Association). There is also a missed opportunity in the millions in foreign currency that could collected with a more mainstream tattoo tourism industry (Korean Tattoo Association). Ironically, the subculture that emphasize opposition of “normal” are taking part in a practice that is becoming increasingly more mainstream (Streübel & Jones 2017). Tattoos have essentially transformed as a symbol of “stigma to status”, and idea that consumes the daily lives of many South Koreans (DeMello 1995). The “antisocial” practice of tattoos surprisingly brings together people from all different backgrounds in the form of tattoo show and tattoo conventions (DeMello 1995). “I want to establish more of a camaraderie between female tattooists in Korea and females in general,” reflects Nini, a female South Korean tattooist (Chan 2017). This is made possible by the shared experiences women with tattoos might have, especially in terms of discrimination or trauma

(Kang & Jones 2007). Women who have gone through an abusive relationship or survived a life changing disease are known to get tattoos to commemorate the experience (Kang & Jones 2007). For a society with a growing economy and expectations of perfection, there is little room in South Korea to share these kinds of experiences. Tattoos could serve as the vehicle to open up these conversations while also questioning tradition as a hindrance to progress.

Tattoos are a way to connect the external with the internal of a body (Streübel & Jones 2017). As social media closes the gap between countries, South Koreans experience a mobility of ideas (Abelman 2019). Korean Pop (or K-Pop) has even received western attention, with bands like BTS winning awards at major American music award shows (Oi 2016). Behind the beautiful faces and flashy costumes of K-Pop are talent agencies and management companies that completely control the lives of the stars they promote (Oi 2016). Even though every aspect of the lives of these stars are carefully curated, there is still an unspoken expectation that normal citizens achieve the same results, whether that be through plastic surgery or other means. K-Pop management play an important role in image creation for Koreans abroad (Oi 2016). In a way, the K-Pop industry is a reflection of what South Korea wants to be seen as. For the average American citizen whose exposure to South Korea is K-Pop, there might be an expectation for this same standard to be held in every aspect of Korean life. The industry itself challenges the conservative past of Korea and its historically set social norms. K-Pop stars are not standing next to American celebrities who do not have the same restrictions on their lives. Tattoos previously only associated with gang members are slowly becoming a fashion trend with the help of prominent K-Pop stars (Jae-Huen 2019). Tattoos can play an important role in reconciling the new international norms with local tradition. But many South Korean tattoo artist get their start simply through a desire to express themselves. Luyuhwa, a 27-year-old female tattoo artist, and

Mirae, a 25-year-old female tattoo artist, both got their start after completing college for fashion design in search of a way to continue their passion for art (Chan 2017). Jiran, a 27-year-old female tattoo artist, believed that tattoos could be a way to make money from a passion she already have, drawing (Chan 2017). Kyung Eun, a 23-year-old tattoo artist, got into tattooing after seeing it portrayed on American bodies on TV (Chan 2017). Regardless of how they got their start, it seems like most of these tattoo artist got their start because of a new interest or a continuation of an existing interest.

The diversity in tattoo styles means that it can be used as a way to represent the individual using the body (Kang & Jones 2007). But the meaning of the body is largely controlled by the social context that the individual belongs to (Kang and Jones 2007). In South Korea, this means traditional gender norms in both role and aesthetic. Albeit what the image is, anyone with a tattoo can be seen as a criminal or lower class just for having a tattoo (Kang and Jones 2007). This has changed as celebrities with tattoos make the tattoos more mainstream along with the increased accessibility with the "supermarket era of tattooing" (Kang & Jones 2007). Even though tattoos are seen in a more positive light on the international stage, many South Korean artist still highlight their beginnings by incorporating traditional South Korean ideals into their artwork. No longer is getting a real tattoo necessary to achieve the same aesthetic with temporary tattoos (Temple 2016). The intentional addition of permanent artwork on the body gives many the feeling of control (Braunberger 2000). Especially for women who are forced to conform to certain standards of femininity (Braunberger 2000). Women who have been abused or survived serious diseases commonly get tattoos as mementos for the experience (Kang & Jones 2007). Regardless of the actual intention, many tattooist struggle with balancing their own ideal projection and society's perception. For South Korea, an opportunity is presented

here to enter the world stage with is culture that is uniquely their own and can be proudly displayed. While the world may be watching South Korea's economy, there is likely an equally as impressive social revolution that is happening.

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