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Institute for
International Policy Studies

▪ Tokyo ▪

IIPS International Conference

“Reidentifying Japan for the 21st Century”

Tokyo, October 27-28, 2004

“Japanese Culture: Unraveling the Secrets of *Shi* and *Hai*”

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Reidentifying Japan for the 21st Century

Japanese Culture: Unraveling the Secrets of *Shi* and *Hai*

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Though Japan is a member of the *kanji* culture bloc—countries that use Chinese characters—it uses them in a way unique to Japan. For instance, the character 士 (*shi*) means “writer,” but in Japan it can also mean “samurai.” Because the character looks a little like the number 11 when written using characters, (十一月十一日), November 11 is called “Samurai Day.”

The character 仕 (*shi*, to serve or work) is widely used in words to represent the sound “shi,” but without using the characters meaning, such as in the phrases *shigataganai* and *shiyoganai* (both meaning roughly “nothing can be done about it”). The meaning of *shi* is different in Chinese and Korean. *Shi* expresses the commerce and manufacturing aspects of Japanese culture, starting with its use in *shiho* (method) through to *shiage* (to finish), and expressing a methodical mind.

Before the influences of Western culture in modern times, a special Japanese methodology or know-how was developing in Japan. Before the modernization of Japan, a man named Ninomiya Sontoku successfully established hundreds of villages with a *shiyō* (method) that combined hard work, financial management, and humbleness into a single mindset. Just as the American-English word “know-how” created a uniquely American pragmatism on the continent, the Japanese words *shiyō* (method) and *shikata* (way) were the master keys to creating the uniquely Japanese pragmatism and technologism.

Haikai (俳諧) is a particular Japanese literary style that includes haiku, but the character *hai* and its meaning come from the *kanji* culture. As can be seen in the characters of the word 俳優 (*haiyu*, actor), the concept for *hai* contrasts with *yu* and means “not serious,” “common,” or “comical.” *Yu* means “serious” or “elegant” and serves as an antonym to *hai*. Thus, *haiyu* refers to a person who performs comedies and tragedies on stage. The *haikai* spirit was born of an anti-establishment that split off from the primary, surface culture. The unique characteristics of Japanese culture can be seen more in the dualism of *hai* and *yu* than in the dualism of the chrysanthemum and the sword.

Observing Japanese culture (the Japan brand and other national symbols) from the standpoint of *shi* and *hai*, we can see a new Japan emerging. The engine driving the development of Japanese society is ritualized patterns based on 士 and 仕 (both *shi*)

and the resulting deviance of 俳 (*hai*) as seen in comic tanka. If Japan loses that tension and balance created between the two, Japan will lose its drive. There is the serious side of Japan, and then there is the side that parodies the classic Seven Sages with the Seven Beauties.

It is a mistake to only use the tea-ceremony type serious culture as Japan's image. There is also the wild side of Japanese culture.

This deviant element in the buttoned-down culture is Japan's secret ingredient for creating the likes of anime and Pokemon.