

# THE TATTOO ARTIST

From the age old tradition of calligraphy to modern day tattoos, ink has evolved as a new medium of self-expression.

Words by Giselle Whiteaker.  
Photo by Quinn Ryan Mattingly

A YOUNG VIETNAMESE GUY LOOKS AT A BUZZING GUN as it pierces his skin before returning to his text messaging. No blood is seen, it's hidden by excess ink.

This is the intricate work of tattoo artist Dang Huy, who has his own tattoo stretching over his right shoulder, across his chest and down his stomach. Designed by Vietnamese master tattooist Mr Thien, it features brightly coloured flowers and flowing water, ending in a large orange carp. All three elements — flowers, water and fish — are considered lucky in Vietnam and are the most popular requests. His customers tend to steer clear of themes often represented by prison and army tattoos and focus instead on philosophy and personal passions.

Most of Huy's customers are Vietnamese, although the occasional foreigner wanders in. The average age is 25, but he sees people ranging from 18 to 40. Surprisingly, there is a 50/50 split in the gender of the tattoo recipients although the preferred location of the tattoo is different — women here favour the art on their shoulders or chests while men lean towards the neck and stomach. No matter what the theme, Huy believes he injects the Vietnamese soul into his art with a little twist.

Le Thi Ngoc Thao, 27, and Nguyen Truc Linh, 28, both female, have tattoos that were inked in Ho Chi Minh City. The former got her first one just over a year ago. Neither stopped at just one and both are considering adding more to their collections. They are atypical in that they chose locations such as the rib cage, hand and back. Thao admits that her parents don't know about her tattoos and are not likely to approve. Her friends are more mixed in their opinions. Some don't like them, some think they are cool, but all agree that she shouldn't get any more.

Because of the location, Linh can't hide the tattoo on her hand from her parents. "They were unhappy," she explains. Her friends are much more tolerant.

"Older generations don't accept tattoos," says Thao, "but if you look at Vietnamese teenagers right now, a lot of them have tattoos, even if it's just a small star."

Thao also believes her tattoo is a reflection of the different people she meets every day in the city. She has Hebrew words inked alongside some of her ribs. "Also, I can use tattoos as a way to tell everyone who I am without having to speak. They're images that I can show and hopefully people can understand a bit of who I am from them," she explains. "My parents don't approve of them, but it's my way of breaking away from tradition."

