

A portrait of the tattooist as a nice young man

'Otattoo' pioneer Horii Benny battled prejudice, poverty and punishing training to blaze ink trail in Osaka

TELLING LIVES

J.J. Donoghue

When Horii Benny moved into his brand new business premises in 2014 near Nipponbashi in downtown Osaka, there was an unwelcoming committee waiting for him. A neighboring business had gathered over 1,000 signatures for a petition to get him to move back out. The message was clear: The tattoo artist was not welcome.

If there was a list of undesirable neighbors in Japan, tattoo artists would probably come close to the top; for many here the industry is inextricably linked to the yakuza. Many others see tattoos as unsavory — they mark you out for things you can't do, like visiting hot springs and swimming pools.

But Benny stood his ground; he also proffered his hand in friendship. Americans from the Midwest are like that. They're polite, proud and cordial. His opponent didn't know that. All he knew — needed to know — was that he was in the company of a tattoo artist.

In the years since Benny set up Invasion Club, a tattoo studio and clothing store, he has gone out of his way to make friends in the neighborhood.

Osaka-based writer Brian Ashcraft, who co-authored "Japanese Tattoos" with Benny, said that his compatriot might be one of the politest people he's ever met. "Even by Japanese standards, he's very polite."

Invasion Club, by design, is a long way from the seedy image of tattoo parlors of yore: Huge glass panes allow passers-by a clear view into the shop. Two petit mounds of salt in saucers are placed either side of the door. Manga and anime feature prominently in the shop: Busty female figurines mix with trolls, posters of Benny's favorite manga and anime line the wall (especially posters of "Urusei Yatsura"). Shelves filled with books cord off an office space. Even the animal skull that hangs on a beam is filled with flowers. If anything, Invasion Club feels like a quirky design studio, which in a manner of speaking it is, except that designs are inked on a human canvas.

The design of the shop is a segue to

"otattoo" (a play on *otaku*, meaning nerd), the type of custom tattooing that Benny pioneered and is becoming increasingly known for, which bridges the worlds of pop culture and tattooing.

Benny, now 38, first came to Japan under a different name from Minneapolis, Minnesota, as a teacher, in 2002, and worked as a teacher on the JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching) program in Kagoshima. He was hoping for Osaka but landed "down range" on Nagashima, an island just off the Kagoshima coast.

He stayed put for two years until he wound his way to Osaka, in search of an apprenticeship at a tattoo studio. For a decade he learned the craft of tattooing. He's in the position of a teacher again, mentoring his first assistant, but admits to being still a student — a first-year student.

"One of the things they teach you about the *shokunin* class is that after 10 years you're finally at the level of an *ichinensei* (first-year student)."

If it sounds like a straightforward journey, it was anything but. To secure an apprenticeship Benny had to fight through the initial laughter, mockery and disbelief. That was just to get his foot in the door at Chopstick Tattoo, one of Osaka's best-known tattoo studios.

There he had to quickly acclimatize by mastering formal Japanese and adhering to a rigid social structure, which is "harder when you're a loudmouth American and you think you can tell the whole world what to do." Benny is hardly that American, but he was coming from a system that "bucks trends and ignores the rules," he says half-jokingly.

He was three years into his apprenticeship at Chopstick before he touched a needle. His pay was meager, and it wasn't long before he was cutting into his savings for a full body tattoo featuring Benzaiten,

Benny was three years into his apprenticeship before he touched a needle. He slept rough (stairwells in winter, beside air conditioning units in summer), ate badly and existed on the kindness of others.



Skin as canvas: Invasion Art customers sport some of Horii Benny's recent works. His "otattoo" style bridges the worlds of pop culture and tattooing. COURTESY OF HORII BENNY

the only goddess among the otherwise all-male Seven Gods of Fortune.

However, the needle wasn't the only pain he was inflicting on his mind and body. Benny recalls times at the shop when he would announce he was going to the bathroom, which they had to do. However, he wasn't going to answer the call of nature. "I would go in to the bathroom and sleep on the toilet for two minutes to recharge."

He slept rough (stairwells in winter, beside air conditioning units in summer), ate badly and existed on the kindness of others. By his own admission it was traumatizing and he was naive. But he learned the business side of the operation, of managing a shop of half a dozen artists, and crucially for anyone planning on opening a business in Osaka, learning to hustle.

Benny credits his experience at Chopstick for getting his street-wear clothing label up and running inside of a year.

"I was managing a team of six or seven (at Chopstick)," he says. "I was learning to get things done. I was learning to hustle and I was getting a lifelong skill."

Chopstick is also where he picked up his name: Horii Benny. *Hori*, which means carving, is an honorific given to tattoo artists. When it came to tattooing, there was very little, if any, guidance. He learned by observing, by being silent and bearing witness. And gritting his teeth through the frustration of being at arm's length for so long. When he finally did get his hands on a needle, he first had to find a friend, or guinea pig, and cajole them into being tattooed.

He has his own ideas about mentor-

ing: "I'm not going to throw the cub off the cliff and see if she comes back." While he has set the bar high, he doesn't see the need for yelling and shouting. Rather, guidance is something that features in his female apprentice's education, something that was sorely lacking in his.

"I'm not of that 'you just shut up and watch me and figure it out,' school," says Benny. "I'm trying to set her up for success from the start. I'm not saying I know how to do that, but I'm figuring it out."

He also has a great degree of empathy, not just for his assistant — who is nearly 20 years his junior, a female working in a male-dominated society — but for the *yutori* (breathing-space) generation in general.

"Reality is hard enough," he says, pointing out that Japan's looming population crash is something millennials and the successive generations will have to figure out. His empathy for millennials is driven by his anger at baby boomers and Gen-Xers who were responsible for policies (such as *yutori kyōiku*, the more relaxed "education with breathing space") and who subsequently blamed the failures of these policies on a younger generation.

And then there's the existential crisis that tattooing in Japan faces. Beginning last year tattoo artists were back in the firing range. Several in Osaka were shut down for violating the Medical Practitioners' Law, which was initially set up to regulate cosmetic surgery but is now being used against tattooers.

Interestingly, in the culture wars surrounding tattooing, petitions are being used on both sides.

One of the tattoo artists has taken his case to court, while others have banded together and are fighting back with peti-

tions. They have collected enough signatures that their plight will have to be discussed in parliament. The tattoo artists behind the petition are calling for better regulations and have disavowed mafia connections. Essentially, they want to get on with their livelihoods.

Benny is ambivalent about being drawn into an activist role — something which he has given a great deal of thought to — not because he disagrees with his fellow tattoo artists, but rather because of the drain the fight would take on his time and energy. To illustrate this he highlights Richard Dawkins, a prominent atheist and Oxford professor, who has been drawn into a never-ending social media battle with American evangelicals.

"I don't necessarily think it's a mantle he wants to wear as it's a distraction from his work," Benny says, "but he's fighting to keep science at the forefront."

For the time being, Benny's focus lies with his family and business. Tattooing, as he points out, has a long history of repression in Japan, and his hope is that the current travail is a bump in the road.

There will likely be more bumps ahead, particularly when thousands of tattooed sports fans arrive in Japan for the Rugby World Cup in 2019 and the Olympics and Paralympics the following year. Will Japan pull back the *noren* curtains and allow tattooed visitors to enjoy the country's famed hot springs?

Benny thinks authorities might have to — and they should.

"What I hope will happen is the Olympics are a wake-up call."

Tattoos, after all, only run skin deep.

Horii Benny: www.horibenny.com.
Your comments and story ideas: community@japantimes.co.jp



Welcome to my world: Horii Benny runs Invasion Club in Osaka. J.J. DONOGHUE

Japan should stay out of U.S. sailors' lawsuit against Tepco



Dear Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Let me first acknowledge that after four long years of silence, the Japanese government has finally taken a position regarding the lawsuit filed against Tokyo Electric Power Co. in the U.S. by more than 450 American sailors, marines and civilians who were on board the USS Reagan and accompanying military ships off the coast of Tohoku after 3/11.

These young people experienced serious health problems resulting from, they allege, radiation exposure while participating in Operation Tomodachi, the U.S. military's humanitarian rescue mission launched in response to the Great East Japan Earthquake, tsunami and multiple meltdowns at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant in March 2011.

While the Japanese government's acknowledgement of the suit is welcome, the unconditional support it has given to Tepco is a matter of deep concern. Even now, U.S. service personnel find themselves prevented from seeking justice because Tepco, with the support of the Japanese government, is doing its utmost to ensure the case will never be heard in an American court.

The Japanese government submitted an *amicus curiae* brief to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals on Feb. 3. An

amicus curiae (friend of the court) brief is one presented by a party not directly involved in the suit in the hope of influencing the outcome. The brief contains two points:

1. "The Government of Japan has developed a comprehensive system to ensure compensation for victims of the Fukushima Nuclear Accident."
2. "Damage claims brought in tribunals outside of Japan threaten the continuing viability of the compensation system established by the Government of Japan."

Examining the first point, if the Japanese government truly had "a comprehensive system to ensure compensation for victims," there would be no need for the U.S. service members' lawsuit. Yet, as you know, the Japanese government and its subsidiaries have, to date, not paid a single yen to any non-Tepco-related victim of radiation exposure from Fukushima No. 1. This includes, as of March this year, a total of 173 children from the prefecture who underwent surgery after being diagnosed with suspected thyroid cancer, 131 of whom were confirmed to have had cancer.

If the Japanese government will not admit that the suffering of its own children was caused by radiation exposure, how confident can young Americans be that the apparently radiation-induced injuries they experienced will be recognized as such, let alone compensated for, in Japan?

Further, at least seven of these previously healthy young Americans have already died and many others are too ill to travel to Japan even if they could afford to, let alone reside in this country during lengthy legal procedures, which typically take years to resolve. This is not to mention the prospect of expensive legal costs, including for court fees, hir-



Anti-nuclear village voice: Former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi attends a press conference in Carlsbad, California, in May with former U.S. soldiers who have sued Tokyo Electric Power Co. for damage to their health they believe was caused by the Fukushima nuclear disaster. The author of this column, Brian Victoria, who acted as translator for Koizumi during the trip, is on the left. KYODO

ing Japanese lawyers, translation of relevant documents, etc. And let us never forget, Prime Minister, it was the Japanese government that requested the assistance of these American military personnel.

As for the second point above, I agree the U.S. military personnel's lawsuit threatens "the continuing viability of the compensation system established by the Government of Japan." For example, if a U.S. court were to ascribe the plaintiffs' illnesses to radiation exposure, how could the Japanese government con-

tinue to claim that none of the many illnesses the children and adults of Fukushima presently experience are radiation-related? The American service personnel truly serve as "the canary in the coal mine" when it comes to demonstrating the damaging effects of radiation exposure. Moreover, this canary is out of the Japanese government's ability to control.

Let us further suppose that an American court were to award \$3 million per person as compensation for the deaths, currently standing at seven, of the mili-

tary personnel who were irradiated. By contrast, the Japanese government continues to deny compensation, for radiation-induced illnesses let alone deaths, to its own citizens. This would surely impact the "viability" (not to mention reputation) of the Japanese government in its ongoing denial of radiation-related injuries to non-Tepco employees.

Let me close by noting that there is one Japanese political leader who has accepted personal responsibility for the injuries inflicted on American service personnel. I refer to former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi who, after meeting with injured servicemen and women in San Diego in May, initiated a fund to meet as many of the medical needs of these sailors and marines as possible.

Fortunately, thanks to the support of thousands of ordinary Japanese, he has already raised \$700,000 toward his \$1 million goal. With tears in his eyes, Koizumi explained that he could not ignore the suffering of hundreds of formerly healthy young Americans who willingly put themselves at risk in order to render aid to the Japanese people.

Prime Minister Abe, I call on you to end the Japanese government's unconditional legal support of Tepco. Further, if the Japanese government has a conscience, please immediately provide medical aid and compensation to the hundreds of American victims of Operation Tomodachi.

BRIAN VICTORIA
Kyoto

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