Introduction

The sensibility of *iki*, for which I adopt the gloss “urbane, plucky stylishness” for this introduction, is somewhat similar to that of dandyism in the West. But while both sensibilities maintained tacit codes of dress and behavior, and flourished around the same time, the dandyism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was a trademark of indolent and socially irresponsible men who put on not only clothing that made a statement but an air of superiority, and *iki* shared little of this type of decadence. In contrast to dandies, who were often sexually inert men, the men and women who cultivated *iki* sensibility in its original form pursued romantic liaisons with the opposite sex. Unlike dandyism, which was not practiced widely in a particular locale or by a certain class of people, *iki* constituted one among the aggregate characteristics that made the inhabitants of Edo, today’s Tokyo, true Edokko (Edo-ites). Not everyone could become an Edokko. Besides being born in the city—preferably reared in the city center—other essential traits were the ability to resign oneself quickly to inescapable destiny, an embodiment of *iki*, and a type of spiritual tension called *hari*. Some unflattering characteristics were essential as well, such as bravado, boastfulness, and spendthrift habits that could squander a fortune overnight. These traits, Edokko katagi, were proudly and mockingly put into use to draw a contrast between Edokko and those lacking this “sophistication”—those not from the city, such as merchants from the Kyoto-Osaka area, house servants, and samurai from outlying provinces. The *iki* sensibility, first cited in literature in the Meisawa era (1764–1772), was sharpened in the pleasure quarters of Fukagawa, in a southeastern part of Edo. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Fukagawa was one of the major not-officially-sanctioned brothel areas of the city that had become a trendy place for rich merchants and townsmen to spend an evening, while its competitor Yoshiwara had declined due in part to the Kansei Reform of 1787, which had instituted austerities. Fukagawa courtesans differed from
their Yoshiwara counterparts in that they prided themselves on being more masculine in disposition, even affecting male attire to attend their entertainment engagements. Presenting themselves as strictly geisha, women of Fukagawa took customers on the side only when they felt inclined to do so, while Yoshiwara women never pretended to be other than ladies of the night. Fukagawa courtesans were thus more selective about their bedmates, and the ideal customer displayed wit, pluck, and, most of all, iki.

A man or woman in pursuit of iki would employ a certain cool, elegant, and flirtatious demeanor, backed by pluck, to win over the object of desire. Like a good Edokko, though, a successful pursuer was able to recognize a relationship destined to fail, and thus retreat quickly. This spiritual tenet became sublimated in the psyche of the common people of Edo, and by the beginning of the eighteenth century, the townspeople there identified themselves very closely with iki and strove to cultivate and embody this spirit. Iki became such a rarefied, creedlike code of behavior that it was said to be detectable in every facet of life, including patterns of speech, choices in food, furniture, and other household items, not to mention courting behavior and clothing colors and patterns.

Iki is arguably the phenomenon of a specific time and place in Edo, but its roots derive from the Kyoto-Osaka sensibility of sui, which in fact describes very similar, perhaps identical, sensibilities in Kyoto-Osaka from the late eighteenth century onward. The origins of iki and sui can be found in such traditional Japanese aesthetic sensibilities as miyabi (elegance), wabi (rustic simplicity), sabi (elegant simplicity), and yūgen (mystery; profundity), which were primarily found in the center of high culture, then the Kyoto-Osaka area. The exact combinations of sensibilities contributing to the various aspects of iki and sui are difficult to determine, but it is fairly certain that as the center of popular culture moved from the Kyoto-Osaka area to Edo, the once high-class aesthetic sensibilities gave birth to the sensibility of iki. We can still find in iki the simplicity, lightness, suggestiveness, sincerity, transience, and spontaneity, that comprise the basic components of traditional Japanese aesthetics. This discussion of iki through the vision of a philosopher not only reveals much on the lifestyle of late Edo’s townspeople but facilitates further understanding of Japanese aesthetics, long an integral part of the culture of Japan. In fact, the predominance of aesthetics in the conceptualization of Japanese culture may be unmatched elsewhere.

In this context, then, it is natural for modern Japanese writers to reflect upon this tradition and to ponder how Japanese aesthetics might be treated in a philosophical idiom comprehensible in the West, a quest that began in
earnest in the Meiji period (1868–1912). During this time, Japanese intellectuals learned of Western concepts of aesthetics and the arts, both through studies at Japanese universities and through research in Europe. From later Meiji until the late 1940s, a number of these important thinkers sought to explain centuries-old literary, aesthetic, and artistic concepts in Japan, to place them in an international framework.

In premodern Japanese culture, discussions concerning aesthetic principles were limited to those among the artists themselves, sometimes giving rise to secret treatises. More frequently, trade secrets were tacitly passed down through a succession of master-apprentice relationships. In the modern period, however, the Japanese aesthetics nexus came to be identified as a privileged means of defining the significance of Japanese society and culture for international and domestic audiences. The wider public, increasingly familiar with Western intellectual systems, also sought explanations concerning Japanese aesthetics. Kuki’s attempt to recast traditional understanding within the context of Western aesthetic theory was to answer this need for explanations, and to assert afresh the centrality of Japanese aesthetic sensibilities.

Kuki Shūzō (1888–1941) was a philosopher of considerable prominence in Japan during the first half of the twentieth century. He was the fourth son of Kuki Ryūichi, a successful politician with special influence on government policies dealing with the arts. Kuki’s education and training were on a par with any young man of financial means and intellectual promise—he was educated at the First Higher School and at the Tokyo Imperial University, graduating from the latter in 1912 with a degree in philosophy. Not much is known about what kept Kuki busy for the next several years, but in 1921, at the age of thirty-three, he embarked for Europe, accompanied by his wife, Nui, intent on studying Western philosophy in situ. Kuki traveled around in Europe for the next seven years, crisscrossing Switzerland, France, and Germany, staying in one city for a few months, and another city for a year, just long enough to nibble at the academic offerings there. These offerings included private readings from Rickert and Herrigel, talks by his fellow countrymen, studies with Husserl, lectures by and conferences with Heidegger, and visits to Bergson in Paris. During this time, Kuki wrote some of his most important philosophical thought, completing, for example, a draft of The Structure of Iki, in Paris, in December of 1926. He also gave public lectures, and in 1928 he spoke on the oriental notion of time and the expression of infinity in Japanese art.

While traveling, he divided his time between work and pleasure. He spent
weeks collecting plant specimens in the Swiss Alps to satisfy his boyhood interest in botany. Paris particularly seemed to have agreed with Kuki. When he was not dining at the most exquisite restaurants and visiting houses of pleasure in the French capital, he was meticulously recording his private ruminations through poetry. One might say that he lived his philosophy and then recorded it on paper. Nonetheless, Kuki’s scholarly cultivation impressed Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945), a prominent philosopher and department chair at Kyoto Imperial University until 1928. Just a few months before leaving his position as department chair, Nishida wrote a letter to his successor, Tanabe Hajime, in December 1928, recommending Kuki for a position in the university’s philosophy department.

Kuki returned to Japan in 1929 via the United States. He then joined the department of philosophy at Kyoto and began teaching courses on French philosophy, Husserl, Heidegger, the problem of contingency, and the history of Western philosophy, among others. Kuki published The Structure of Iki in the year after he returned to Japan, first as a series of two articles in the philosophy journal Shisō (Thought), and then as a book, from the publisher Iwanami shoten. In this work, Kuki analyzed iki using new theoretical frameworks in the Continental tradition. He concluded that iki could be understood only through “lived experience.” In other words, iki is not the sum of conceptual analyses of objective expression; its full signification cannot be determined by identification of generic concepts that pervade its manifestations. Iki should be defined, Kuki argued, in terms of “a mode of being” as localized in Japanese ethnicity. In this way, Kuki brought to the fore this quintessentially Japanese sensibility, which was in danger of being forgotten during the wave of modernizing in interwar Japan, and gave it an elegant analysis, situating it in a system of other Japanese aesthetic sensibilities.

There is a good deal of scholarly interest in Kuki’s role in the formation of so-called Japanese national aesthetics in the 1930s, when the military Japanese government was grappling with defining and asserting Japan’s identity to the rest of the world. Thus, the ideas proposed in Kuki’s 1930 publication have been the subject of considerable discourse among historians and art historians, especially since the 1970s in Japan and more recently in the United States. Two critical books on Kuki have been written in English—Stephen Light’s Shūzō Kuki and Jean-Pierre Sartre (Southern Illinois University Press, 1987) and Leslie Pincus’ book Authenticating Culture in Imperial Japan: Kuki Shūzō and the Rise of National Aesthetics (University of California Press, 1996). The study of an aesthetic vision achieved by a Japanese thinker such as Kuki should shed light on the ways in which modern Japanese have defined
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their own culture. Through the translation comprising part 1 of this text, we hear a Japanese thinker speaking on aesthetics, a subject dear to the Japanese heart, not through paraphrase and summary, but in his own voice. We learn how he tackled the recondite sensibility of *iki* using the prevailing Western philosophical methodology. We see where the philosophical fit between methodology and phenomenon was perfect and where judicious trimming was needed. And through this analysis of *iki*, we feel the author’s yearning to make this sensibility relevant to modern life.

Part 2 of this book presents in its three essays three distinct but clearly interlaced perspectives. The authors arrive at a similar intellectual locus about Kuki, which is that a more productive—and arguably more balanced—strategy for understanding Kuki’s writing in his *Structure of Iki* is not wedded to the view from Heidegger’s philosophical window.

In the first essay, Hiroshi Nara presents a glimpse of Kuki as a man who expended considerable energy formulating scrupulous judgments on where to use which facts to argue for his own brand of philosophical analysis of *iki* and who was quite methodical in underscoring the fundamental thesis of his book. What emerges is that Kuki was a less than careful scholar, at least in writing this book. Nara argues that when judged in the context of Kuki’s other writings, this shaky scholarly footing is uncharacteristic of Kuki and that adding in the 1930s sociopolitical and personal contexts, we gain a new perspective on the political roles of Kuki and his writing during the interwar years.

J. Thomas Rimer’s essay compels us to reexamine the inclination to analyze Kuki’s *Structure of Iki* as a work in philosophical aesthetics. Rimer sees this work in the celebrated literary tradition of casual writings (zuihitsu), much like the works of Kamo no Chōmei or Yoshida Kenkō. Though the tone is muted and clearly more philosophical, Kuki’s easygoing writing style on a matter so abstruse supports Rimer’s viewpoint well. Rimer points out, too, that Kuki’s French connection—both in style of presentation and outlook—is undeniable. To be sure, Kuki begins with a quote from Biran and cites both Stendhal and Baudelaire to support some of his pivotal arguments. If Kuki’s French connection is shown to be more than merely tangential than his connection to the beleaguered German philosopher, we have good reason to orient future Kuki scholarship in this direction.

Jon Mark Mikkelsen questions the validity of the link between Kuki and Heidegger, arguing that although Heidegger’s view of art is consistent both historically and conceptually with his political involvement with the Nazis, the same cannot be said about Kuki. Mikkelsen asks if Kuki’s conceptualiza-
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tion of art and political conviction is manifest in his Structure of Iki. First comparing the role of the sensibility of iki in Kuki’s work with that of Hölderlin’s poetry in Heidegger’s, Mikkelsen then attempts to find in Kuki’s writing any suggestion that Kuki saw history as destined to achieve a political goal. Mikkelsen uses this analysis to remark on the role that Kuki might have played in the formation of the cultural landscape of Japan in the 1930s.

Evidence presented in these essays points to the validity of the thought that Kuki was unlikely to have been a willing and active conscript in serving the ideology that fueled Japan’s imperialism. At least, the essays show that an incontrovertible basis to inculpate Kuki is lacking. A more rewarding vantage point for interpreting Kuki’s Structure of Iki may be to consider this Japanese philosopher a man seeking to make organic connections between the world of ideas and the pleasurable and sometimes unsavory complications of life. During the 1920s and 1930s, a time of looming uncertainties when tradition was relinquishing its role to modernization, Kuki must have felt an urgent desire to return spiritually to the unflagging bedrock of history and tradition. In this search, Kuki found the sensibility of iki to be a fitting means to sound the clarion message that tradition has a place in modernity; that is, one cannot move forward into modernity without keeping one’s sight squarely on tradition.

Notes

1. Kuki’s fascination with Alain was apparently more than speculative: In 1928, on his way back to Japan, Kuki stopped over in Washington, D.C., to meet French-poet-turned-diplomat Paul Claudel (1868–1955), a known admirer of Baudelaire, in order to discuss the aesthetic philosophy of Alain.