



FRANK JACOB (ED.)

THE YAKUZA IN POPULAR MEDIA

Honorable Criminals or
Violent Gangsters?



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Yakuza: Chivalrous Traditionalists or Violent Mobsters?

Frank Jacob

Yakuza is probably one of the Japanese words and cultural phenomena—alongside sushi¹ and Godzilla²—that are internationally most well-known. Due to video games³ and clothing brands,⁴ the term has spread throughout Western consumer culture, and popular media like novels, manga, films, etc. There it helped to cement knowledge about Japan's underworld beyond the borders of the East Asian country. However, the display of the image of the yakuza, especially in Japanese popular culture, is not written in stone, but like many other cultural images determined by its time. Images of Japanese organized crime therefore range between chivalrous gangsters and violent mobsters. The first image depended on the consideration that the yakuza represent a necessary evil to provide a control for the illegal business world of the country. In addition, the yakuza themselves by supposedly chivalrous acts—e.g. supporting the people in times of crisis like in the aftermath of the Kobe earthquake (*Hanshin Awaji daishin-*

1 Sasha Issenberg, *The Sushi Economy: Globalization and the Making of Modern Delicacy* (New York: Gotham Books, 2014).

2 Frank Jacob, »From Tokyo's Destroyer to International Icon: Godzilla and Japanese Monstrosity in the Postwar Age,« in *All Around Monstrous: Monster Media in Their Historical Contexts*, eds. Verena Bernardi und Frank Jacob (Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, 2019), 211–244.

3 The Sega/Deep Silver videogame series Ryū ga Gotoku (Like a Dragon, known in the Western world as Yakuza) is particularly well-known and successful worldwide.

4 Yakuza Premium Store. Accessed November 20, 2020. <https://www.yakuzapremiumstore.com/>.

sai) in 1995⁵ or the Fukushima Dai-ichi Nuclear Disaster (*Fukushima dai-ichi genshiryoku hatsudensho jiko*) in 2011⁶—emphasized their own importance for Japan.

After the Edo period and its Pax Tokugawa, during the almost 250-year-long peaceful period that stimulated a flourishing trade and urbanization after Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616) had finished the unification process of the country after the so-called Age of Warring States (*Sengoku jidai*, 1467–1615), criminal gangs began to form to control gambling and other illegal activities. Traditionally, there existed two different branches of the yakuza, namely the gamblers (*bakuto*) and the peddlers (*tekiya*).⁷ It is this long history that stimulated the existence of traditional structures and honorable codes that have been reproduced in popular media, and the yakuza, as David E. Kaplan and Alec Dubro highlight in their important book about the criminal underworld of Japan, »in fact, form a central theme of popular culture in Japan, with heroes and anti-heroes enshrined in countless movies, books, ballads, and short stories.«⁸ These stories were also provided by yakuza themselves, like Fujita Gorō, the author of more than 30 novels about life as a gang member, whose works were published since the 1960s.⁹ In such stories, the image provided of the yakuza is one determined by chivalry, dedication, honor, and the protection of common people. Very often, a dichotomy between honorable yakuza and honorless gangsters is constructed, due to which a rather

5 James Sterngold, »Quake in Japan: Gangsters—Gang in Kobe Organizes Aid for People in Quake,« *The New York Times*, January 22, 1995; »Lessons for Japan from Kobe Quake: Interview with David Edgington,« *The Diplomat*, March 23, 2011. Accessed November 12, 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2011/03/lessons-for-japan-from-kobe-quake/>.

6 Terril Yue Jones, »Yakuza Among First with Relief supplies in Japan,« *Reuters*, March 25, 2011. Accessed November 25, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yakuza-idUSTRE72O6TF20110325>.

7 David E. Kaplan and Alec Dubro, *Yakuza: Japan's Criminal Underworld*, Expanded Edition (Berkeley/Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

8 *Ibid.*, 4.

9 See, among others, Fujita Gorō, *Burai no uta* (Tōkyō: Ryūkei Shosa, 1976).

positivistic image of organized crime is provided. Inagawa Kakuji, a yakuza himself, explained in an interview in 1984 with regard to the organization's self-perception that »[t]he yakuza are trying to pursue the road of chivalry and patriotism. That's our biggest difference with the American Mafia, it's our sense of giri and ninjō. The yakuza try to take care of all society if possible, even if it takes 1 million yen to help a single person.«¹⁰ The yakuza, nevertheless, as Wolfgang Herbert's contribution in the present volume emphasizes, are to be understood as a traditional element of Japanese society that is being challenged by modern times and by the fact that the society no longer intends to accept organized crime.

The yakuza, whose members often consider themselves to be heirs to Japan's samurai traditions, is organized in families, whose members are hierarchically ranked according to a father-child like relationship (*oyabun-kobun*)¹¹ into which new recruits are initiated by a traditional ceremony that is often shown or described in yakuza-related popular media. The rules for life as a yakuza are strict and mistakes are not tolerated, often leading to a formal apology by the cutting off of a fingertip (*yubitsume*), another aspect that is very often shown in films or in other popular media.

A survey in 1993 confirmed that 45 % of known yakuza gang members had performed *yubitsume* at least once, 15 % even twice.¹² Another trademark of the Japanese yakuza, next to fancy oversized suits, is their tattoos.¹³ Usually having a traditional Japanese style (*wabori*), these tattoos follow the tradition of Edo-period woodblock prints

10 Kaplan and Dubro, *Yakuza*, 18. Giri refers to duty, while ninjō means compassion. For a detailed discussion of these elements and how they determine human relations in Japanese society see Minami Hiroshi, »Human Relations in the Japanese Society,« *The Annals of the Hitotsubashi Academy* 4, no. 2 (1954): 148–162.

11 Iwao Ishino, »The Oyabun-Kobun: A Japanese Ritual Kinship Institution,« *American Anthropologist* 55, no. 5 (1953): 695–707.

12 Kaplan and Dubro, *Yakuza*, 14.

13 Frank Jacob, »Japanese Tattoo Semiotics,« in *Culture del tatuaggio*, eds. Francesco Mangiagapane and Gianfranco Marrone (Palermo: Museo Pasqualino, 2018), 101–116.



Fig. 1-4: Traditional tattooing by Horihiro in Osaka.
Photos by Frank Jacob.



Fig. 5-8: A member of the Yamaguchi-gum with a bodysuit-tattoo by Horihiro in Osaka. Photos by Frank Jacob.

(*ukiyo-e*), often the particularly famous and popular series of the 108 heroes of the Suikoden.¹⁴ While »[t]he tattoo marks the yakuza as misfits, forever unable or unwilling to adapt themselves to Japanese society,«¹⁵ this is a rather modern reading of tattoos in Japan, where large body tattoos were common among non-yakuza until the early Meiji-period (1868–1912) as well.¹⁶ Regardless of their status as social outcasts,¹⁷ the yakuza were quite successful and, especially in the years after the Second World War, very influential with ties to politicians and large businesses.¹⁸

The occupation of Japan created a power vacuum that allowed the gangs to grow further, although violent conflicts were not uncommon in those years. The Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers, General Douglas MacArthur (1889–1964), and his staff tolerated the yakuza and looked the other way, especially since they were not a communist threat in the early Cold War.¹⁹ The American occupation forces only tried for a short time span to suppress organized crime in Japan, and they did not succeed in their efforts.²⁰

In the years to come, the large yakuza syndicates would continue to extend their influence and were socially accepted, although the issue

14 Inge Klomp makers, *Of Brigands and Bravery. Kuniyoshi's Heroes of the Suikoden* (Leiden, Hotei Publishing, 2003).

15 Kaplan and Dubro, *Yakuza*, 15.

16 Wolfgang Herbert, »Tatauierungen als Ver-Kleidungen: Nackte und bunte Haut,« in *Nacktheit: Ästhetische Inszenierungen im Kulturvergleich*, ed. Kerstin Gernig (Cologne et al.: Böhlau, 2002), 205–239.

17 Stephan Köhn and Chantal Weber, eds. *Outcasts in Japans Vormoderne: Mechanismen der Segregation in der Edo-Zeit—Festschrift für Ingrid Fritsch* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2019).

18 The ties of the yakuza to Japanese politics range back until the Meiji-period. For a detailed discussion see Eiko Maruko Siniawer, *Ruffians, Yakuza, Nationalists: The Violent Politics of Modern Japan, 1860–1960* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

19 On MacArthur's occupational politics see Frank Jacob, »MacArthur's Legacy: Japan and the Early Years of the Cold War,« in *Peripheries of the Cold War*, ed. Frank Jacob (Würzburg: K&N, 2015), 207–227.

20 Kaplan and Dubro, *Yakuza*, 39.

of organized crime was never really addressed in public. It was more like an outspoken secret, especially since the connections between police and crime syndicates were equally as close as those between politicians and the yakuza. Nevertheless, larger scandals and the involvement of leading yakuza would lead to a change in the perception of the »chivalrous gangsters.«²¹ This change was intensified even more by a large gang war during the 1980s, when one of the largest syndicates, the Kobe-based Yamaguchi, split after the death of its boss (*kumichō*) Taoka Kazuo (1913–1981). Takenaka Masahisa (1933–1985), leader of the Takenaka-gumi, was elected as the new boss, but Yamamoto Hiroshi, *kumichō* of the Yamahiro-gumi, did not accept this result and formed a new syndicate, the Ichiwa-kai. As a consequence, the two groups fought the so-called Yama-Ichi War (Yama-Ichi Kōsō), which not only led to Takenaka's murder but also caused unwanted attention for the yakuza and their business, although the Yamaguchi-gumi turned out to be victorious and many Ichiwa-kai members rejoined their former gang. In 2015, another split took place, and Wolfgang Herbert described the situation that existed afterward as a secession war between the antagonist syndicates. In 2018, the police registered 24 large yakuza groups in Japan and around 30,000 yakuza nationwide (Fig. 3).²²

Regardless of the internal clashes between different yakuza groups, the violent gang war in the 1980s, which also became the plot of numerous films, e. g. the 9-part series *New Japan's Don* (Shin-Nippon no don, 2004–2006),²³ transformed the image the yakuza had in public. This transformation, however, was also stimulated by new laws.

21 Hans H. Baerwald, »Lockheed and Japanese Politics,« *Asian Survey* 16, no. 9 (1976): 817–829. Also see Albrecht Rothacher, *The Japanese Power Elite* (London: Macmillan, 1993), 105 and Sakade Takeshi, »Rokkidojiken to toraisutā ryokakuki keikaku (1961–1986 nen),« *Keizai Ronsō* 191, no. 4 (2017): 1–14.

22 »Fight against Organized Crimes.« Accessed November 30, 2020. https://www.npa.go.jp/english/Police_of_Japan/2019/Police_of_Japan_2019_20.pdf.

23 Wolfgang Herbert, »Sezession, Rezession und Transformation: Umbruch in der Welt der Yakuza,« in *Japan 2016: Politik, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, eds. David Chiavacci and Iris Wiczorek (Munich: Iudicium 2016), 262.

Designated Boryokudan Groups

No.	Name of Boryokudan	Main Office	No. of Members (as of the end of 2018)
1	Rokudaime Yamaguchi-gumi	Hyogo	4,400
2	Inagawa-kai	Tokyo	2,200
3	Sumiyoshi-kai	Tokyo	2,800
4	Godaime Kudo-kai	Fukuoka	330
5	Gyokuryu-kai	Okinawa	320
6	Nanadaime Aizu Kotetsu-kai (Daihyosha Kim Gen)	Kyoto	40 (As of April 19, 2019)
7	Rokudaime Kyosei-kai	Hiroshima	140
8	Nanadaime Goda-ikka	Yamaguchi	70
9	Yondaime Kozakura-ikka	Kagoshima	60
10	Godaime Asano-gumi	Okayama	70
11	Dojin-kai	Fukuoka	480
12	Nidaime Shinwa-kai	Kagawa	40
13	Soai-kai	Chiba	140
14	Sandaime Kyodo-kai	Hiroshima	80
15	Taishu-kai	Fukuoka	90
16	Kyudaim Sakaume-gumi	Osaka	30
17	Kyukoto-kai	Tokyo	520
18	Nidaime Azuma-gumi	Osaka	130
19	Matsuba-kai	Tokyo	420
20	Sandaime Fukuhaku-kai	Fukuoka	110
21	Namikawa-kai	Fukuoka	210
22	Kobe Yamaguchi-gumi	Hyogo	1,700
23	Ninkyo Yamaguchi-gumi	Hyogo	400
24	Kanto Sekine-gumi	Ibaraki	130

Fig. 9: The 24 yakuza groups registered by the Japanese police at the end of 2018.



Fig. 10: A member of the Yamguchi-gumi with the Kanji for the group's name on his chest and a bodysuit-tattoo by Horihiro in progress.
Photograph by Frank Jacob.

From 1992, the authorities challenged the romantic view of the yakuza with a legal renomination. The yakuza were now referred to as *bōryokudan* (gangster groups),²⁴ and the Anti-Bōryokudan Law (Bōtaihō, 1992)²⁵ was a first measure to end the existence of organized crime in Japan.²⁶ This first legal measure decreased the num-

24 Ōno Tatsuzo et al., »Zadankai: Bōryokudan to wa nanika,« *Bunka hyōron* 328 (1988), German translation available online. Accessed December 8, 2020. <https://www.aai.uni-hamburg.de/japan/personen/worm/medien/kagami-1987-1988/kagami-1987-88-boryokudan-gespraech-ueber-das-organisierte-verbrechen-in-japan.pdf>.

25 Peter B. E. Hill, *The Japanese Mafia: Yakuza, Law, and the State* (Oxford/New York: Oyfod University Press, 2003), 137–176.

26 Andreas Schloenhardt, »Mission Unaccomplished: Japan's Anti-Bōryoku-Dan Law,« *Zeitschrift für Japanisches Recht* 29, no. 15 (2010): 123–136.

ber of yakuza groups and their members, and the legal course of the Japanese authorities against organized crime was further intensified.²⁷ A police report from 2018 therefore argues, with regard to other legal measures that had been taken since the early 1990s, that »[t]he police have been promoting efforts by the community to eliminate Bōryokudan. Specifically, in order to cut off Bōryokudans' funding sources, the police, in coordination with the relevant agencies, are promoting Bōryokudan elimination activities in wide-ranging industries such as moneylending businesses and construction businesses.«²⁸ The organized crime syndicates, on the other hand, felt harassed by the new laws: »The Yakuza's initial reaction to the implementation of the Anti-Bōryokudan Law was to adapt internally while engaging in an aggressive public relations campaign against the law. The external actions came to a peak on the date of the Anti-Bōryokudan Law's enactment; around 130 Yakuza members protested in Ginza, claiming that the new law would lead to human rights abuses by the police.«²⁹

Regardless of such reactions, the laws seem to have been successful not only in decreasing the number of men organized in *bōryokudan* but also in changing the perception of criminal syndicates and their members in Japan. However, depictions of the yakuza in Japanese film went through different periods, and the heroic images in the early period of Japan's cinema, described by Sybil A. Thornton in some detail in the present volume, had already changed since Fukasaku Kinji's (1930–2003) *Battles Without Honor and Humanity* (Jingi Naki Tatakai, 1973), which stimulated a more realistic narrative about the yakuza. While Western cineast narratives, as described by Frank Jacob in the present volume, remain based on stereotypes, Benjamin

27 Police Policy Research Center, »Present Situation of Organized Crime in Japan and Countermeasures Against It,« February 2000. Accessed November 20, 2020. <https://www.ncjrs.gov/App/Publications/abstract.aspx?ID=197906>.

28 »Fight against Organized Crimes.«

29 Edward F. Reilly, Jr., »Criminalizing Yakuza Membership: A Comparative Study of the Anti-Boryokudan Law,« *Washington University Global Studies Law Review* 13, no. 4 (2014): 809.