Kuki Shûzô (1888-1941) is best known for his 1930 “Iki” no Kôzô, or The Structure of “Iki.” This work is, after the writings of Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) and his championing of mono no aware (the “capacity to be moved deeply by things”),¹ a foundational text in Japanese key-word essentialism, which is in turn a major strategy of Japanese exceptionalism (nihonjin ron). Kuki claimed that the true essence of Japanese ethnicity was to be found in the concept of “iki,” or “bordello chic,” a kind of fashion and style that developed in the unlicensed prostitution district of Fukagawa in the city of Edo (modern-day Tokyo) in the Bunka and Bunsei eras, that is, 1804-1829.

Kuki was the son of Baron Kuki Ryûichi (1850-1931), the Japanese Minister in the United States (chûbei kôshi) in the 1880s, and the first director of the Imperial Museum. He was also the bureaucrat responsible for, among other things, overseeing the Japanese pavilion at the 1900 Exposition universelle de Paris, for which the first modern history of Japanese art was produced. Shûzô himself identified Okakura Tenshin (1862-1913, best-known for The Book of Tea) as his “spiritual father” and indeed there have long been suggestions that Okakura was his biological father as well. In any event, Kuki Shûzô’s presentation of the concept of iki can be seen as continuing in the course set by Okakura in the latter’s use of Hegelian philosophy to construct the concept of an Asian world-spirit (Geist) in contrast to that of the West, one that was seen to have achieved its fullest manifestation in Japan.

In 1921 Kuki left for Europe and spent the next eight years studying philosophy in Germany and France. In France he met Henri Bergson and was tutored by Jean-Paul Sartre. In Germany, he studied the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and the

hermeneutical philosophy of Martin Heidegger. Kuki returned to Japan in 1929 and took up a position in the philosophy department of Kyoto University.

Kuki completed a first draft of The Structure of ‘Iki’ in December 1926, while at the Sorbonne. The concept of iki clearly owes something to Baudelaire and bears some resemblance to the concept of the dandy, a resemblance that Kuki goes to some pains to deny. In the early drafts, Kuki avails himself of Edo-period sentimental fiction, or ninjōbon; kabuki theater; and Edo fūzoku-shi, or histories of the customs and mores of the Edo period which were produced largely in the 1920s, pulling out passages from these for examples of iki, as if gathering Arnoldian touchstones, with all quotations referenced to his sources. It is only in the later version that these references are largely removed, and these touchstones are presented as too well-known to require documenting. This change represents a fundamental re-orientation, from seeing research on iki as a kind of reconstruction of a dead language, to the insistence on every Japanese as a “native speaker” of its ethnic aesthetics.

When he was not engaged in philosophical study, Kuki seems to have spent his time being entertained by the high-class courtisanes of Paris—Michael Marra provides an annotated list: Yvonne, Denise, Rina, Marianne, Louise, Henriette, Jeannine, Renée, Yvette. He also wrote poems about his experiences—comprising what Leslie Pincus has called an “eroticized Guide bleu”—which were published in such venues as Myōjō, the house-organ of the Japanese Romantic movement:

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4 Such a stance is not unique to Kuki, as can be seen in the following by the historian of Edo-period culture, Nishiyama Matsunosuke: “Iki seems to be a specifically Japanese form of aesthetic consciousness. Pinpointing where or how a person embodies the quality of iki may be difficult, but its presence is felt by every Japanese. The aesthetic of iki is, in this sense, the common property of the Japanese people.” Edo Culture: Daily Life and Diversions in Urban Japan, 1600-1868, trans. Gerald Groemer (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1997), p. 53.

5 Marra, Kuki Shūzō, p. 29.