

Spectacular lake festival in Myanmar shines despite political upheaval and natural disasters

INLE LAKE, Myanmar (AP) — Myanmar’s Phaung Daw Oo Pagoda Festival, a major Buddhist celebration and world-class tourist attraction, has seen some of its celebratory spirit diminished, with locals and visitors citing a confluence of challenges including the COVID-19 pandemic, political upheaval, and natural disasters — including a recent devastating earthquake.

Crowds nonetheless flocked to enjoy the festivity, with a spectacular gold-gilded barge at its center and scores of smaller wooden boats manned by fishermen from the Intha ethnic minority who practice a unique style of rowing while standing with one leg wrapped around a single oar. The ornate barge, with a golden image of the mythical Karaweik bird on its bow, hauls four statues of Buddha to 21 villages around the lake for people to pay homage to them.

The picturesque festival takes place over more than two weeks on mountain-fringed Inle Lake in southern Shan state, a popular tourist hub about 260 miles northeast of Yangon.

The coronavirus pandemic curbed the celebration in 2020 and the army’s ouster of the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi in 2021 — resulting in civil war over much of the country — led to the event being suspended again, to resume only in 2023. Widespread flooding last year again caused its cancellation.



CONTINUING CELEBRATION. Ethnic Intha troupes, top and bottom photos, perform during the Phaung Daw Oo Pagoda Festival in Inle Lake, southern Shan State, Myanmar. The picturesque festival takes place over more than two weeks on mountain-fringed Inle Lake, a popular tourist hub about 260 miles northeast of Yangon. (AP Photos/Thein Zaw)

The celebration resumed this year, but it was overshadowed by a 7.7 magnitude quake on March 28 that killed more than 3,800 people and caused widespread destruction.

While central Myanmar bore the brunt of the quake, Inle Lake was also significantly affected. Many houses built on wooden stilts in the water collapsed, leaving up to 90 percent damaged or destroyed in some villages around the lake. Local estimates, none official, put the death toll at between 50 and 90. According to a report by the consultancy E Guard Environmental Services, more than 13,000 people in

the area were impacted.

Many or most of the houses have been rebuilt or repaired in the traditional style, but not to the highest standards, Nyi Nyi Zaw, a 42-year-old ethnic Intha from Heyarywarma village, told The Associated Press.

He said the scarcity of local craftsmen skilled in traditional construction techniques, coupled with the urgency of repairs, was the problem.

“Not all the houses are standing straight, if you look carefully. To get them back to their original state, they will have to be repaired when the lake dries up in the summer,” said Nyi Nyi Zaw, whose

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EASIER INKING. Members of the Korea Tattoo Federation react after hearing the news that parliament passed a bill that would allow non-medical personnel to give tattoos, outside the National Assembly in Seoul, South Korea. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)

South Korean parliament votes to allow tattooists to work without a medical license

By Hyung-Jin Kim
The Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — Tattoo artists in South Korea will no longer need to worry about being punished for doing their jobs, as the country’s parliament approved a landmark bill to end a requirement that anyone who gives a tattoo must have a medical license.

South Korea is currently the only country with such a restriction in the industrialized world. The Tattooist Act, which was passed by the unicameral National Assembly in a 195-0 vote, would introduce an official licensing system for tattoo artists and place them under state supervision.

About 20 to 30 tattoo artists gathered at the assembly shouted for joy, clapped, and raised placards that read “We Welcome the Tattooist Act.” Some hugged each other and wept.

“I’m deeply moved,” said Jang Young Ah, 33, who owns a tattoo studio in Daegu. She said she and other tattooists will pay careful attention to safety and hygiene issues.

The act will take effect after a two-year grace period that begins once it’s formally proclaimed by President Lee Jae Myung. That step is considered a formality, as Lee and his Health Ministry have made their support for the law clear.

Widespread adoptions of tattoos

The bill’s passage comes as public views toward tattoos are changing in South Korea. In the past, tattoos were associated with gangsters or criminals, but they are now increasingly perceived as a form of self-expression, with K-pop idols and other celebrities openly displaying tattoos.

The current restriction traces back to a 1992 Supreme Court verdict that defined cosmetic tattoos as medical procedures, citing health issues that could be caused by tattoo needles and ink. Authorities don’t aggressively enforce the rules, allowing tattooists to thrive in the shadows.

A 2023 Health Ministry survey found that the vast majority of people with

tattoos didn’t get them in hospitals. Just 6.8% of people with cosmetic tattoos — such as eyebrows, eyeliner, lips, or scalps — said they got them in hospitals, and just 1.4% of people with ordinary tattoos.

In a Gallup Korea phone survey in 2021, 5% of respondents said they had received ordinary tattoos, while 28% said they had semi-permanent cosmetic tattoos. Observers say millions of people in South Korea have received tattoos, a majority of them cosmetic tattoos.

The text of the bill posted on the website of the assembly says that it aims to “resolve the gap between the law and reality and promote public health and safety” by giving tattooists licenses, regulating the scope of their work, and stipulating required hygiene and safety steps.

Victory for tattoo artists

The act’s passage represented a victory for tens of thousands of tattooists in South Korea, who have fought hard to bring an end to the 33-year ban on their work. They face up to five years in prison and 50 million won (\$35,740) in fines if they are caught inking people.

In recent years, judges have increasingly ruled in favor of tattoo artists or issued deferred rulings, but some have been punished with fines.

Fears of investigations have led to many tattooists in South Korea running studios without signs and with doors closed. Many have testified that they put up with customers behaving badly, while some have also moved abroad for work.

Park Jumin, chairman of the assembly’s health committee and a key backer of the bill, said in a floor speech before the vote that the bill would help the people get tattoos safely and make tattoo artists legitimate professionals in their fields.

“Many of the lawmakers who are present here now have received eyebrow and lip tattoos. Those tattoo procedures have been all illegal and conducted without proper management because they were in a blind spot of our legal system,” Park said.

Associated Press video journalist Yong Ho Kim contributed to this report.

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