

ON ENGLISH TANKA

(Sequel 4)

7 The Chinese Influence on Tanka

by Atsuo Nakagawa

As most scholars who are engaged in studying ancient Japanese songs and poems know, there are not a few references to possible or conceivable influences of, and actual adaptations or borrowings of arts of verse-making and subject matter from, ancient Chinese songs and poems which were brought to Japan. There seem to have been exchanges of cultures between China and Japan or rather one-sided inflows into the latter of cultures for at least several centuries before Christ;¹ there have recently been discovered some evidences which lead to the assumption. Besides, the *Nihongi* (Chronicles of Japan)² says that the foundation of the Japanese empire took place at a date corresponding to 660 B.C. But it was only in the sixth century that some Chinese literatures were brought to Japan according to some Chinese and Japanese chronicles.³ Anyway the Japanese *katauta* and *tanka* seem to have been influenced by, or to have taken after, Chinese songs and poems like the following:

Ex. 1. Shooting or hunting poem in two-word phrases from *Wuyüeh*
Ch'unch'üu, Vol. V:⁴

<i>Tuan chu</i>	Cutting bamboos,
<i>Shü mu</i>	Joining them to sticks;
<i>Fei t'u</i>	Spattering soil,
<i>Chu jou</i>	Running after a boar

Ex. 2. *Ch'ing ch'ing tzu pei* Your belt is very blue
Yu yu wo ssü My thought of you lasts very long
Tsung wo pu hang Even if I don't go,
Tzu ning pu lai Why won't you come?
by Chêng Feng from *Maoshih Tich'ien*, Vol. IV⁵

adopted for singing in Japan, the prevalent Japanese song, *katauta*, seems to have settled into the form of 19 syllables.⁹

On the other hand, when the tanka form was getting fixed, in China poems of seven-character lines, especially independent quatrains, had become more popular than those of five-character lines. Therefore the formation of the tanka form of 31-syllables seem to have been affected by the independent septasyllabic quatrain in 28 syllables, e.i., *chueh-chü* or *tüan-chü*¹⁰ (See Ex. 4), because Chinese tunes which were brought in along with *tüan-chü* were also adapted or adopted for singing tanka.¹¹ The Chinese songs could be shorter than the Japanese counterparts, because the *katauta* and the tanka had only one caesura in each or rarely more in the tanka, while the Chinese songs had more or less three in each.

However, the Chinese counterpart had about twice as much content as the Japanese one, because almost every Chinese character which is pronounced in one syllable has meaning in itself, while no Japanese *onji*—one-syllable phonetic sign—has any meaning in itself with a few exceptions. Therefore some tanka took or borrowed subject matter or materials from couples of lines or couplets of, Chinese poems of seven-character lines—mostly from anthologies of extracts from fine Chinese poetry, because the septasyllabic quatrain had approximately twice as much contents as the Japanese counterpart tanka; that is, when two lines of seven Chinese characters were read in the Japanese way or translated into Japanese, they became almost twice as long as the original. For instance, according to the *Wakan Roeishu* (Anthology of Japanese and Chinese Poems for Reading and Chanting)¹² the following two phrases from Yeh Hsiang Kung's *K'ê she Ch'iu tz'u*:

Wu sê tzu shên shang kê i I Chiang ch'üü tzu tso Chiang Hsin.

could be translated into this:

*Mono no iro wa onozukara kyaku no kokoro wo itamashimuru ni taetari
Ubenari uree no ji wo mote aki no kokoro ni tsukureru koto*

(Since autumn saddens travellers' hearts, it is natural that
the word "sorrow" should be composed of the words "autumn" and
"heart")

And from the above the following tanka was later adapted by Fujiwara-no-Momomichi:

Kotogoto ni kanashi karikeri mubeshi koso

Aki no kokoro wo uree to ihikere

from *Senzai Shu*¹³

(Everything induced sorrow—how fairly

did they call the mind of autumn "sorrow")

You see the Japanese reading has about twice as much sonic quantity as the Chinese, while the Japanese tanka which was composed after the Chinese original, does not include all the matter the latter has; apparently the Japanese tanka contains from 60 to 80 percent of the original and the rest of the poem is mere poetical words and phrases which have little substantial meaning. We can give quite a few examples from the same book. Yet unfortunately the writer cannot give the instances like those given in Chapter II¹⁴ in which cases *kouta* or *imayou* and Chinese poems are translated into each other with almost no loss of any significant meaning on either side. That incomplete conversion of Chinese poems into tanka comes from the fact that unlike *kouta* and *imayou*, the tanka says just a little like a haiku.

The tanka which had become the most refined form of Japanese poetry, and been called "*waka*" meaning "Japanese song," seems to have been affected in other respects too. That is, as many scholars point out in their essays, tanka adopted some Chinese poetics and techniques, along with philosophical and religious thoughts ranging from Confucianism to Buddhism.

According to Kouchi Doi, some tanka seem to have adopted the art of versification called '*kishou tenketsu*' (introduction-development-turn-conclusion) (and partly contents too) of the "broken-off verse." For instance, Chang Mao Hsien's *tian-chü*:¹⁵

Ch'ing fêng tung wei lien *Ch'ên yüeh chao yu fang*
Chia jên ch'u hsia yüan *Lan shih wu jung kuang*

from *Wen Hsuan*, Vol. XV

(Cool winds sway the reed screen/Morning moon throws light into the inner room.

My husband is gone far away/His room is deprived of my man's figure) seems to have affected Kagami-no-Ookimi's tanka:

Kaze wo dani I envy you, my sister, whom
Kofuru wa tomoshi At least the wind calls on; if I
Kaze wo dani Could but wait for a man to come,
Komutoshi mataba I should be glad, and never sigh!
Nani ka nagekamu Trans. by H. H. Honda (Poem No. 489,
Manyoshu)¹⁶

According to Takaaki Yoshimoto again,¹⁷ apart from borrowings of fragmental subject matter and contents from Chinese poems, Japanese tanka lost its former direct taking-in of natural objects and direct way of expressing human emotion and feelings aroused by nature, and adopted the Chinese way

of expression of nature and human responses to nature. That is, nature is neutrally re-structured as symbols. And such figures of speech as allusion, simile, metaphor, and allegory are supposed to have been polished by those Japanese poets who appreciated refined poems of the T'ang dynasty.

In short, the Japanese tanka (and *katauta*, too, in a smaller degree) was influenced or rather affected by Chinese poetry in four ways. The linear forms—seven and five syllable lines—are supposed to have been adopted after the models of as many syllable lines of Chinese poetry. Secondly, the sonic quantity of the 31-syllabic tanka seems to have been fixed in accordance with that of the Chinese quatrain of 28 characters, i.e., the quatrain of 7-character lines—only the Japanese form is not rendered in quatrains like the Chinese counterpart or the Okinawan tanka.¹⁸ Thirdly, the subject matter and materials (including ideas and thoughts) of tanka were often taken or borrowed from couples of lines or couplets (i.e., the basic units) of Chinese poems of septasyllabic lines, as Japanese old songs in quatrains, *imayou* of 48 syllables were made (almost straight in this and the next cases) from Chinese quatrains of pentasyllabic lines; and *kouta* of 28 syllables from couples of lines or couplets of Chinese poems of septasyllabic lines. Fourthly, rhetorical techniques, versification and other knowledge concerning poetry were acquired from, and influenced by, those of ancient Chinese poetry produced during the period from the unknown times up to the T'ang dynasty.

NOTES:

1. One of the handiest books available which clearly state of the influence of Chinese literature is Brower and Miner's *Japanese Court Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1961).

2. Or *Nihon Shoki*, the first set of volumes of *Rikkoku Shi* (20 volumes of Japanese history), first authorized Japanese chronicle compiled in 720 by Prince Toneri et al. in obedience to Imperial order. It is written in Chinese characters and covers the space from the age of gods to Emperor Jito's period.

3. For the historical facts, R. Tsunoda and Wm. Theodore de Bary's *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, Vol. I (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1958) is referred to.

4. Quoted from Shizuka Shirakawa, *Chugoku Kodai Bungaku* (Chinese Ancient Literature), No. 1 (Tokyo: Chuou Kouron Sha, 1976).

5. Quoted from *Chugoku Meishi Kansho Jiten* (Dictionary for Appreciating Famous Chinese Verse), ed. Mikio Hosoda (Tokyo: Tokyo-do, 1977).

6. Quoted from *Doshisha Daigaku Eigo-Eibungaku Kenkyu* (Journal of English Department, Doshisha University), No. 30 (Sept. 1982).

7. Quoted from the same.

8. Koujiro Kikkawa, *Chugoku Shishi* (History of Chinese Poetry) (Tokyo: Chikuma-Shobo, 1975), Vol. 1, p. 29.

9. Sometimes the *katauta* took the form of 5-7-5 syllable arrangement. Further explanation of the reason follows in the next paragraph. See also the writer's essay: Chapter One of "The Origins of Haiku: Short Primitive Songs" appearing in Vol. 19, No. 1 of this journal.

10. Those Chinese terms mean "stopped-short verse" and "broken-off verse" respectively.

11. Refer to Takaaki Yoshimoto, *Shoki Kayo Ron* (Tokyo: Kawade Shobo Shinsha, 1977), pp. 278-79. Also to Mabito Yokota's *Nippon Teikeishi-ron Oboegaki* (Nagano: Mimizuku Shokan, 1981), p. 139.

12. Published by Shincho Sha, Tokyo in 1983.

13. Quoted from *Shinpen Kokka Taikan*, Vol. 1 (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1983).

14. See Atsuo Nakagawa, "On English Tanka" (Sequel 2), *Journal of Gifu College of Economics*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (March 1980).

15. Quoted from Kouchi Doi, *Doi Kouchi Sakuhin Shu* (Works of Doi Kouchi), Vol. 2 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1977).

16. H. H. Honda, *The Manyoshu* (Tokyo: Hokuseido, 1967).

17. Yoshimoto, *op. cit.*

18. For the reason of this difference, see Chapters II and III.

AFTERWORD

Since I published my studies on the form of English haiku,¹ almost ten years have passed, and am now thinking of publishing its revised edition, for I have written several articles on the form of haiku for magazines and newspapers. But it was also my wish to write articles on English tanka and make them into a book on the subject, for there have been inquiries about tanka from abroad from time to time.

The first English tanka that I saw were Jose Civasagui's two tanka printed in a magazine for English students in Japan.² They were about Kyoto, which I thought beautiful. The next ones I read were two tanka by an established British poet James Kirkup. But they did not appeal to me 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 quality but was not in the conventional Japanese tanka pattern.³

Then I was shown by Professor Bntaro Taira⁴ Okinawan tanka, which were well translated by him into English in the form of the Okinawan tanka that is a little different from that of the Japanese-mainland tanka.⁵ My fourth encounter with tanka in English occurred when I got H. H. Honda's trans-

lation of the *Manyoshu*,⁶ only some of which I found done well. Meanwhile I, an editor of a magazine,⁷ was shown by some foreign contributors very short poems called 'tanka' which were composed in the copy pattern of the Japanese tanka, but could hardly enjoy them as tanka since I read little tanka poetry in them. By and by I also found some similar tanka poems in foreign periodicals of short poetry.⁸

The person who gave me a first strong incentive to write my first article on English tanka came from Reverend Neal Henry Lawrence,⁹ who was taught about tanka by a former president of Tokyo University while teaching at the University as a lecturer, and since has been trying to compose tanka in English and recently writing successful ones. Another temptation came to me about the same time from Dr. Marie Philomene,¹⁰ who was working on the translation of tanka by the Imperial family and of other successful ones selected for the annual poetry party at the Imperial Palace.

Those two influential persons in the foreigners' circles in Tokyo and some Japanese sympathizers or supporters of their cause—to promote the translation of tanka and the composition of tanka in foreign languages, especially in English abroad—made up a group or rather a cultural force, which led to putting lectures and symposiums on English tanka form and how to compose English tanka on the programs of the annual meetings held by the Poetry Society of Japan. I was always one of the participants in the symposiums, and at the same time I have been writing articles on English tanka for the organ of the society, *Poetry Nippon*.

Thus the time has come for me to write some more and add them to the ones I have already published. I hope these tanka essays, whose kind has so far never been heard of, will play a part in this literary movement which has slowly but gradually gathering its force in this human world of leisure and comparative peace.

NOTES:

1. *Studies on English Haiku* (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1976).
2. "Kyoto Winter," *Jiji Eigo Kenkyu* (The Study of Current English) (19-?).
3. "Domesticities: Two Tanka," *Japan Physical* (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1969).
4. *My Favorite Okinawan Poems* (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1969).
5. For detailed treatment of the subject matter, see Sequel 2 of this essay.
6. Published by Hokuseido Press, Tokyo in 1967.
7. Atsuo Nakagawa is the founding editor of *Poetry Nippon*.
8. A quarterly haiku magazine, *Dragonfly* edited and published by Lorraine Ellis Harr has been carrying tanka poems besides haiku. Some other magazines such as *Bonsai* and

Haiku Highlights printed English tanka.

9. He has two books of English tanka published: *Soul's Inner Sparkle* (Tokyo: Eichosha, 1978) and *Rushing Amid Tears* (Tokyo: Eichosha Shinsha, 1983).

10. She has *The New Year's Poetry Party at the Imperial Court* (1983) and two other books published by the Hokuseido Press, Tokyo—*Japanese Songs of Innocence and Experience* (translations) (1975) and *White Birches and the Fire Tree* (1978). The first one is a collection of translations of tanka poems, and the other two includes tanka and translations of tanka.

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