Wa 和
Or, Japan and harmony

Japan's greatest treasure is its people, wrote French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who greatly loved the land of the Rising Sun throughout his lifetime, and who, by means of this statement, seems to have identified the fulcrum of the spirit of *wa* 和 and the kanji that represents it.

Contrary to what foreigners (and many Japanese) may think, *wa* is neither *kimono* nor is it *sushi*; it isn't the architecture of traditional dwellings, nor the exuberance of *anime* and *manga*. It's not one of the sanctuaries immersed in the luxuriance of nature honored as sacred; Japan's eight million gods aren't *wa* either, nor are the sinuously refined movements of Kanasawa's or Pontochō's *geisha*. *Wa* isn't even *matcha*, the powdery green tea, nor is it the uproar of the young, school uniform-clad girls pouring into the trendy Takeshita-dōri in the Harajuku district of Tokyo. Neither is *wa* the Spring ceremony performed for the cult of the ancestors, nor the *tatami*-lined floor, or the floral compositions of *ikebana.* It isn't the reservedness and moderation of the people, nor the delicate tinkling of a bell in the faint summer breeze.

So what, then, is truly Japanese? Where, truly, is Japan? How exactly is harmony, a cultural priority that governs word and deed of the Japanese people, ultimately achieved? What renders the society of the Rising Sun peaceful and orderly? What is hiding behind the ideogram *wa* 和?

What does wa mean?

Wa is a word both beautiful and mysterious. When a word seems obscure, and shedding light on its meaning is nevertheless desirable, the best method for revealing its meaning (without, however, running the risk of simplifying it) is without a doubt looking up the word in the dictionary of the language to which it belongs.

A full range of meanings fans out under the word *wa* in the monolingual dictionary Kōjien: Japan, all things Japanese (日本のこと); Japanese in style, made in Japan (日本風、日本製などの意味); all that is quiet, tranquil, mild, pleasant, cordial, and serene (穏やか、なごやかなこと); getting along with each other, existing in perfect harmony (仲よくすること); what mixes and blends together well, the harmonious agreement of all things, adapting oneself, conforming oneself to something; (合わせること); the culmination, the totality of all things (二つ以上の数字 を合わせた値).

By slowly unfolding the various panels of the fan, we thus discover that *wa* 和 is kanji for "harmony" while at the same time illustrating everything that is strictly connected to the culture of the Rising Sun: It evokes all that is mild, serene, and moderate, tranquility of tone, the peaceful and quiet conjunction of the elements, calmness and courteousness in people and things. It is inclusive of words that mean "peace" (*heiwa* 平和 and *wahei* 和平) and of a key term such as *chōwa* 調和, "harmony and agreement" which, as a verb, (*chōwa suru* 調和する),

means precisely the effort of blending things without applying pressure. From a behavioral point of view, attitudes that are encouraged and promoted in Japan designate a precise path: unpleasantness must be left behind, yelling avoided, while privileging, instead, an approach that makes the example of others its guiding line. It isn't useful, either, to yield to the temptation of venting, under the illusion that in doing so, you will be freed of your anger or other negative emotions. It is especially ill advised to assume that you can take on everything *at all costs*, because the cost is always there and it is always very high. The consolation of venting, to summarize, never really consoles. It dampens, instead, certain purulent abscesses of the spirit, but it doesn't subdue them; it seems to allow them to transmigrate to another place, where they await being pulled out yet again. The kanji *wa* 和 precedes an extremely wide range of words, signifying them as "culturally Japanese," of "Japanese production," of "Japanese tradition," or of "Japanese style," like *washi* 和紙"Japanese paper" or *washoku* 和食 which is "traditional Japanese cooking," or yet again *wafuku* 和服 the "Japanese clothing," *washiki* 和式 "Japanese style" or *wayaku* 和訳 as well, which signifies translation into the Japanese language.

The ancient name for Japan was *Yamato* 大和, which today, broken down into its ideograms means "great *wa*," or "Great Harmony." However, it seems that at one time the country referred to itself internally as "passage between the mountains" because of the territory's high density of mountains and because the Japanese have always identified themselves precisely with that passage of rare beauty between the mountains, those snowy heights, vegetation-covered ridges and iridescent green-shimmering-to-blue slopes, dappled with blooming cherry trees.

Having evolved as an agricultural society, since antiquity, Japanese culture has tended to privilege group harmony and collaboration targeting common goals, rather than personal interest.

This happens largely because *wa* primarily means a "mixture," one that doesn't signify the dissolving of an element into one or many other elements, but rather, the peaceful and respectful cohabitation of all of its parts, the euphonious and balanced sharing of the same space. Again, Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote that, "In the West, lifestyles and modes of production appear in succession. In Japan, they may be said to coexist." The implications of this concept are many, like the fact that, for example, believing in a single truth is unnecessary, that everything should be brought into harmony (and thus no one should stand out ostentatiously), that it is possible to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable, as is also suggested by the religious syncretism that allows Shintoism and Buddhism to coexist and even collaborate in the same territory (***kami***). Or *wa* even translates into avoiding conflict at all costs, which requires character traits like patience (***nintai***), preemptively saying sorry when you know that you're not at fault (***gomennasai***), ignoring negativity (***mushi suru***), constantly considering the feelings of others (***omoiyari***), and being ready to sacrifice yourself (***gaman***).

Every behavior is incorporated into a network of gestures and words, deeply rooted correspondences that form the framework of Japanese thought. It is impossible to eliminate one aspect without dismantling the entire structure.

The 72 seasons of Japan

The world has four seasons. Like four quarters of an apple they split the year and, depending on the region, they are sometimes reduced to just two.

Spring begins on February 4th, Summer is born on May 5th, Autumn on August 7th, and Winter on November 7th.

The ancient Japanese calendar (*kyūreki* 旧暦)says something else however, that is, that the four seasons are divided into 24 periods, which in turn, divide once again in three parts, until they create 72 different periods. It essentially maintains that every five days a new "season" follows.

Despite the amount of time that has passed since the creation of this ancient calendar, it seems true to life. In fact, you just need to leave your house, and, as told by the "season" that lasts from May 10th to the 14th (whose name is *mimizu izuru* 蚯蚓出ずる "the earthworms break out from the earth"), there are many worms on the ground; frenetic and beautiful images of a very famous *matsuri* or festival held on every third Friday in May in Asakusa gush forth on TV. The seasons have names full of poetry: you can find fireflies inside the names—like in the season that goes from June 10th to the 15th—, the heat of the wind (July 7–11), the twittering of the *yellow wagtail* (September 12–16), the *twilight cicada* (August 12–16), the peach blossoms (March 10–14).

The idea of seasons that change every five days is a vital production of new beginnings.

The alarm clock goes off, the eyes open wide to a brand-new season. A season ends that washes away the blunders of the previous one. It carries away feelings of negativity and offers the hope that from tomorrow on things will be different.

In this old way of experiencing time, one appreciates the beauty of its variations, something that today is particularly useful, seeing that time is often simply reduced to an atmospheric and utilitarian condition (What should I put on? Do I need to bring an umbrella? Is it cold? Can we go to the beach this weekend?).

Knowing about another place in the world that is so different provides an advantage: it gives us resources to cope with the banal, the rough edges of certain days plagued with inertia, fear—which resides inside each of us in different ways—and the inability to see a new beginning clearly. Well, instead there are 72 seasons, and therefore 72 new beginnings. And in each one of those seasons the wonders of the world are concealed, in each one a small potential, precious, and intimate joy is hidden: "I relied on the beauty of the world / and I held the fragrance of the seasons in my hands," noted the writer Annie Ernaux in *The Years*.

If not all the names belonging to each of the 72 chapters of this book are familiar, it is true that the 24 macro-sections are instead also marked on the solar calendars in use since 1873, and appear on all of the calendars being sold today.

It is an invitation to appreciate time, to explore the natural landscapes closest to us, either during a walk in a city park near our homes or in a field at the gates of the small village where we vacation. It is the inspiration to rediscover the ancient calendar of one's culture, to rely on the beauty of the world. Needless to say, the 72 entries found in this book come from here.

1. 人 *hito*
or, on supporting each other

Hito 人 in Japanese means "person."

Two simple strokes for one of the most important kanji of the Japanese language. A single body formed by a line that sweeps from right to left, and top to bottom, and another that takes off from the slender upright body and descends in the opposite direction, lending it a sense of movement. It is a character that is faithful to what it represents, a dynamic kanji that seems to walk.

Yet, they are also two lines that in print—which always differs from handwritten cursive—appear to join together at the top, adhering to each other perfectly.

A personal interpretation, one of the countless number of them that exist, explains that the character *hito* derives from the fact that people must support each other to stay on their feet.

This is what Professor Kinpachi said in one of the most famous television series (*terebi dorama*) in Japan, *San-nen B-gumi Kinpachi-sensei* ３年B組金八先生 "The Third B of Professor Kinpachi." Attentive to the emotional growth of his pupils rather than their academic performance, a charismatic figure who forged a place in the collective imagination of an entire generation of viewers, the sensei regularly explained to the class the importance of helping each other, showing solidarity, being there for others, and others being there for you.

This reciprocal support, then, forms the basis of every relationship and is the foundation of a society that is gradually building itself around that first essential core of mutual aid. Implicitly, people must also be aware that they are benefitting from the help of others and that they are therefore obliged to be of service in return.

Aside from specific studies documenting the contexts in which kanji are used and speculating about their origins, it is not uncommon for kanji to be untethered from their constituent strokes and made to blossom anew by everyday people to better express their feelings and circumstances, and other aspects of daily life. These are seeds that preserve the original meaning of Chinese and Japanese cultures of bygone days and which can still sprout, albeit differently, depending on the soil in which they are sown.

This is what happens to *oya* 親, the "parent," which after its fashion can provide a true lesson on parenting, one often imparted by obstetricians and educators in the land of the Rising Sun.

At the top-left corner of the character *oya*, we find *tatsu* 立つ, a verb that means "to stay on one's feet, to rise to one's feet." Below is *ki* 木 the "tree," and to the right stands *miru* 見る, that is, "to see, to watch." By unpacking its components, this is how the phrase is reconstructed:

Oya no yakuwari wa, ki no ue ni tatte miru koto da 親の 役割は、木の上に立って見ることだ,which means, "the duty of *oya*, the parent, is to climb the tree and stand watch from a distance."

The explanation of what it means to be a parent is therefore already in the word itself: it is the person who must intervene only when it is truly necessary. Lest one take the place of one's child, and to keep from hindering the course of events, the *oya*, or parent, must above all observe from a distance and supervise discreetly. In this way, the crying of a child is endured, suffering is tolerated, and, despite the difficulty of accepting a role on the sidelines, unable to prevent them from making certain mistakes, there is instead the consolation of knowing how great is the danger of denying the child the learning experience of committing that error, thus making the child insecure, and forcing him or her, through misguided behavior, into a state of dependence.

The kanji *oya* conceals within itself the importance of teaching children to do thing on their own, helping them gradually to learn to fend for themselves. On the other hand, one stresses the importance of reassuring them that their parents will never stop "watching from a distance": when and if they ever need them, when they are at fault or in difficulty, fathers and mothers will quickly descend from the tree and, without hesitation, hasten to their aid.

6. 忙しい isogashii
or, on the death of the heart

忙 is made up of six strokes, two pairs of three lines each. And that's how, when dissecting the strokes, the original meaning emerges in all of its plenitude. Within this character, in fact, two concepts join hands: there is *kokoro* 心 (***kokoro***) the heart on the left whose disappearance, its death, immediately follows on the right, that is 亡 or *nakusu* 亡くす.

Thus, in this elegant correspondence, *kokoro wo nakusu* 心を亡くす literally, "kill off the heart" is equal to *isogashii* 忙しい, to "being busy."

It is in the unraveling of this poetic kanji, in explaining it, that the Japanese recommend rest, revealing how already, within the language itself, precisely at its core, there is also a warning: if you are too busy—the strokes seem to say—so busy that you overwhelm the capaciousness of your own heart, you lose it, the soul somehow expands until it becomes wafer-thin, extremely fragile, and worn to the point of disappearing. In the excess of work or study, in the

immoderate amount of time spent on anything but self-care, in the desire to overload the time one has left with things to do, the risk of losing oneself is present. We must not forget what counts most, because in the vortex of *everything* we lose the essence of the *single* things.

Japanese culture inherently contains both the poison and the antidote: on the one hand *karōshi* 過労死, "death by overwork," the constant push to overachieve and to honor commitments and deadlines at all costs, and on the other the wisdom, deeply rooted in the language, which reminds us that forgetting to make time for rest, pushing yourself to the limit, is tantamount to the "death of the heart."

Finding the balance between doing and stopping—between taking things on and taking the time just to be—seems the key to understanding the present time, which toggles between the two extremes, sometimes fearfully so.

Sometimes people trace this word on their palms, during a private conversation, for instance, if they perceive exhaustion on the face of a friend talking about his job, or sense the adrenaline that comes before the meltdown as a daughter describes a list of upcoming university exams.

It happens all the time in Tokyo, where people toe the line, where they run and plunge from one end (of the city) to the other as if on the back of a whale, streaming out from one station to the next like the sea exploding from its blowhole.

Tokyo is an example of *isogashii*: it is hyperactive, always striving to live up to the dreams of those who live in it, and of the many who work too much and continue, undeterred, without rest, trying to complete research projects, construct brilliant careers, and build perfect families.

No matter the life we've chosen, no matter where we live, it's up to us what we do. And no matter what, we ought to be mindful of how we live, avoid overdoing it, and keep from being dragged down into the maelstrom of work, at the risk of losing our own hearts.

14. いただきます *Itadakimasu*
or, on gratefulness

Itadakimasu is the polite form of the verb *itadaku* 頂く which, among the various meanings it conveys, expresses "to receive." We utter this word, for instance, when someone gives us a gift and we accept it with mild-mannered acknowledgements. By uttering the word *itadakimasu*, the exchange is in a sense brought to a close: we take the gift into our hands, we make half a bow, and with this word, we show our personal gratitude.

In the meaning we have chosen here, instead, *itadakimasu* could be rendered as the equivalent of the French "bon appétit" and yet, that would be wrong. It would be necessary to explain that there is no exact translation, and instead emphasize the slight, yet substantial, differences, which link the word's meaning more to the act of receiving than to the notion of "bon appétit," which is a way of wishing others a pleasant meal in enjoyable company.

Itadakimasu いただきます is, in fact, the formula we recite before eating a meal, but it's also an implicit acknowledgement of all that was done to prepare the meal now on our plate or *bento* box, be it expensive and refined or the simplest of fare.

This expression reminds us that a lengthy series of actions carried out by a considerable number of people leads up to the act of eating. *Itadakimasu* basically suggests a simple truth, namely, that humility and gratitude are required when receiving food and that it is a mistake to take any meal for granted.

In Japan you can see people join their hands and bow their heads, both before splendid dishes and trays of fast food or slices of cake in a coffee shop. The gesture is particularly commmon among children when they prepare to eat under the watchful eye of their mothers or teachers, or else among young people on university campuses as they remove the covers of their *bento* boxes, unsheathing their chopsticks, ready to eat; or yet again, among women and men, young and old, as they whisper *itadakimasu* over a most simple dish of *onigiri* in humble *ramen* or *ochaduke* restaurants.

The important nuance of meaning inherent in *itadakimasu* ensures that in Japanese the word is used only by those who are about to eat, and moreover that it is never addressed to third parties, but only to oneself; that it is above all an acknowledgement toward someone who is present and being thanked (the person hosting us, a relative); or toward nameless strangers. Only when uttered in the presence of those who played no role in food preparation, offering, or arrangement, does *itadakimasu* acquire the added function of conferring permission to begin eating.

Nonetheless, it is important to emphasize that receiving coincides with thanking, and that someone need not have helped you for you to utter it. It is a word of feeling, rather than of purposeful speech.

Itadakimasu, then, is an expression that makes everything better, a piece of phraseology that might be nice to adopt in and adapt to every language.

We feel less alone just by saying the word, more part of a world of people who needn't know each other to cooperate, people who understand that everything requires effort and has a personal story all its own. The word reiterates that nothing should be taken for granted when it comes to nourishment and food.

You need only whisper it once to learn how to make saying it a virtuous habit. It is enough to join your hands together, bow your head ever so slightly, and say *itadakimasu* before eating.

Or perhaps you can skip all of these actions. It may suffice, really, to stop and think for a long moment about what it *really* means to receive and to eat.

Itadakimasu.

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15. 愛 *ai*
Or, of whispering love

Ai 愛 is the word for "love" in Japanese. Professor Shirakawa, the scholar who dedicated his life to the linguistic exploration of Chinese characters, read in

the kanji "love" the act of a person taking their leave whose heart is somehow held back by the shoulders. It is as if a sentiment has been left behind, or perhaps we should say, one's own heart (***kokoro*** 心), which, not surprisingly, appears at the center of *ai*. It is the heart sitting a little further ahead in its own wake that restrains the step of someone preparing to leave.

In bygone times 愛 was read as *kanashi*, or "sad," "melancholic": an assonance that justifies what happens in the inner workings of this ideogram, because leaving one's heart behind is what happens to anyone who is involved in love; they are present to themselves and yet they feel incomplete, as if pulled back by something imperceptible, an emotional pretext that denies them the freedom to wander away from the place where the beloved resides.

The language of love in Japanese is much more discreet than it is in the West. Love is thought to be a sentiment not communicated through words, or not only through words, but rather a sentiment conveyed primarily through deeds. Sweetness, attention, and respect do not necessarily have to be verbalized; instead, it is the relationship, the years spent together, the sharing of time, especially, more than place—and what is left unsaid, more than what is said—that determines love's solidity and influences its quality.

It seems that the Japanese harbor a sort of instinctive suspicion toward outward displays of emotion. The essence—they seem to say—goes beyond what the exterior promises.

To say "I love you" the Japanese prefer an expression that we might translate as "I like you" or *suki* 好き—which in any case is read as "ski," with the contraction of the "u," and a series of variants to gauge the degree of formality.

Ai shiteru 愛してる, which literally means "I love you," is instead used much less frequently, but especially in films, which reveal the behind-the-scenes activity of private life or tend to elaborate on emotions, in part distorting. There are adult couples who have never uttered these words to each other and, even though married, wear no wedding bands because that custom is actually foreign to Japanese culture, at least in origin. Nonetheless, the younger generations wear them more freely and *manga* overflow with pages in which the word love is uttered openly.

Public life and private life are two very separate domains (***soto/uchi***) in Japan. it is rare to see couples kissing in public. Mostly couples limit themselves to the more modest act of holding hands. Showing and expressing love is a sign of uncouthness, and synonymous with showiness. There are things that, unless you take part in them firsthand, appear unpleasant or embarrassing, and which attract attention, such as an argument in the street or a voice speaking loudly into a cellphone. That being so, when you see two people kissing passionately, you get drawn in and your gaze is drawn to that interplay of lips, and you immediately feel as though you've intruded upon a very private moment. A feeling of inadequacy replaces the sweetness of the moment and, if you meet the lovers' gaze, the feeling you are left with is one of reinforced embarrassment and vague unpleasantness.

In Japan, people prefer instead to exercise restraint, simply to perceive the excitement of the body when merely brushed. And it is even enjoyable for foreign couples who travel to the Land of the Rising Sun to refrain from engaging in public displays of affection, open kissing, to resist the temptation of imposing their own Western conventions, and instead try to maKe do with mere glances and a style of eroticism capable of triggering pent-up desires, and to save one's lovemaking for the hotel room, that sphere of privacy which accepts every impulse, making it the sole forum for the only eyes that deserve to witness that union, which is to say, the eyes of the two lovers, and those eyes alone.

That which is left unsaid also remains, in this domain, the sole channel of communication, capable of expressing much more than the word ever could (***iwanu ga hana***). Moreover, as Jean de La Bruyère wrote in *The Characters or the Manners of the Age*, "To be in the company of those whom we love satisfies us; it does not signify whether we dream of them, speak or not speak to them, think of them or think of indifferent things, as long as we are near them."

Legend has it that destiny determines the union of two people.
It is *akai ito* 赤い糸, "the red thread" of destiny of Japanese lore that firmly links two people from birth and which, sooner or later, brings them together. This legend states that we are born with a red thread tied to our little finger, the other end of which is tied to that of our soul mate. No matter how many hardships one encounters in life, sooner or later that person will come to us, and we will come to that person. The red thread of destiny is the protagonist of one of the *tableaux vivants* chapters of the heartbreaking film *Dolls* (2002) by Kitano Takeshi.

Yokibata 呼び方 is instead "the way to call (someone)," from the verb *yobu* 呼ぶ "to call" and *kata* 方 which is "modality," and explains the beautiful way the Japanese have of using the new name one assumes in an amorous relationship. Within a context that is strongly socially connoted—which makes a year's difference in age a sufficiently great gap to modify the language used—diminutives and nicknames that are used to narrate a love story (which in Japan remains *truly* visible only to those who take part in it) thus become extremely important.

Therefore, *yokibata* persists as something greater than a simple romantic detail, so much so that during press conferences in which actors and actresses announce their plans to marry or that they already have, they always reveal the pet names they use for each other in private. The typical question the journalist asks is: *otagaini nanto yobiamasuka?* お互いに何と呼び合いますか "what are your private names for each other?", something that no one in Italy, for example, would ever dream of asking.

Venturing a little deeper into the topic, we can detect in this careful consideration of the name the symbolic intimacy of the sounds that we carry with us through the world. In Japan, a name not only denotes the relationship and degree of intimacy between people, it is also chosen by families with great care, in accordance with a series of linguistic and cultural factors that extend from the meaning of the kanji, to the number of strokes that make it up; from the adoption of characters inherited from relatives, to the decision to transcribe them in the

phonetic writing system of *hiragana* so as to exalt their sound, and so forth. Traditionally, seven days after a child's birth, the family gets together and, after a general consultation, transcribes the name of the newborn on a roll of *washi* paper.

It is interesting to note how the word "love" breaks up into numerous terms in Japanese. Historically, for example, there exists a difference between the words *koi* and *ren'ai*, both of which can be translated as "love." In the literature of the Edo period, *Koi* 恋 (whose ideogram, which was originally quite complex, explained the passive act of the heart of the person being attracted, subjected to a bodily attraction by something or someone, according to the interpretation of Professor Shirakawa) had a sexual connotation, while *ren'ai* 恋愛 (which, importantly, is composed of the two kanji *ai* and *koi*) appeared in the Meiji period circulating above all in the churches of the new Christian cult and might have referred to an idealized feeling of love, as well as exchanges of a sexual nature. Nevertheless, associated with Japanese Christianity and with the romanticist literature of writers like Stendhal, the more volatile and sublime meaning of the term prevailed, until it acquired a new shade of meaning that intended for *ren'ai* when used together with the word "wedding" (*ren'ai kekkon* 恋愛結婚) to mean a free and sincere union, in contrast with an arranged marriage (*miai kekkon* 見合い結婚見合い結婚).

So it is nice to think about love, about the things that whisper and those of which one only murmurs, about those passionate things that are nevertheless hidden from the eyes of others, about the name that feeling always carries with it—from that which is conferred upon us as a family gift, to that other name that we acquire as a couple.

The Japanese custom explains to us that there are so many ways to love and be loved, that the secret of our intimacy can be found in a name, while the legend of the red thread, *akai ito*, seems to suggest that if we have not yet found our great love, we should never give up. What belongs to us sooner or later will come to us, whereas if someone leaves us or we leave them, then it simply wasn't meant to be. At the end of our red thread, someone else is waiting.

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—translated by Clorinda Donato and Manuel Romero