

KOI CLASSIFICATION & JUDGING CRITERIA

By Douglas Dahl

KOHAKU

It is said “appreciation of koi starts and ends with Kohaku”. What that means is Kohaku was the first class to be bred consistently or stabilized in about 1890. It also means that after a person has studied all of the classes of koi and has become experienced, they will come back to appreciate Kohaku for its simplicity and beauty. I will keep the amount of Japanese terminology to a minimum in this lecture. A Japanese term dictionary will be available soon in KOIUSA magazine and on the AKCA website.

Before I continue on Kohaku, I want to take a minute to discuss judging points common to all classes. Koi are judged as a whole or holistically and are not judged on a positive or negative point system. Negative points can come into play in close contests. Koi are judged side by side based on what we see today and not what may be there next week or next year. Japanese Judges have a disadvantage in often being able to recognize bloodlines, which can cloud their “judge for today” decisions because they know which koi cost more and has more potential. A Japanese Judge once answered a question on why a koi won an award replying, “because it was the most expensive fish”. Koi may lose today only to come back to win tomorrow based on the competition tomorrow.

1. First, the koi cannot be missing anything like a fin or have any abnormalities like a pushed in mouth all of which will disqualify the koi from judging. The exception is the second set of barbels.
2. Second the koi must be healthy and not show signs of disease or parasites, which could disqualify the koi from judging. An exception is made for split fins or bruises judged to be caused during transportation.
3. Third, is the importance of body conformation. Broad, thick body shape of female koi is preferred giving an imposing appearance when compared to the thin trout shaped body of a male koi. Shape and size of the fins are important to be in proportion to the body. The head shape is important that it not be too short or too long or turn to one side. The koi when viewed from above should be symmetrical on both sides and not have one side flatter than the other. Even the way a koi swims is taken into account on conformation. Not all female koi hold their eggs well, which could affect conformation.
4. Fourth, in my opinion is quality of skin and deep, vibrant colors, which makes koi “living jewels”. This also includes how well the koi is “finished”, are all of the colors up, and is there a good sheen on the skin. It is conformation and quality that will catch a Judges eye from a distance.
5. Fifth is pattern that is artistically balanced and not front, tail or side heavy. Pattern must also be proportional to the size of the koi and not have a small pattern on a huge body or a huge pattern on a small body.
6. Last is uniqueness or character usually of the pattern on the head that makes this koi special.

Now for Kohaku. We have a snow white (shiro) base color with a red (hi) pattern. The pattern may be stepped or continuous. The white must be without blemish or yellow tint. The hi may be any one of the many hues from deep persimmon orange to Ferrari red but the red must be thick without any thin spots and the pattern must be the same color from head to tail. Some Judges prefer the persimmon orange hi to the Ferrari red because the orange appears soft and the purple red appears hard and gaudy. Kohaku must have red pattern on the head. The pattern on the body must be artistically balanced and the kiwa or rear edges of each spot must be sharp like cut with a razor. A new bias in Japan has started to favor bloodlines that have the kiwa stop at the edge of each scale forming a scalloped edge rather than a straight edge across the center of a scale. The front edge of each spot (not on the head) may have blurred red color that is called "sashi" or insertion. Sashi indicates the koi is still improving in quality and is not finished yet. It is elegant if a Kohaku has a white nose and a white area with no red pattern just in front of the tail called a "tail stop" and several other names. Some subtleties of pattern not liked are a totally red head or red down the face to the nose that are heavy in appearance. Red pattern wrapping below the lateral line suggests a future koi when the red and white are better balanced. Red spots below the lateral line are disliked. The lateral line is a raised sensory organ running the full length of a koi half way up the side of a koi. A red head pattern with an additional red lip mark is called "kuchibeni" and can be cute if it balances the overall pattern. Red pattern at the base of the pectoral fin was considered unfavorable but is being accepted now if it adds to the overall balance of the pattern. Red into the tail or into the dorsal fin is still disliked. Kohaku tend to get black specks "shimis" in hard water with high pH.

SANKE

Sanke or "Taisho Sanshoku" is a Kohaku with an added black spotted pattern overlaid onto the body. Sanke were first stabilized round 1917(the Taisho Emperor era). All of the criteria for Kohaku also apply to Sanke. In addition, the black spots must add to the overall balance of the pattern. The black or "sumi" spots must all be the same color, must be thick with good kiwa, may have sashi, must be shiny, lacquered black and are preferred on top of the white instead of on top of the red. Sanke sumi spots are usually above the lateral line on the back. Sanke may or may not have black stripes in their fins but too many stripes can make the fins appear heavy. Sanke have a tendency to get too much sumi on the back half of the koi making it appear tail heavy. It is difficult to finish the quality of the hi and the sumi on a Sanke at the same time because the hi peaks early in age and the sumi peaks later. Many Sanke have lost to Kohaku because the sumi on the Sanke was not finished which detracted from the appreciation of the Sanke even if the white and hi of both koi were equal. It seems unfair but on the other hand a Sanke with all colors finished has the advantage of difficulty and rarity over Kohaku. This advantage is not often discussed but definitely an advantage in judging. A Sanke with a circle red Tancho pattern on the head in addition to a red and black pattern on the body is a Maurten Sanke. A Sanke with a red pattern running the full length of the body almost covering the complete top is Aka Sanke. Aka is another term for red.

SHOWA

Showa or "Showa Sanshoku" is a Kohaku with an added black, spreading pattern overlaid onto the body that wraps from the back down below the lateral line. The black is not spots like in Sanke. Showa were first stabilized round 1920(the Showa Emperor era). The earlier Showa bloodlines were a checkerboard of black and red with very little white showing making people

call it a black koi with white markings. In fact, breeders kept only all black babies. Modern “Kindai” bloodlines have a more balanced amount of white, red and black showing. Not until the creation of the modern Kindai Showa did Showa compete on an equal basis with Sanke and Kohaku. All of the criteria for Kohaku also apply to Showa. In addition, the black wrapping pattern must add to the overall balance of the pattern. The black or “sumi” pattern must all be the same color, must be thick with good kiwa, may have sashi and must be shiny black. Early bloodlines had dull or matte finished sumi and were not as popular as the modern Showa. Showa MUST have all three colors on their face. Often there is a lightning pattern across the head down to the nose called “Menware” or a V pattern on the shoulder. Showa usually have black in their fins including black base of the pectoral fins called “motogoro”. Showa have a tendency to get too much sumi on the pectoral fins or on the back half of the koi making it appear tail heavy. It is difficult to finish the quality of the hi and the sumi on a Showa at the same time because the hi peaks early in age and the sumi peaks later. Many Showa have lost to Kohaku because the sumi on the Showa was not finished which detracted from the appreciation of the Showa even if the white and hi of both koi were equal. It seems unfair but on the other hand a Showa with all colors finished has the advantage of difficulty and rarity over Kohaku. Again, this is not often discussed but definitely an advantage in judging. Some Showa have light gray sumi under the surface of the scale called “boke” but many judges call it unfinished if some of the sumi is up and black but not all of it. Local, unfinished sumi marks on Showa are currently being evaluated whether they should be judged a beauty mark if the quality of the koi is high. Should a Showa with some unfinished sumi be less appreciated than another koi variety that is finished? It is not a simple answer because you have to see both koi to make that holistic judgment. However, these judgments have been questioned in the past. Showas with underlying sumi that forms a reticulated pattern like Goromo are called Kage Showa and are put into Kawarimono class. Go figure.

GOSANKE (a collection of Kohaku, Sanke and Showa classes)

The first three classes I discussed (Kohaku, Sanke, Showa) are the oldest koi classes to be stabilized and as a group are called Gosanke. Breeders have had 8 decades to perfect the many bloodlines of Gosanke and also 8 decades to perfect the judging criteria for these big 3. Gosanke are highly valued because they have to breed 100,000 babies to get 10 koi with high quality patterns acceptable to the All Japan Koi Show. Again, with rarity and cost comes appreciation and rewards with Gosanke winning almost all of the Major Awards at koi shows. Most of the other koi classes have been stabilized since World War II. Breeders of these koi classes usually get 90 percent or more high quality show koi from each breeding making the koi less expensive and much less rare than Gosanke. One exception is the new Shiro Utsuri (white with black wrapping pattern) and I will discuss this class next. I believe Gosanke, in addition to tradition and cost; also have the advantage of good contrast of color with white as the base that shows off the red and black pattern very well.

UTSURI

Utsuri are white (Shiro), yellow (Ki) or red (Hi) base color koi with wrapping black pattern forming a checkerboard pattern that starts on the back and wraps below the lateral line. Utsuri were originally stabilized around 1925. Just as the early Showas evolved from the dark, heavy patterns to the modern Showa, so has the new Shiro Utsuri very recently (1990s) evolved to the balance of white and black and from dull sumi to jet-

black sumi. The Ki and Hi Utsuri bloodlines have generally not evolved to this balance or to this jet-black sumi. As a result Ki and Hi Utsuri are not as highly valued and their sumi tends to fade away when moved from a dark pond to a blue show tank. They also have a tendency to get scattered sumi specks on their base color making it look dirty. Utsuri also may have the motogoro at the base of their pectoral fins and sumi in the other fins. Utsuri need to have black on the face sometimes in the form of a lightening pattern down the head. Like the modern Showa, only the new Shiro Utsuri can compete with Gosanke on an almost equal footing. Shiro Utsuri do not have the difficulty Showa have of finishing two colors which gives the new Shiro Utsuri an advantage over Showa in finish but Showa have the advantage in difficulty, rarity and high cost. Many of the comments I made earlier about Showa and also about Gosanke can also be said of the new Shiro Utsuri. I expect to see more Major Awards going to the new Shiro Utsuri in the future.

BEKKO

Bekko are white (Shiro), yellow (Ki) or red (Aka) base color koi with lacquered sumi spots on the back, like Sanke. Yes, the Japanese have several terms meaning red. Shiro Bekko often result from Sanke breeding but are koi that never developed a red pattern or lost their red pattern. The most difficult and important thing with Bekko is to get a clear, unblemished head with no sumi pattern. The fins are the same as Sanke. Ki and Hi Bekko have the same problem as Utsuri in the tendency to get many small black spots but the sumi does not fade at shows like Ki and Hi Utsuri tend to do. Hi Bekko with this condition are referred to as pumpkin fish (not meant as a compliment). I believe Bekko are not valued because they are culls from Sanke breeding making them second-class. Their appreciation also suffers from not having a head pattern that Shiro Utsuri does have.

TANCHO

In Kohaku, Sanke and Showa breeding, many koi turn out to have only a single red spot which is on the head. We call these koi Tancho, Tancho Sanke and Tancho Showa respectively and they are shown in Tancho class. The Tancho spot must be between the eyes and preferable perfectly round. It must not go back onto the shoulder of the koi or down to the nose of the koi. Red may not appear anywhere else on the koi to be shown in Tancho class. A sumi pattern may cross the Tancho mark on a Tancho Showa. No other variety with a spot on the head may be shown in Tancho class. This includes Goshiki with red spot on the head, Bekko with black spot on the head and Ogon with orange spot on the head to name a few.

DOITSU (in all classes of koi)

Doitsu are Japanese koi crossbred to display the characteristics of the German “leather” carp with no scales at all or with the German “mirror” carp having large scales only along both sides of the dorsal fin or with large scales along the dorsal fin and also along the lateral line on both sides of the koi. Doitsu koi have been crossbred in Japan for most all of the classes and typically compete against scaled Japanese koi in the same class unless there is a special Doitsu class. Doitsu koi can easily have sharp kiwa due to not having

scales so scaled koi are given the difficulty advantage in judging. All judging points being equal, scaled koi will beat Doitsu koi.

ASAGI / SHUSUI

Asagi koi have red below the lateral line to the under side, often some red on all fins and the red can come up from the belly to cover the gill covers and to the base of the mouth. Blue color is above the lateral line. The blue color can vary from dark almost gray to a very light blue depending on the bloodlines. The lighter shade of blue of the Narumi bloodline is preferred. The blue color of each scale is surrounded by a lighter ring around the edge of the scale giving a netting appearance which is very pretty when all of the scales line up in straight rows. This last point is very important in judging Asagi. Also, it is difficult to have a clear head with no blemishes so this also is a strong judging point. Asagi were documented over 160 years ago and have evolved to the beautiful specimens we find today. The Asagi is fully scaled.

Shusui is the Doitsu version of the Asagi. All criteria and characteristics of Asagi also apply to Shusui except there is no netting pattern but a sky blue top half of the koi. It is very important there is no break in the line of mirror scales from the back of the head along the dorsal fin and the scales line up in straight rows. Again, a clear head is very important. It is difficult to keep black spots from appearing on Shusui in hard, high pH water. A Shusui with red almost covering the back above the lateral line is called Hi Shusui. A Hi Shusui with the addition of blue mirror scales on both lateral lines separating the red top and bottom is called "Hana Shusui".

KOROMO

Koromo meaning "robed" is a cross between Kohaku and Asagi. The result is a white base koi with a red Kohaku pattern that has blue edged scales forming a reticulated pattern only on top of the red pattern. Ai Goromo has beautiful blue netting. Sumi Goromo adds sumi spots. Budo Goromo has what appears to be clusters of grapes on the red pattern. There are also crosses of Sanke and Showa with Asagi to create Koromo Sanke and Koromo Showa.

KIN GIN RIN

Literally means Gold and Silver scales. A chemical deposit creates a sparkle effect on each scale. Many of the koi classes have been crossbred to have Kin Gin Rin scales but if a koi has two rows of Gin Rin scales, it is shown in Kin Gin Rin class. Koi with less Gin Rin scales are usually shown in their normal class and the scales may or may not affect the judging. There are four types Kin Gin Rin scales. Pearl Gin Rin has a sparkle deposit in the center of each scale like a pearl. Diamond Gin Rin or Hiroshima Gin Rin looks like brushed aluminum sparkle. Beta-Gin is where the whole scale sparkles and is the most valued type. Kado-Gin has only the aft edge of each scale covered with this sparkling deposit. Gin Rin shows up best on white and red and does not show very well on black. It needs sunlight to be appreciated.

HIKARI MUJI (also called Hikarimono)

Hikari means metallic. These are koi with one metallic color. Koi in this class include Platinum Ogon, Kinbo (shiny gold), Ginbo (shiny silver), Orenji (orange) Ogon, Yamabuki (yellow) Ogon and Nezu (silver gray) Ogon. All of those koi are solid color koi with metallic sheen. With no pattern to judge, all you have is a strict requirement for a clear head with no blemishes and a requirement for the color to be consistent from head to tail. The sheen on the fins, especially the pectoral fins, is important when judging ALL metallic koi. Hikari koi seem to have more problems with deformities of the mouth, fins and back than the other classes so look closely when you buy them. Also in Hikari Muji is the Kin Matsuba and the Gin Matsuba that have black reticulation in the center of each scale to form a pinecone pattern.

HIKARI UTSURI (also Hikari-Utsurimono)

Metallic versions of Showa and Utsuri. Koi in this class include Kin Showa (metallic Showa with golden luster), Gin Showa (metallic Showa with silver luster), Gin Shiro (metallic Shiro Utsuri), Kin Ki Utsuri (metallic Ki Utsuri), Kin Hi Utsuri (metallic Hi Utsuri) and Kage Gin Shiro (metallic Showa with kage sumi). All of these tend to fade out when removed from a dark pond and placed into a blue show tank so they don't show well but will return to their splendor when returned to the pond. All of these also tend to have a dirty sumi look caused by the metallic. Again the clear head and sheen is very important especially in the pectoral fins.

HIKARI MOYO (also Hikarimoyo Mono)

Koi with two metallic colors like Platinum and red. Koi in this class include Platinum Kohaku, Gin Bekko, Yamabuki Hariwake (yellow and Platinum), Kikisui (literally Water chrysanthemum Platinum Kohaku with wavy red lines on both sides) and Orenji Hariwake (orange and Platinum). Also included with two metallic colors plus black are Kujaku (Platinum Hariwake with black pine cone pattern), Doitsu Kujaku, Yamatonsihiki (metallic Sanke), Tora Ogon (Tiger koi actually a gold metallic Ki Bekko), Hariwake Matsuba (Platinum Hariwake with black reticulation). Metallic Shusui are called Kinsui and Ginsui with the former having more red markings. Shochikubai are metallic Ai Goromo.

KAWAIRMONO (ALL OTHERS)(no metallic koi allowed)

We finally get to the end and it is a catch all class for all of the other koi that do not fit into one of the other classes. The list is huge but here are some of the favorites.

Included are all of the Karasugoi or crow carp family that are black with various white markings on the body and fins. Depending on how much white you have Hajiro (black with white only on the tail and pectoral fin tips), Hageshiro (black with white on tail and pectoral fin tips and on the head), Yotsushiro (Hageshiro with all white head), Kumonryu (Doitsu koi with killer whale pattern) and Matsukawabake (koi that changes from black to gray depending on water temperature forming a net black pattern).

There is a very new koi that has been put into Kawarimono due to lack of a better place because it is metallic and does not belong in Kawarimono. This is the Bene(red) Kumonryu called Kikokuryu. It is a metallic Kumonryu with a red pattern. It probably

should be moved to Hikarimoyo because the black looks metallic so it has black, white and red metallic colors.

Next in favor is Goshiki meaning 5 colors that are white with a red Kohaku pattern and two shades of blue and black netting not only on the red but also on the white. Cool water makes the colors darken. It is important for Goshiki to have a clean red and white head with no sumi markings.

The next favorite is the Chagoi or brown/green tea colored carp. These koi grow fast and very large and become the favorite in the pond by their gluttony. Also in solid colors are the Kigo (yellow koi), Soragoi (gray blue koi), Midorigoi (green koi), Benigo (red koi), Aka Hijiro (red koi with white fin tips) and Shiro Muji (white koi).

Next is a very recent cross between Chagoi and Kohaku or Asagi called Ochiba Shigure. This koi reminds people of autumn leaves because the hi shows up as a bright mustard pattern on a gray body with black netting over the whole body. The Doitsu version of Ochiba Shigure has been called "antique" due to the colors.

The next group is the Kanoko group. Kanoko means "fawn" describing a dappled Kohaku red pattern that looks like cherry blossoms. This group includes Kanoko Kohaku, Kanoko Sanke and Kanoko Showa.

The next group are the Kage (robed) group. They include Kage Shiro Utsuri, Kage Hi Utsuri, and Kage Showa.

The last group are the non-metallic Matsuba koi. They are Aka (red) Matsuba, Ki Matsuba and Shiro Matsuba. There are also Doitsu versions of all of the above.