

# Kuki Shūzō: A Man Burdened with Modernity and Tradition

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Kuki Shūzō (1888-1941) was a Japanese philosopher of considerable eminence in the first half of the 20th century. He is credited for bringing into Japan Martin Heidegger's philosophy and for giving the translation *jitsuzon* for the German *Sein* (being). Today Kuki's name is better known as the author of *Iki no kōzō* "The Structure of *iki*," a small book of fewer than 100 pages that was published in 1930 by the distinguished Tokyo publisher Iwanami Shigeo. In this book, Kuki discusses the nature of the quintessentially Edo aesthetic sensibility of *iki*, that a sense of urbane, plucky stylishness of living, which was forged in the late 1700s in Edo (a city now known as Tokyo). Kuki also provides an analysis and definition of the sensibility of *iki* using philosophical idioms he acquired in Europe during his eight years of study there beginning in 1921. In the conclusion of this book, Kuki proposes that *iki* represents the core of the Japanese people and encourages the reader to keep alive this old aesthetic sensitivity of *iki*.

What is then *iki*? *Iki* embodies some elements that are similar to the sensibility of dandyism, which developed in the late eighteenth century and nineteenth century in Europe. Perhaps the most renowned example of such a dandy was the French poet, essayist and art critic Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867). Dandies rejected bourgeois life style and pretended they had connections to aristocracy when in fact they had none. They were elegant, arrogant, and socially irresponsible. Dandyism had tacit codes of dress and behavior, a symbol of decadence and the trademark of men who were socially indolent. *Iki* was different. In contrast to dandies who were politically and sexually inert, *Iki* signified sensibilities essential in a man or a woman who was in a pursuit of conquering the opposite sex. This sensibility of *iki* was perfected in Edo Fukagawa's pleasure quarters at the end of the 1700s, but it was about to be forgotten in modern Japan in the 1930s when this book (*Iki no kōzō*) was written.

Today the book *Iki no kōzō* has taken on a special meaning for many reasons; one is that it was written at the time of Japan's assertion of cultural, military identity over other countries in Asia in the troublesome 1930s. Another reason is the author's intellectual kinship to Martin Heidegger, who has been criticized for colluding with the Nazis (National Socialists), and this connection is strengthened all the more when we learn that Kuki and Heidegger once worked closely together. So, naturally, a question has arisen as to the role Kuki's philosophy played in the Japanese military expansion, a situation similar to Heidegger's philosophy, which served the Nazis well. Perhaps more

importantly for readers now, Kuki serves as an example of a modern man who was caught in the crease of modernity and tradition—he lived through a tumultuous period in Japanese history and found personal equilibrium within himself in his own attempt to balance Japan's tradition and modernity.

Through this essay, you will get a sense of who this man was and about what it is that Kuki discusses in the book *Iki no kōzō*. You will also learn about the connection between Kuki and Heidegger and Kuki's role in the discourse on aesthetics and Japanese militarism.

## **Kuki's Life**

Kuki Shūzō was born as the fourth son of Kuki Ryūichi, a successful politician with special influences in the government policies dealing with the arts who worked closely with Okakura Tenshin (1862-1913), who, along with Ernest Fenollosa (1853-1908), became a major figure in the development of modern Japanese art, finishing his career as curator of Japanese art at the Boston museum. Kuki's education and training was at a par with any young men with financial means and intellectual promise—he was educated at the First Higher School then at the Tokyo Imperial University, graduating from the latter with a degree in philosophy in 1912.

Not much is known about what kept Kuki busy for the ensuing several years. In 1921, at the age of 33, he embarked for Europe, accompanied by his wife Nui, intent on studying philosophy. He paid for his own way for those years in Europe. Once there, Kuki traveled Europe in the next seven years.

He crisscrossed Switzerland, France, and Germany for pleasure and work, staying in a city for a few months here and a few years there, just long enough to nibble at the academic offerings made available to him in these cities. These included private reading from Neo-Kantians Heinrich Rickert and Eugen Herrigel (the latter is famous among Japanologists for having written *Zen and the Art of Japanese Archery*, a book based on his experience as a student of archery in Japan), attending talks by his fellow countrymen, studying under the most famous phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, conferring with Martin Heidegger, attending his lectures, and visiting Henri Bergson in Paris. These were the luminaries in European philosophy then and only a few would have had the privilege of interacting with them. He put down in writing some of his important philosophical thought—a draft for *The Structure (Iki no kōzō)* was written in Paris in December of 1926. He also gave public lectures. For instance, in 1928 he lectured on the oriental notion of time and expression of infinity in Japanese art in Paris.

In these cities, he divided his time between work and pleasure. He spent weeks in the Swiss Alps collecting plant specimens to satisfy his boyhood interest in botany. Paris

seemed to have agreed with Kuki most. When Kuki was not on the town dining at the most exquisite restaurants and visiting houses of pleasure in the French capital, he would meticulously record his private ruminations in tanka poetry and send the poems back to Japan for publication. Despite his opulent and decadent lifestyle, Kuki's scholarly cultivation impressed Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945), Japan's most prominent philosopher at the time, and former philosophy department chair at Kyoto Imperial University, Nishida wrote a letter to his successor Tanabe Hajime in December 1928 recommending Kuki for a position in Kyoto Imperial University's department of philosophy.

Kuki returned to Japan via the United States in 1929. He then joined the department of philosophy at Kyoto and began teaching courses on French philosophy, Husserl, Heidegger, problem of contingency, and history of western philosophy, among others. Kuki published *The Structure of 'iki'* in 1930, the year after he returned to Japan.

During the following years, he continued to teach French and German philosophies at Kyoto Imperial University. In 1936 he helped Karl Lowith, Kuki's acquaintance, Heidegger's student, and a Jew then being persecuted in Germany, to obtain a teaching position at Tōhoku Daigaku in Sendai in northern Japan and thereby securing an exit visa out of Germany. From 1937 on until his death in 1941 at the age of 53, Kuki contributed a number of articles to newspapers and magazines in which he extolled the virtues of Japanese culture and spirit, engaging in a kind of activity that some feel has made Kuki sound very nationalistic. In 1939 he traveled to Manchuria and China, among 174,000 tourists who visited that part in that year. He died in May of 1941 from peritonitis.

## **What is in "Iki no Kōzō"?**

At this point you might wonder what it is that Kuki said in *Iki no kōzō* which made Kuki very famous. That will be the topic of this section.

In *Iki no kōzō*, Kuki made use of new theoretical frameworks in the continental tradition to analyze *iki*. Kuki concluded that *iki* could only be understood through lived experience. In other words, *iki* is not a sum of conceptual analyses of its objective expressions; its full range of signification cannot be arrived at by identifying some generic concepts that pervade these manifestations. Kuki argued that *iki* should be defined in terms of a mode of being specific to the Japanese ethnicity. Chapter 1 sets out how to find an answer to how to find the structure of *iki* and more generally to arrive at the structure of a cultural phenomenon. Kuki shows that the mode of existence of the Japanese people precipitates in a word in Japanese when it is essential for the people. A mode of existence, in this case the *iki* sensibility, exists as a meaning only if the

sensibility is central to the being of the people. Kuki goes on to argue that, although similar sensibilities to iki may exist in non-Japanese cultures, there is none equivalent. Here he considers words like chic and esprit in French, Sehnsucht 'longing' in German. Had Kuki lived in the 21st century in the United States, he might have entertained cool or awesome.

Kuki believes further that an aesthetic sensibility like iki can be broken down into constituent meaning elements (e.g., iki is a combination of "coquetry," "detachment," and "cool" that embodies fashionable and attractive elements) but warns the reader of the danger that finding these constituent elements only captures the "dry" meaning and still does not capture the smell and taste of the meaning of these words, which we might call the "wet" meaning. The way Kuki advocates to learn the meaning of iki is to experience it directly. That is, one must touch it, feel it, taste it, learn by doing, and above all, live it, thus making the "wet" connections needed. The "wet" stuff will fill the void left by the dry constituent elements that were aggregated mechanically, much like cement filling in the cracks in a rock pavement. In other words, he concludes that the approach to understanding the meaning of iki ought not to be universalist/eidetic/a listing out of attributes but interpretive/hermeneutic through actual experience.

In Chapter 2, Kuki identifies the intrinsic constituent elements to be bitai (coquetry), ikiji (pluck, tension), and akirame (resignation to fate). Bitai is the material cause (Aristotelian sense; the material out of which something is made), ikiji and akirame are the formal causes (the way specific meanings are formed).

Bitai (coquetry) is displayed toward the opposite sex, a sort of romantic tension that exists between Self and Other which suggests the possibility of a romantic union. There is no tension if the union is achieved. Teasing and flirting is iki but consummating a union with the mate is not. Since this relationship involves two parties, Kuki thinks iki has, at its core, a dualistic opposition.

Ikiji (pluck, spirited tension) refers to the moral ideal held dear to the heart by the townsmen of Edo, a spirited and determined courage, a sensibility embodied in such words as inase (stylish), otokodate (manly), isami (valiant and dashing), denpō (showoff bravado). Ikiji is a basic ingredient in bushidō (way of the samurai).

Akirame (resignation to one's destiny) comes from Buddhistic detachment from reality and from a natural realization of one's destiny. In love affairs this refers to accepting a failing relationship as it is.

In other words, Kuki says that iki arises from bitai that is modulated by ikiji and akirame. These three moments constitute the intension of iki, the unchanging meaning essences

of iki. Iki is most apparent when one is flirting, but when the final objective has been reached, it disappears on its own accord.

Chapter 3 deals with the questions "What are the manifestations of iki as observed in different situations, art, and literary genres?" What are the extensions of iki? In chapter 3 Kuki discusses a number of words describing aesthetic sensibilities in Japanese, including iki, and tries to find out differences in meaning among four pairs of Japanese words.

These sometimes elusive terms are difficult to translate in English but are explained fully in detail in *The Structure of Detachment*, mentioned in the suggested reading. The pairs are jōhin—gehin, hade—jimi, iki—yabo, and amami—shibumi. The pairs jōhin—gehin and hade—jimi describe people's nature in general, while iki—yabo and amami—shibumi describe people's nature as manifested in romantic relationships between man and woman. Using other characteristics, such as whether a word has a positive/negative meaning, inactive or active, Kuki sets up a matrix of aesthetic words, which he represents in a rectangular prism. On this rectangular prism, he also finds places for such words of aesthetic sensibility not included in these four pairs, chic, raffiné, sabi, otsu, miyabi, and so forth.

"How is iki manifested in natural form?" is the question addressed in Chapter 4. Physical manifestations which embody iki is following, all in somehow or another involves underscoring the constituent elements of iki. Let us see some examples. In terms of body posture, bending as opposed to keeping the bodyline straight breaks the equilibrium, thus symbolizing iki. Wearing of thin fabric embodies iki as it suggests and also inhibits at the same time access to the flesh. Women right after bathing embody iki as it suggests a sumptuous experience just finished. A thin figure suggests spirituality.

Relaxation and tension on the eyes, mouth, and cheeks suggest attentiveness as well as relaxation again suggesting that a dualistic opposition has been broken. Other traits include a thin application of makeup, informal hairstyles, baring the shoulders and upper breast, bare feet—all these suggest and inhibit at the same time a carnal path to the flesh. Lifting the kimono skirt with the left hand (*hidarizuma*) not only facilitates walking but, more importantly in terms of iki, shows off the ankle, again in reference to the access to the flesh.

Chapter 5 deals with the same topic but Kuki considered more symbolic manifestations of iki, such as those in designs, colors, etc. Of these Kuki places an extraordinary importance to the role of vertical stripes. They, according to Kuki, is a perfect manifestation of dualism. Colors that embody iki are grays, muted browns and blues, all of which suggests erstwhile splendor and pleasurable experience. The same principle may be applied to architecture. Here iki is embodied in the duality of construction

material (wood vs. bamboo). Also indirect natural light or oil lantern light go well with the notion of dualism (and breaking of equilibrium slightly). In music—both in terms of musical pitch and rhythm, not following the theoretical value is symbolic of iki.

In this concluding Chapter 6, Kuki returns to the discussion of organicism. Although in the chapters 2 through 5, he isolated elements that make up iki, he now re-stresses that a collection of these elements does not create iki. To know the true nature of iki, indeed any word which has a meaning to an ethnic group or which is central to the being of the group, iki must be tasted, experienced firsthand. The truth about iki—iki's meaning and significance—is revealed only through direct experience of it.

In other words, tasting of iki is to reach the core of the true nature of the Japanese people. Kuki urges a Japanese to experience iki, let it live in the core of self, and know iki reveals the essence of the people of Japan. This firsthand experience is the only way to understand iki.

Although Kuki sees value in the conceptual analysis of iki, which involves teasing apart constituent elements of iki, in the end, Kuki advocates the practice of iki-living.

### **Kuki and Japanese Militarism**

Now that we have some ideas about what Kuki said about iki, let us now examine how historians and art historians have dealt with this text. If one bases one's ideas on the conviction that this aesthetic sensibility of iki constitutes the core of Japanese people, and so must be held onto in order to maintain the authentic Japanese character, it is easy to see how the military mind might be interested in making use of such ideas to prop up nationalistic beliefs.

Naturally, historians have now become curious about Kuki's role in the formation of so-called Japanese national aesthetics in the 1930s, at the time when the Japanese military government was grappling with the issue of defining and asserting the national and cultural identity to the rest of the world. Some historians claim that Kuki had a very active role in the formation of "national aesthetics," the same role, some argue, Martin Heidegger played for the National Socialism in the 1930s. However, evidence to support this position is much less convincing. One can look to several places to understand why this is the case.

First, some circumstantial evidence about Kuki's personality and social skills. Kuki as a young man was both idealistic and decadent. He was active in a Christian cause of social conscience and converted to Catholicism in 1911 at age 23 like many of his peers at the First Higher School he attended. He also lived in a period when Japan came out of two major wars—one against China (1894-1895) and another against Russia

(1904-1905) ten years later, both formidable military powers—with victory. These events as well as other two events that finally vindicated Japan from the biased treatment it was subjected in Meiji (e.g., Ansei Treaty of 1854 which gave favorable status to United States, Belgium, Great Britain, France, and Russia) were revoked to some degree in 1894 and completely in 1911. At the conclusion of the Russo-Japanese War, Japan was drunk with the sweet taste of new international recognition and soaring nationalism. The First Higher School was also known to have had a extremely effervescent political culture among its students. No doubt the nationalism and renewed pride in Japan must have affected young Kuki. Throughout higher school and university, while Kuki enjoyed all the trappings of modern Japan—cafes, jazz halls, and the like—Kuki was very much interested in decadent, opulent world in Edo—that perfect era—richly depicted by Nagai Kafū (1879-1959), whose fiction mirrors and manifests in a literacy mode many of Kuki's convictions. Kuki himself attempted to emulate this style and wrote romantic poetry later in the 1920s. He sent his drafts from Paris for publication in the prestigious Tokyo literary magazine *Myōjō*.

Besides being a budding aesthete, he was also a don Juan, and lover of good times, especially apparent during his stay in Europe. There he went to best restaurants and enjoyed the most exquisite pleasure houses on the Seine. Professionally he was more of a loner—after he took the post at Kyoto, he never took a student nor engaged in much intellectual discourse with his colleagues. He would spend his "meager professor's salary" at Kyoto on nights out on the town, frequenting the Gion geisha district in that city. Kuki was a recluse. He seems to have had no political desire or acumen. Other than his pursuit as a philosopher and teacher of a few courses, his existence appeared to be irrelevant to the national discourse on any matter of significance. He may have been *iki* in his life but inert and inconsequential to society like a dandy.

Second, Kuki's view of what philosophy ought to do did not agree with the prevailing currents in Japan. In the Higher School he studied philosophy under Amano Tei and later at the Tokyo Imperial University under the distinguished European philosopher Raphael von Koeber, then teaching in Japan. The lessons he learned was that philosophy must be about life and that, to do it, one must have a wide humanistic learning, which included knowledge of classics, foreign languages, and so forth, consonant with the general atmosphere then prevailing in late Meiji and Taishō Japan. By the time Kuki reached Europe and studied under Heinrich Rickert and Eugen Herrigel (neo-Kantians) and Edmund Husserl (1859-1938; still very influential phenomenologist), Kuki was losing interest in their way of analyzing life, which he characterized as "desiccated," this in contrast to a characterization that philosophy for Kuki should be "wet." What seemed attractive to Kuki then were the ideas of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), another young philosopher one year of his junior who had a lot

to say about being. From reading *Iki no kōzō*, it is apparent that he used certain of Heidegger's technique of exposition, involving evocative etymologies, the magic of language, and the ways in which language can open up a direct path to philosophical truth, among others.

Kuki's coupling of art and truth is distinct from Heidegger's. Whereas Kuki's idea about art and aesthetic sensibility is that it inhabits the ethnic core and the perfection of the people's historical being, Heidegger views art (i.e., poetry) as self-revealing of the true ethnic core and that art may therefore be used for the advancement of the ethnic group. In other words, for Heidegger, art seems to play a very active role in pursuit of truth or, put in yet another way, the people of that ethnic group must pursue art/truth because of an historical destiny/inevitability. This type of thinking put Heidegger on very dangerous ground and uncomfortably close to the ideals of National Socialism (the Nazis). Kuki differs in that he thinks art is not endowed with teleology; art is, in Kuki's words, "a mirror that reflects the ethnic group's past in perfection."

Kuki went to study with Heidegger because the German philosopher seemed to have something to say about life and the meaning of existence. I can guess that Kuki liked some aspects of Heidegger's idea of *Dasein* "there-being," the insight that we are thrown into this existence without our consent or input, that we are compelled to deal with this life as best we can, that we are often distracted by trivial concerns and worries and fail to live authentically, and that in order to live honestly and authentically we must acknowledge looming and ever-approaching death.

However, Heidegger's trenchant analysis was still unsatisfactory for satisfying Kuki's desire to know about life. It was Bergson (1851-1941) who had far more to do with Kuki's thinking than Heidegger, for this French philosopher was able to fill in the gaps in conceptual analysis with the "wet stuff." Active when Charles Darwin's (1809-1882) theory of evolution seemed paramount, Bergson was skeptical of science. He thought that science provides but one way of approaching the true nature of an object or phenomenon. Think about motion, he would say—if an object moves from A to B in  $t$  seconds, science allows us to determine the location of the object at any time between  $t_0$  and  $t_n$ . But this is a scientific construal of motion and does not capture the humanistic/perception side of motion. These are slices of motion and not motion itself; to make slices into a whole, one must make use of memory, for it is the glue that holds these slices together into a coherent whole. Thus scientific explanation constitutes only one way of looking at things and fails to grasp the true nature of an object.

Kuki was attracted to Bergson because he too believed that conceptual analysis—philosophies of Rickett, Herrigel, Husserl, and even Heidegger—was all useful but ultimately did not provide the "wet" stuff to fill the gaps left behind. Bergson's views



agreed with Kuki's yearning, his desire to move away from dry German ideology and get more involved with actual experience of life with all messy complications and rich rewards. Thus linking Kuki closely with Heidegger appears to be unfounded.

The third reason that Kuki was an unlikely conscript to the building of national aestheticism is the book's significance in the 1930s. In the 1930s, according to Kuki's own account, Japan's scholarly publishers were awash with books on communism, pragmatism, and so on, and only one book, *Iki no kōzō*, dealt with art and aesthetics. Kuki himself felt "surrounded by enemy." His scholarship was not in step with the zeitgeist. The book did not gain a wider readership appeared only is a small blip in view of many more "important" books published in the 1930s. His book does not seem to have done a lot to his career in the department of philosophy. The department, then run by Tanabe Hajime, was known for its preference for German ideology and, for someone like Kuki who had largely renounced these views, could thus not have had an easy time having this recognized as making significant contribution to the scholarship.

The fourth reason is Kuki's unclear relationship to National Socialism. As mentioned above, Kuki helped Karl Lowith, a Jew being persecuted in Germany and fellow student at Marburg when they both studied with Heidegger, to obtain an exit visa to Japan in 1936. Lowith was able to take a teaching position at Tōhoku University in Sendai, northern Japan, and later emigrated to New York. Kuki's helping hand might have been motivated by friendship, altruism, ethical conviction, or disagreement with the National Socialism. Whatever the case, the fact stands that Kuki had an active hand in helping Lowith out of Germany's death grip and this action speaks to the complexity of Kuki's belief in politics and political philosophy.

Fifth, some critics note that Kuki made a trip to northern China and Manchuria in 1939, contending this to be a clear sign that he was working for the military. The fact is that some 174,000 tourists, in 1939 alone, traveled to China and Manchuria to see how Japanese expansionism was working in that area. During the 1930s the Japan Travel Bureau marketed Manchuria and Northern China as tourist destinations; as a result, thousands of Japanese traveled in buses and trains to see firsthand how Japan and Japanese culture were transplanted there. We are not certain of the situation in which Kuki traveled to China—as a guest of the Japanese military or just as a regular tourist. Given this circumstance, it may not be wise to attach so much importance to Kuki's visit.

Lastly, his newspaper and magazine articles. Kuki wrote a handful of nationalistic and ultra-nationalistic articles in the late 1930s, published in newspapers and magazines. In one, entitled "Thought on the Current State of Affairs" (*Jikyoku no kansō*), in the monthly magazine *Bungei shunjū*, Kuki defended the Japan's role in the China Incident of 1937, claiming that such military action teaches the Chinese about the value of Japanese

spiritualism. In some places he sounds very shrill in his pleading but never actually incites people.

In summary, Kuki verily shows a number of nationalistic characteristics. At the same time he is conspicuous in his lack of social and political acumen that would have been needed to make him an active participant in the promotion of Japanese militarism. The case against Kuki is ambiguous; there is circumstantial evidence, but nothing damning that incriminates him as an agent of the Japan's expansionist desires. He is noteworthy in that he did not suggest any actions that might incite the Japanese military, and in that he did not think that art and aesthetics were destined to fulfill the Japanese people's historical destiny, as they did in Heidegger's philosophy.

### **Kuki Caught in the Crease**

Kuki appears to be someone who was caught in the chasm between tradition and modernity, one who is struggling to make sense of his surroundings, which were full of contradictions and unresolved tensions. To use Heidegger's reasoning, Kuki was born into them and had to deal with them best he could. He looked both in Japan's historical past and at the best of what the West had to offer to make sense of the wave of modernity rushing against tradition. Kuki himself became a creature accustomed to living in this crease—precisely because of his upbringing and his youth took place in this clash—who came to terms with living in a world of contradictions. To just give one example, he sensed, as a baptized Catholic, the Christian imperative to suppress carnal pleasure, but this canon contrasts to his lascivious life spent in the pleasure quarters of Paris during his stay there in the late 1920s. His father too was a man of enormous contradictions, who also lived in the era of cultural clash. But even while Kuki lived in the world of contradictions, his mind's eye was traveling into the Japan's past, to the world of Edo, now free from its specific time and place, where the pure, reified aesthetic sensibility of *iki* thrived. However fantastic and aggrandized that aesthetic vision might have been, it provided Kuki the reason to live on and to be connected to his cultural root. *Iki* for Kuki was like a rudder in the turbulent sea of influences, foreign and domestic, which made this very modern, traditional man feel steady and on course.

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## Suggested Reading

Light, Stephen. *Shūzō Kuki and Jean-Paul Sartre: Influence and Counter-influence in the Early History of Existential Philosophy*. Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987. Includes translations of lectures given by Kuki in France and notes taken during tutorial sessions in French with J-P Sartre.

Marra, Michael E. *Kuki Shūzō: A Philosopher's Poetry and Poetics*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004. An excellent sampling of Kuki's poetry and essays in English translation.

Nara, Hiroshi. *The Structure of Detachment*. Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004. Introduction is useful for a bird's eye view of the ideas presented in this essay.

Pincus, Leslie. *Authenticating Culture in Imperial Japan: Kuki Shūzō and the Rise of National Aesthetics*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1996.