

ON ENGLISH TANKA

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The first English tanka that the writer saw were Jose Civa-saqui's two tanka which were printed in a magazine for English students in Japan published by Kenkyusha, Tokyo.¹ They were about Kyoto, which the writer thought beautiful. The next ones the writer read were two tanka by an established British writer, James Kirkup. But they did not appeal to the writer as tanka, one of which was rather a short humorous poem written in five lines, while the other, also in five lines, had some tanka poetry in it but was not written in 31 syllables.² [Indeed James Kirkup seems to have learned a lot more about the tanka since, because his latest one which was printed in *Poetry Nippon*, Nos. 45 & 46 (1979) is a good work]³

Then the writer was shown by Professor Buntaro Taira Okinawan tanka which were superbly translated by him into English in 30 syllables of four lines after the pattern of the Okinawa tanka. The writer's fourth encounter occurred when he got H. H. Honda's translation of the *Manyoshu*. He found some tanka in the book rendered in 31 syllables of four lines which seemed agreeable. Meanwhile the writer, an editor of a magazine, was shown by some foreign contributors short poems called *tanka* which were composed in the 5-7-5 7-7 syllable pattern. But hardly could he enjoy them as tanka since he read little tanka poetry in them. By and by he also found some similar *tanka* poems in foreign periodicals of short poems.

This is just a brief chronicle of the writer's meetings with

tanka poetry in English for the past 20 years. Thus he finds himself faced with some questions which he feels he has to solve:

- (1) Why are the Okinawan tanka beautiful?
- (2) Why did Dr. Honda adopt the four-lined form to translate tanka into English?
- (3) Why do original tanka-like English poems produced abroad have little tanka poetry in them though they are written in the fixed tanka pattern?
- (4) Why is the form of Okinawan tanka a quatrain like the ballad stanza while the Japanese tanka is in a unique five-line form?
- (5) What form, then, should the English tanka take?

There are still other reasons why the writer has decided to write this essay: (6) he has got letters inquiring about the tanka from abroad; while he wonders: (7) if we Japanese are just shown those deplorable tanka-like English poems called "tanka" written by foreigners and leave them as they are? (8) Why is haiku far more popular than tanka abroad? Those questions and incentives have long been urging the writer to do something about them, who is the founding editor of an international poetry magazine, *Poetry Nippon*.⁴ Now at last the time has come, he thinks, when he should begin writing about the tanka, for he has tentatively finished writing about the English haiku.⁵ Thus the writer will continue to treat those matters in series of essays in this periodical.

1

As regards Question, No.8, the writer treated the subject partly in his *Studies on English Haiku*.⁶ The reasons why haiku is popular abroad are summerized as follows:

(1) Because of R. H. Blyth's persuasive introduction, westerners believe that the haiku poetry is closely related to Zen dogma, and the study of Zen promoted the study of haiku. (2) The haiku is the shortest poem in the world, handy and easy of access; it is simple to write it and it can be comprehended quickly. (3) Westerners have never had this kind of poem before which is a vehicle for what is called "haiku moment" or "ah-ness." (4) The haiku is an all-round art for painters, poets, calligraphers, psychologists, photographers, et al. (5) It can be made use of for teaching poetry in general, especially to beginners in creative writing class. (And the writer likes to add to them a very important reason which D. J. Enright mentions as one of the two main reasons in his "Commentary" in *TLS* (Sept. 8, 1978): (6) The father of modern poetry, Ezra Pound, was interested in haiku and experimented in writing haiku in English.

On the other hand, (1) the tanka did not attract any great European or American writers, translators nor introducers who might have devoted themselves to it. (2) Probably because its form is not new to westerners; as a whole it looks like a ballad stanza, the commonest of all the stanzas of English verse.⁷ Besides, (3) they have the cinquain and the limeric. Though the latter is a shorter poem whose nature is very peculiar and far from that of the tanka, the cinquain is one of the common English verses. Its average length is around 30 syllables just like that of the tanka, and the fact that it can often produce certain musical effects shows that it is qualified for being adopted as a form of the English tanka. (4) The length of the tanka is about twice as long as that of the haiku which is the shortest, but since in the poetry world of Europeans and Americans they do not have such a short fixed form of lyrical poetry, it must be appealing to them though *not* so much as the haiku. And handling tanka might be twice as troublesome as dealing with haiku. (5) The tanka was

originally an elegy or a love song; in other words, its theme was lament, praise or love and its essential nature is lyricism. In this sense the tanka is not appealingly new to westerners who have such poems in abundance even though they are mostly much longer. (6) It has not persistently been connected with any particular philosophy, religion, cult, thought, ism, etc. like the haiku. (7) It could be an all-round art like the haiku, but not in reality. (8) Since the tanka is much shorter than the sonnet—less than one-third of it—its form could also be used for teaching beginners poetry and in reality is,⁸ but because it does not have so much ease of procedures as the haiku, nor has so much simple aspect of objective statement of what is happening or seen compared with the latter, it may not be so appealing to teachers.

Taking all the above items into consideration we find that the tanka is not blessed with any of the unique and attractive features of the haiku. Besides, (9) the tanka was introduced to Europe and American as Japanese Court poetry even though as the *Manyōshū* tells it is not necessarily the noble's.⁹ But since all the historic "waka"¹⁰ anthologies were edited in accordance with Emperors' orders,¹¹ most important entries were imperial families', courtiers' or noblemen's, so that the tanka translated into English might have given the impression that it is a poem for the noble and upper classes, and not for the lower classes like haiku. (10) Still another conceivable reason is that tanka seemed to be a queer poem mostly concerned with nature, with qualities of experience and so on.¹² This strangeness or foreignness must also have worked as a detractive factor in its appealing to westerners.¹³

2

So much for Question, No. 8, and let us proceed to Question,

No. 3: why do original English tanka produced abroad have little tanka poetry in them though they are written in the fixed form?

To begin with, let's examine the following two poems quoted from *Dragonfly*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (Oct. 1978):

(Ex. 1:) Massachusetts spring:
 The round-faced child you carried
 Befriends a crab:
 Her pink toes remind me of you
 By the sea, beneath the moon. —Simba, NE

*

(Ex. 2:) in this spring forest
 where old horsemen and beercans
 are man's evidence
 a prehistoric river
 the only sound but silence —Brent T. Leake, UT

They are among the better ones the writer finds in magazines published in the United States. They stick to the 5-7-5 7-7 syllable pattern. As English haiku following the 5-7-5 syllable pattern have too many words in them, that is, the poets sing too much,¹⁴ so do those tanka. The former poet, Simba, has crammed many nouns into her poem, while the latter apparently writes of only two themes but also has put too many images into the limited number of lines. As the writer stated in the first section, the essence of the tanka poetry is lyricism, and when too many things are put into a short form, it is feared, fluency or smooth flow of lyricism in the poem is lost. It is also supposed that the first 5-7-5 syllable pattern which is effective in making images vivid, detracts from the flow of tanka poetry. The upper three lines are for haiku, which is, in a sense, said to be a poem of images, and not for fluent flow of lyricism which is usually produced effectively in longer lines of verse.

3

Now let us see what the writer found beautiful and treat Question, No.1: an Okinawan song—one of the tanka printed in *My Favorite Okinawan Poems*:¹⁵

(Ex. 3:) Beyond the mountains of Un-na
 Lies the village of my lover,
 I wish to push the hill aside
 and have him by my side!

This short poem has more lyricism in it than a conceivable five-line version of it might, and also a desirable amount of flow of thought and images and passion—just a moderate quantity of love song. Besides, it is pregnant with what is left out unsaid as becomes a very short poem. It is composed of three lines of eight syllables and one line of six syllables totaling 30 syllables in four lines ($8+8+8+6=30$), which is the Okinawan tanka form. It strictly follows the fixed pattern but does not have clumsiness, rigidity, hardness and what not, because its form is a quatrain of three lines of iambic tetrameter and one line of iambic trimeter like the ballad stanza, only the second line being exceptionally trochaic. It does not contain too many nouns and images. It is loaded with only one theme that the poetess wishes to have her lover by her side who lives beyond mountains. This is a tanka. Therefore this form is supposed to be one of the models which English tanka poets should follow.

4

Now let's get down to Question, No.2: why H. H. Honda chose the four-line form. (Saito Hidesaburo, a famous compiler of

English-Japanese and Japanese-English dictionaries is also in favor of the four-line form. His reason is considered to be the same as Honda's. According to Honda himself, Dr. Nitobe, William N. Porter, Kenneth Yasuda used the quintet to translate tanka into English, while Hidesaburo Saito, Dr. Takemoto preferred the quatrain.)¹⁶

In his short introductory essay, "How to Translate the Tanka" in *The Manyoshu*,¹⁷ he says that "irregularity of beat always accompanies the quintet unless the rendering is done throughout in trochaic measure.... The trochaic measure, however,... is a sprightly measure, not to say, warlike. It is like heady wine lacking in mellowness, especially when it is uniformly used.... Now one of the Tanka's peculiarities is elegance. It is, generally speaking, like cherry-blossoms seen through vernal mist. Its nature is feminine, static, and as calm and sweet as an idle dream."¹⁸ In this sense the quintet is not a suitable form for the tanka. And then he comes to this conclusion:

As for me, I prefer the quatrain as a pattern for Tanka's translation to the quintet. And if I have to give reasons, the chiefest is the latter's irregularities of beat which appear almost of themselves. In my opinion poetry must first appeal to the ear. In the quatrain the flow of rhythm, if the verse is well written, is not disturbed, whereas in the quintet, as I have already mentioned, hitches in the rhythm are unavoidable unless the measure be trochaic.¹⁹

And he adds: "Japanese Tanka... are not necessarily written in five lines, but may be written in any lines less than five.... Japanese verses, with a very few exceptions, lack rhymes. In poetry what is essential is rhythm, and rhyme is only of secondary importance; wherein lies the *raison d'être* of blank verse. ... the worst drawback in the 5-7-5 7-7 verse form lies in its too great artificiality, its too much attention to the number of syllables at the expense of rhythm."²⁰

Thus he chooses the quatrain in consideration of both rhythm

and nature of tanka and does not stick to any rhyme scheme.

Here for your reference, let us quote Kenneth Yasuda's translation in five lines which Honda finds good:

- (Ex. 4:) Ocean-waves that rush
and hurl like pounding thunder
against the rock-shore,
Break and scatter, whirl and crash
with their wild tumultuous roar!

Here is Honda's version of Saito's translation in a quatrain which is in perfect four feet, he says:

- (Ex. 5:) I look out o'er a tangled mass
Of cherry's bloom and willow's green;
The capital is in the spring
A rich brocade of brilliant sheen.

Honda also quotes in the same essay some quatrain stanzas from Robert Louis Stevenson's "Requiem" and A. E. Houseman:

- (Ex. 6:) Under the wide and starry sky
Dig the grave and let me lie;
Glad did I live and gladly die,
And I laid me down with a will.

*

- (Ex. 7:) Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
Is hung with bloom along the bough,
And stands about the woodland ride
Wearing white for Eastertide.

If the writer may comment on Honda's view of translation, he is right in stressing the flow of rhythm. He is also right when he says the cinquain is apt to lose its flow of rhythm caused by the irregularities of beat which appear almost of themselves unless the rendering is done throughout in trochaic measure, but that most of the tanka nature of feminine character is lost due to the trochaic measure, so that for most tanka the quintet in trochaic measure is not fit.

On the other hand, the tanka is a verse of fixed form, so he thinks it should preferably be translated into the quatrain because by investing it with some definite form it will be recognized at a glance as a tanka. But without any such form, the reader will be at a loss to know what it is. "Suppose," he continues, "he is shown an anthology wherein some translated Chinese and Japanese verses are put together. Perhaps in most cases he will find it difficult to tell Japanese pieces from Chinese. But once the tanka is dressed in a definite English garb, he will readily take it for such."²¹

It is desirable that the tanka which is a unique Japanese short poem should be given a fixed form different from the other forms of poetry. But when we find in an anthology some Japanese tanka in English and some Chinese poems in English which are just like tanka, the writer wonders if it is necessary to tell the difference between the two by forms. Do readers of poetry seek for forms and not for poetry itself? He is wrong on this point. If a tanka in English is not distinguishable from a Chinese poem in English, it does not matter at all. In that case the Chinese one must be a tanka-like poem—maybe a prototype of the Japanese tanka, or its sister. If we are to give the English tanka a definite pattern different from those of Chinese short poems, we should give it a five-line form, which is far more unique than the quatrain. Besides, some tanka had better be given forms of the cinquin, not that of what Honda calls "the quintet," because of the nature of their contents which are best expressed in the five-line form. But when you stress rhythmic flow of lyricism in tanka, you'd better give it not only the four-line form but the couplet according to the content of the tanka. Honda speaks of "hitches," "irregularities of beat" and "artificiality" in the 5-7-5 7-7 syllable form. In the writer's view as he stated in the second section, they come from its upper hemistich, or the 5-7-5 *hokku*

whose form is suitable for haiku poetry because it does not emphasize rhythm but image. Honda thought that “hitches” or “irregularities of beat” result from prosodic difficulty. It does not come from that alone; it also comes from *sticking* to the 5-7-5 7-7 syllable form. It is indeed a puzzle why Honda could think only of the 5-7-5 7-7 syllable pattern as the quintet and not of what they call “cinquin” for a vehicle of tanka poetry. (To be continued)

NOTES:

¹ The magazine is *Jiji-Eigo Kenkyu* (The Study of Current English), the number of which is not known.

² They are printed in Kirkup's *Japan Physical* (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1969). Here are the poems:

Domesticities: Two Tanka

In my bachelor establishment
Of wood and straw and paper
As I do some home cooking
I find at the heart of my rice omelette
One pale-brown rubber band.

*

I am happy in Japan
Because when I sweep
The sedge-matted floors I find
Mingled with my blond hairs
Black ones.

³ Here is the tanka:

Kyoto Winter: “tanka”

Like the seven stars
grouped in the constellation
of Ursa Major, hanging
on their one bare bough—
dusky-red, last persimmons.

⁴ It is the organ of The Poetry Society of Japan, in English, whose first issue appeared in 1967.

⁵ His studies on English haiku appeared in this periodical and *Poetry Nippon* published in the past 10 years. Most of the articles were collected

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into the book: *Studies on English Haiku* (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1976).

⁶ See the note above.

⁷ Why the tanka looks like it is to be explained later on.

⁸ According to Prof. Harold Wright's letter sent to the writer in May 1969, both haiku and tanka are introduced to students of creative writing class at Ohio State University.

⁹ About a half of the songs collected in the anthology, numbering some 4,500, are by unknown writers, of which over 4,000 are tanka.

¹⁰ It is another name for "tanka."

¹¹ Until the end of the middle ages some 20 anthologies of "waka" were produced including the *Kokin Waka Shu* and the *Shin Kokin Waka Shu*.

¹² For more of this special quality of tanka, it is to be discussed later. Also refer to R. H. Brower and Earl Miner, *Japanese Court Poetry* (Stanford Univ. Press, 1975).

¹³ In this sense, haiku is stranger to westerners, but this sheer strangeness has more attraction than tanka's strangeness. Haiku is also thought of in association with Zen dogma.

¹⁴ See *Studies on English Haiku*, p. 21.

¹⁵ Its first printing was issued by Hokuseido Press, Tokyo, in 1955.

¹⁶ H. H. Honda, "How to Translate the Tanka," *The Manyoshu* (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1967), p. xi.

¹⁷ See the above.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. xii-xiii.

²¹ *Loc. cit.*