

# [Stereotypes and realities of the japanese yakuza criminology essay](https://assignbuster.com/stereotypes-and-realities-of-the-japanese-yakuza-criminology-essay/)

## Part 1: Yakuza as Criminals

First and foremost, the Yakuza is a crime syndicate and hence it is unsurprising that they indulge in all sorts of criminal activities that involve the vices (Kaplan & Dubro, 2003, p. xviii). The more major activities would be gambling, prostitution, extortion and drug dealing (Kaplan & Dubro, 2003, p. xviii).

The yakuza’s involvement with gambling can be said to date back to a few hundred years ago, back when some of the yakuza were known as the bakuto, also known as the gamblers (Kaplan & Dubro, 2003, p. 7). The bakuto is one of the ancestors of the yakuza and another ancestor would be the tekiya (the peddlers) (Kaplan & Dubro, 2003, p. 7), but some yakuza do not regard themselves to be the same as the tekiya (Saga, 1991, p. 195). In the 20th century, the yakuza’s gambling activities mainly involved running gambling joints in the entertainment district, where attracting and retaining their customers were of paramount significance. Besides the gambling joint being constantly raided by the police (since running gambling joints is illegal in itself), the yakuza were actually professional gamblers that generally do not cheat as it would chase away their customers once they were found out (Saga, 1991). More recently, besides handling betting on various activities such as Sumo Wrestling and horse races, the Yakuza have also incorporated pachinko parlours into their gambling activities which has been very profitable for them since pachinko is legal and is “ Japan’s national gambling pastime” (Stratfor, 2012, Criminal Enterprises section, para. 2).

The Yakuza have also invested great efforts into prostitution as it is a highly profitable industry that caters to great demand from Japanese men. This has caused the yakuza to have a hand in pornography and human trafficking as well (Stratfor, 2012, Criminal Enterprises section, para. 3). In the human trafficking aspect, the yakuza exploit young foreign women by luring them from overseas to Japan, then forcing them to work in the sex industry. Sometimes, “ unwanted female children from China” are bought for this purpose as well (Bruno, 2012, chap. 4). As for the pornography aspect, not only do the Yakuza produce and sell pornography that may include underage girls (Stratfor, 2012, Criminal Enterprises section, para. 4), they also smuggle in pornography material from overseas (Bruno, 2012, chap. 4).

In the case of extortion by the Yakuza, a phenomenon known as the sokaiya has to be briefly mentioned. By sokaiya, one refers to “ people who disrupt shareholder meetings” by engaging in various acts, be it through violence or other forms of disruption; thus members of the corporation pay these people to prevent them from disturbing the shareholder meetings (Szymkowiak, 2002, p. 5). Often, these sokaiya buy some shares in a company to gain them access to these meetings then dig up ugly secrets of the corporation or its members and threaten to disrupt the impending shareholder meeting and reveal these secrets if they are not paid. Their demands are usually met by members of the corporation for fear of unsightly revelations (Bruno, 2012, chap. 4). Due to the ease in which money could be obtained from the corporations as well as the low risk of such an activity (the corporations were unlikely to report the extortion to the authorities since they were afraid the sokaiya would reveal their secrets), the yakuza readily engaged in such a form of extortion and “[amassed] large cash payoffs from corporations” (Szymkowiak, 2002, p. 76).

As for drug dealing, the yakuza mainly deal in amphetamines. These stimulant drugs were legal and rampant during and after World War 2, where they were mainly used by soldiers and civilians respectively. Amphetamine abuse was so severe that the “ Stimulant Drug Control Law” was passed in 1951 to curb the use of amphetamines and this law was effective to some extent (Hill, 2003, p. 99). However, even today, drug abuse still occurs in the form of methamphetamine injections. The yakuza dominate this industry due to their availability of resources and manpower which allows them to be able to handle this illegal industry; some yakuza members are consumers of these drugs as well. Although there is contempt within the yakuza towards those that deal with drugs, many yakuza still turn to drug dealing to sustain their lifestyles (Hill, 2003, p. 100) since drug dealing is a very lucrative industry (Hill, 2003, p. 101). It is so lucrative that about a third of the yakuza’s income comes from drug dealing, especially in methamphetamines (Kaplan & Dubro, 2003, p. xviii).

Hence, it seems that the Yakuza engage quite heavily in criminal activities and are indeed criminals. In fact, in the National Police Agency White Paper in 1989 (as cited in Kaplan & Dubro, 2003, p. 131), about 80. 3% of the yakuza’s income is derived from illegal activities, among which the more significant activities will be stimulant drug trafficking (34. 8%) and gambling (16. 9%). In this case, the yakuza’s criminal activities may have led to them being stereotyped as criminals, which they really are. However, it is doubtful as to whether they are the typical criminals that everyone expects them to be. For example, “ in movies and novels, the yakuza are always reaching for swords and guns” but that is not actually the case as they do not want to catch the attention of the police and cause their businesses to close down (Saga, 1991, p. 194). This is an interesting point that seems to portray the yakuza as businessmen. Also, the yakuza are open about their identities as yakuza despite their criminal activities. It is not uncommon to see them wearing accessories declaring their gang affiliation and they also openly display their gang emblems on their offices. Some of the yakuza leaders have even apologised to the public through press conferences for “ any inconvenience they might have caused” during gang wars (Kaplan & Dubro, 2003, p. xviii). All these actions make them seem different from the typical criminal that is often covert about their criminal identity and this is what distinguishes the Japanese Yakuza from the Mafia.

## Part 2: Yakuza as chivalrous followers of samurai values

Besides being criminals, the yakuza also exhibit chivalry in some instances which could be attributed to the influence of the samurai in many aspects of the yakuza. One such aspect would be the relationship between the bosses and the yakuza members which is known as oyabun-kobun (“ father role-child role”). This relationship is uniquely Japanese as it is derived from the “ lord and vassal” relationship of the samurai which originated in feudal Japan. This relationship entails the loyalty and subservience of the kobun in return for the guidance and protection of the oyabun (Kaplan & Dubro, 2003, p. 8). A result of this relationship is yubitsume which is a way for an errant yakuza member to “ pay penance” to his leader. Yubitsume involves the severing of a little finger joint which is then offered to the leader. This tradition contributes to one of the most common stereotypes of the yakuza, which is that they all have ‘ missing fingers’. Also, yubitsume actually has its origins from a few centuries ago when the more influential yakuza wielded the katana (the weapon of the samurai) and the loss of a finger joint will weaken their grip of the katana. This increases the reliance of the errant member on his leader and he therefore becomes more “ indebted” (Stratfor, 2012, Inside the Yakuza World section, para. 5). Once again, the influence of the samurai, which is a Japanese entity, can be seen in the traditions of the Yakuza.

Another thing that the Yakuza adopted from the samurai would be the values from bushido, in particular the values of ninjo (“ obligation” or “ strong sense of duty”) and giri (“ human feeling”). With these values, the yakuza could demonstrate that they, like the samurai, could “ combine compassion and kindness with their martial skills” (Kaplan & Dubro, 2003, p. 17). These values are part of what makes the yakuza uniquely Japanese. Furthermore, the adoption of these values may have contributed to the stereotypical yakuza hero that was formerly portrayed in yakuza movies in the 1960s – a chivalrous yakuza that had to choose between his interests and obligations (Schilling, 2003, p. 23). Additionally, the Japanese Yakuza demonstrated their chivalry when they generously provided various types of relief supplies to disaster victims after the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan; they also did so after the Kobe earthquake in 1995 (Norman, 2011). The chivalry demonstrated by the yakuza casts doubt on their identities as criminals and sets them apart from ordinary criminals and perhaps other criminal organisations like the Mafia (Kaplan & Dubro, 2003, p. 18).

However, there are some that argue that the yakuza were more chivalrous in the past. Shotaro Hayashi, a yakuza boss, asserted that the “ real yakuza existed until only the end of the Showa era [1925]” and that “ there was more chivalry in those days” (Kaplan & Dubro, 2003, p. 126). This could be why the stereotype of the yakuza has seemed to change in recent years; the “ modern-day gangsters” as portrayed in more recent yakuza movies are more merciless and far from ‘ noble’, yet they are said to be more realistic (Schilling, 2003, p. 19). This shift in portrayal calls into question what the yakuza really are currently. Yet, the current stereotype in the yakuza movies seems to be contradicted by the recent actions of the yakuza in the Japanese earthquake or perhaps there might be a deeper meaning behind the actions of the yakuza.

## Part 3: Yakuza as nationalists

Besides being chivalrous followers of the samurai values, the yakuza are also nationalists. The beginning of the nationalist yakuza began in 1881 when Mitsuru Toyama set up the Genyosha (Dark Ocean Society), the “ forerunner of Japan’s modern secret societies and patriotic groups”. This led to the creation of a new type of yakuza that were heavily involved in political activities, specifically ultranationalism (Kaplan & Dubro, 2003, p. 22). They funded their political activities through sponsorships from wealthy patrons or typical yakuza crimes. Initially, the more traditional yakuza acted separately from these new yakuza but as it became clear that they shared similar beliefs (such as Shinto) (Kaplan & Dubro, 2003, p. 23) and both favoured the right wing (due to threats from the left wing), many of the bosses and their gangs converted to ultranationalism (Kaplan & Dubro, 2003, p. 24). In 1919, a national federation of gangsters, the Kokusui-kai, was created, which eventually became the paramilitary arm of one of Japan’s significant political parties then; eventually, some yakuza bosses even managed to become members of the parliament (Kaplan & Dubro, 2003, p. 25). Besides that, the yakuza continued to contribute manpower for fighting and other purposes so as to advance their cause (Kaplan & Dubro, 2003, p. 26). Although all these events happened before the war, even till today the yakuza are affiliated with the Liberal Democratic Party, which is a right-leaning political party (Stratfor, 2012, The Meiji Restoration section, para. 4). In this case the yakuza seem to be just Japanese trying to advance a political cause in Japan, instead of criminals.

## Part 4: Yakuza as Mafia

The Japanese Yakuza can also be seen as similar to another non-Japanese criminal syndicate, namely the Mafia. After all, the criminal activities that the yakuza are involved in are quite similar to those of the Mafia. Also, like the Mafia, the yakuza are influential in the construction and entertainment industries; they also control numerous legitimate businesses which are sometimes used as fronts for their illegal ones. Both of them have some political power behind the scenes as well (Kaplan & Dubro, 2003, p. xviii). The most striking similarity between the two criminal syndicates will perhaps be their unwritten laws as shown in Kaplan & Dubro (2003):

Never reveal the secrets of the organization.

Never violate the wife or children of another member.

No personal involvement with narcotics.

Do not withhold money from the gang.

Do not fail in obedience to superiors.

Do not appeal to the police or even the law…(p. 125)

These similarities seem to suggest that the Japanese Yakuza might have been influenced by entities outside of Japan as both the Yakuza and the Mafia are involved in similar activities and are governed by the same rules.

## Conclusion

There is little doubt that the Japanese Yakuza are indeed criminals as their involvement in various criminal activities is extensive. However, they seem to differ somewhat from the average gangster due to the values they seem to uphold, which could be due to their Japanese roots and the influence that the Japanese samurai had on them. Furthermore, the yakuza seem to be strongly affiliated with the political right-wing of Japan, making them akin to nationalists as well. Their similarities with the Mafia, though obvious, seem to be rather limited as various differences can be noted and were mentioned in the paper. Ultimately, the yakuza are originated from and based in Japan, so although it would be a stretch to call them “ uniquely Japanese” as no nationality is completely unique, they definitely possess the characteristics that show that they are Japanese.