

ON ENGLISH TANKA

(Sequel 5)

— Supplementary Chapter —

by Atsuo Nakagawa

In Sequel Three of this series of essay (April 1985), the writer concluded that:

Therefore conceivable good forms for English tanka would be a quatrain of trimeter lines, a tercet of tetrameter lines, or a couplet of hexameter lines, rhyming or unrhyming, but for the tanka poetry with its unique rhythm, a tercet or a couplet is preferred, because a quatrain is to have too short lines for its effective expression, and a quintet and a sestet are out of the question.

The length or the quantity of the English tanka was figured out by the writer based on some Japanese scholars' conviction that the tanka is twice as long as the haiku. That is true in a sense. However, after reading some recent books and an essay on the rhythms of the Japanese language and verse¹ and also other free translations of tanka, the writer thought of changing that desirable length of the English tanka (i.e., 12 feet) to a more accurate one: ten feet. That is to say, the Japanese tanka has quadruple measure, or its half, duple time. So the English equivalent of a tanka would be five lines of dimeter lines (2-2-2-2-2), two tetrameter lines and one dimeter line (4-4-2, 4-2-4, or 2-4-4), one tetrameter and one hexameter lines (4-6 or 6-4) or other variations in the quantity of ten feet. Therefore in their view the 5-7-5-7-7 syllable pattern is nonsense. That is the reason why the writer would like to add here some examples of translations ideal in the view of this newly discovered rhythm, and further examine some forms considered ideal for the English tanka.

The method of free translation, by which tanka is translated freely into a short modern poem which the original writer would have written in the contemporary English language, has produced not a few English versions in

the quantity of ten feet. Of the free translations quoted in *Sequel Three* (April 1980), only one by Kirkup and Nakano is in one of the ten-foot variations, i.e., a form of 4-3-3 feet, into which its original English version was transformed by the writer. Here is another example from James Kirkup and Michio Nakano's *The Elegant Art of Translating Japanese Literature*:²

Ex. 1: 戦争の記憶なき子よジェット機の編隊光る空を指さす 今泉敬子
Sensou no Children without memories of war—
kioku naki ko yo They point with delight at the jets
jetto-ki no Glittering in the open sky.
hentai hikaru
sora o yubi sasu

—Keiko Imaizumi, trans. by Kirkup and Nakano

This form has accidentally taken a form of 4-3-3 feet, a variation of ten feet, because they don't seem to have cared about the form of their translation; perhaps this form was just spontaneously formed in Kirkup's mind. They say nothing of the resulting form except of the artistic effect of wording.

Geoffrey Bownas and Anthony Thwaite's *Penguin Book of Japanese Verse*,³ has some translations in forms of 2-2-2-2-2 feet. They were also incidentally made because they "attempted to turn into forms of words and lines which might suggest, to the English reader, what I [they]⁴ took the poems to be in the first place":⁵

Ex. 2: 春のきる霞の衣緯をうすみ山風にこそ乱るべらなれ 在原行平
Haru no kiru The robe of mist
kasumi no koromo Worn by the spring—
nuki o usumi How thin the weft:
yamakaze ni koso By the mountain wind
midaru beranare So soon disordered!

—Ariwara-no-Yukihira

What is excellent about this translation is that except for the fact that the first and third lines are placed in the reverse order of that of those of the original, each line is placed in its corresponding position of the original. Yet, if we are allowed to point out only one shortcoming from the point of the desirable flow of tanka rhythm, the lines (especially the upper three) are too short to produce deep flow of lyricism; each line should have at least five syllables in the writer's opinion.

John Stevens's *One Robe, One Bow*⁶ carries translations of tanka in

three-line forms. The following ones were also made accidentally because Stevens' note on his translations says that he 'deliberately avoided all refined or "poetic" expressions in rendering Ryokan's poetry into colloquial English...'.⁷ He attempted to reproduce the poet's verses which are fresh and direct, without ornamentation or ostentation, adding few notes, and keeping the number of extra words and phrases to a minimum:

Ex. 3: この頃のねざめに聞けばたかさごの峰の上にひびくさを鹿の声	
<i>Kono goro no</i>	
<i>nezame ni kikeba</i>	Unable to sleep
<i>takasago no</i>	I hear the voice of a young deer
<i>mine no he ni hibiku</i>	Rising from a mountain ridge.
<i>sao-jika no koe</i>	

This version has a 2-4-4 foot form. The last line, begun with a strong accent and ending with a stronger stress, concludes the poem with an emotional weight.

Edith Marcombe Shiffert, whose translation method is to make a compromised version of the original, which retains as many characteristics of the original as possible, yet is readable as an English poem, produced some good translations in ten feet, which retain the original line order and images, even preserving original tone of language in some cases.⁸ Let's examine some of her works:

Ex. 4: ⁹	澄江堂の主をとむらう	斎藤茂吉
壁に来て草かげろふはすがり居り透きとほりたる羽のかなしき		
<i>Choko-do no Aruji wo Tomurau</i>	(Mourning for Akutagawa)	
<i>Kabe ni kite</i> (2 rhythmic segments)	Coming to a wall,	(2 feet)
<i>kusa-kagerou wa</i>	a lacewing May fly	(' ')
(' , ,)		
<i>sugari ori</i> (' , ,)	is clinging to it—	(' ')
<i>sukitohori taru</i> (' , ,)	the sheer transparency	(' ')
<i>hane no kanashisa</i>	of the wings, their	
(' , ,)	mournfulness.	(' ')
	—Saito Mokichi, trans. by Shiffert and Sawa	

As you see, the rhythm of this translation is incidentally made to agree to that of the original. Its pattern is 2-2-2-2-2, each line of both the original and the translation being read in one sound group. What is excellent about this

translation is that even the order of lines and that of words except for that in the first line are almost the same as those of the original.

Ex. 5:¹⁰

椰子の林にたまゆら光る稲妻の須臾なれど沁む旅のところに 高折妙子

LIGHTENING [LIGHTNING]

<i>Yashi no hayashi ni</i>	Through the palm grove
<i>tamayura hikaru</i>	a transitory flash
<i>inazuma no</i>	of lightening [lightning]—
<i>shuyu naredo shimu</i>	sudden but piercing,
<i>tabi no kokoro ni</i>	feelings while traveling.

—Taeko Takaori, trans. by Shiffert

One defect with this translation is that the third line is too short, and does not have two feet. But it can be read in one sound group and the following dash should be taken to constitute one foot. And also the two misspellings of the same word would be detrimental but little to its artistic effect. Apart from those, the rhythm and order of the lines are the same on both sides. And even the word order of the second and third lines are the same. In the course of Shiffert's repeated meetings and working on translation with the poet she seems to have mastered the real rhythm of the tanka unawares.

What form is the best for the English tanka, then? The 2-2-2-2-2 pattern of five dimeter lines looks good, but actually it sounds a little too light for tanka poetry. Besides, it is often difficult to make a translation made up of five lines whose length is at least five syllables long unless you add extra "ornamentation and ostentation." However, since the present-day trend of poetry writing is that shorter and shorter lines are used more and more in longer poems, too—Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams's influence?—and also because it is a five-line form, this form of a longer haiku¹¹ might be preferred to other forms of ten feet. But common sense and writer's own feeling bid him choose for the English tanka forms composed of tetrameter lines that are the original pure English lyrical lines. That is to say, the writer recommends the forms made up of two tetrameter lines and one dimeter line. Let's examine some other variations of the tanka form in the quantity of ten feet.

Example Four could be transformed into a stable 2-4-4 form:

Ex. 6: Coming to a wall,
a lacewing May fly is clinging to it—

the sheer transparency of the wings, their mournfulness.

Its 6-6 feet form is also conceivable because the last line could be read in six feet instead of in four. And it doesn't sound bad:

Ex. 7: Coming to a wall, a lacewing Mayfly is clinging to it—
the sheer transparency of the wings, their mournfulness.

Example Five could also be transformed into the 2-4-4 form. It looks like a longer form of haiku, but when it is read aloud, it sounds good and firm, and is really a tanka:

Ex. 8: Through the palm grove
a transitory flash of lightning—
sudden but piercing feelings while traveling.

Its 6-4 feet form is also conceivable:

Ex. 9: Through the palm grove, a transitory flash of lightning—
sudden but piercing feelings while traveling.

As for the 4-4-2 foot pattern, here is another, suitable for concluding, example from *One Robe, One Bowl*, even though you could also read the last line in four feet:

Ex. 10:

風はきよし月はさやけしいざともにをどり明かさむ老のなごりに	良寛
<i>Kaze ha kiyoshi</i>	
<i>tsuki wa sayakeshi</i>	THE WIND is fresh, the moon bright,
<i>iza tomo ni</i>	Let us spend the evening dancing
<i>odori akasamu</i>	As a farewell to old age.
<i>oi no nagori ni</i>	

—Ryokan, trans. by John Steven

NOTES:

1. See Kouchi Doi, *Kotoba to Onritsu* (Tokyo: Kenkyu-sha, 1970); Sadanori Bekku, *Nippon Go no Rizumu* (The Rhythm of the Japanese Language) (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1977) and Hideho Okada, "Shiika no Honyaku ni okeru Rizumu • Nagasa to Gogiryo ni tsuite (On the Rhythm/Length and Semantic Quantity in Translating Poetry) *Bungaku Kenkyu-ka Kiyō*, No. 30 (Waseda University, 1984).

2. Published by Kenkyu-sha, Tokyo in 1973.

3. *The Penguin Poets*, D 77 (1964).

4. The brackets and their enclosures (including all the ones appearing later on) are the

writer's.

5. Thwaite, "Introduction," *Ibid.*
6. Subtitled: *The Zen Poetry of Ryokan* (Tokyo and New York: Weatherhill, 1980).
7. Steven, "Introduction," *Ibid.*
8. See "Introduction," *Anthology of Modern Japanese Poetry*, trans. and comp. Edith Marcombe and Yuki Sawa (Tokyo and Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle, 1972).
9. *Anthology of Modern Japanese Poetry*.
10. Taeko Takaori, *When a Bird Rests*, trans. Edith Shiffert (Kyoto: Hatsune Shobo, 1974).
11. See Atsuo Nakagawa, "A Note on the English Haiku Form: a Dimeter Tercet," *Poetry Nippon*, Nos. 61 and 62 (Spring 1983). The writer says in it that the ideal haiku form in English would be a single tercet of dimeter lines.

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