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

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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 shiyo (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 shiyo (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.