

# ON ENGLISH TANKA

(Sequel 3)

by Atsuo Nakagawa

## How to Translate Tanka into English and What Form Should the English Tanka Take?

As to what form the English tanka should take, the writer is of the opinion that the English tanka can take whatever form suitable for the kind of tanka poetry which is to be translated, provided that the form gives the translation tanka-likeness.

What is the tanka and tanka-likeness then?

First of all, we should make it clear in what kinds of tanka we can find tanka poetry and tanka-likeness. Historically, various kinds of tanka appeared as the chapters on the birth of tanka show, but in order to define the tanka, we only have to examine the classic tanka which was established around the issuance of the *Kokin Shu* (古今集),<sup>1</sup> especially the *Hyakunin Isshu* (百人一首) (Single Verses from a Hundred People)<sup>2</sup> which is an embodiment of the classic tanka dating back to the 7th century (670), and the modern tanka which began to be written in the Meiji Era (1868-1912). And to see what is the tanka-likeness, we can inquire into what we now call the 'avant-garde' tanka which were began to be composed after the World War II.

What is the tanka then? As every dictionary says, it is a very short lyrical poem made up of five phrases (or lines) in the arrangement of 5-7-5-7-7 syllables. It is usually divided into two (or rarely three) parts or breaths. It has, as a rule, no rhyme or alliteration, and little, if any, rhythm. It is usually read aloud slowly and monotonously in a semi-chant, with the beginning of each part, on the new breath, tending to be higher-pitched and lighter in tone. Its contents is a little thumbnail sketch or a fraction of poetry just like that of the haiku, with the undercurrent of a touch of pathos that runs through it in most cases of the classic and modern tanka.

The classical tanka contains no words borrowed from abroad. It consists of poetical ideas clothed in poetical language, compressed within the regu-

lation 'meter' of 5-7-5-7-7, embellished with various elegant word-plays and is free from any trace of vulgarity. The word-plays are represented by such rhetorical terms as *kake-kotoba* (pivot-word), *engo* (phonically-associate word or pun), and such introductory-associating phrases as *makura-kotoba* (pillow-word), *joshi* (introductory words) and alluding-associating phrases for enrichment like *utamakura* (noted place name) and *honkadori* (borrowed phrases). Therefore, strictly speaking, it is impossible to translate classic tanka.

On the other hand since the modern tanka has been freed from the past spells and traditions, it can be composed on any subject matter, of any words, even of those borrowed from abroad, and rejects the traditional word-plays and figures of speech as clichés. They still use the 5-7-5-7-7 meter as the basic pattern for tanka, most excellent works being written in its variations. So the translation of modern tanka can be possible in the same degree as that in which the modern haiku is translated. But its contents is still, as a whole, a little different from those of the English quintet, quatrain, tercet, and couplet, and of the limerick, the cinquain, and the interne. For the uniqueness of the tanka lies in the instant wholly-materialization of the vision of the object embodied in the rhythm of tanka.<sup>3</sup> In other words, its essence is 'deep serene poesy' (深々と澄みとおった詩性), 'rhythmical spasm,' (韻律的けいれん)<sup>4</sup> or 'spasmodic continuance of emotion which burns instantly' (瞬間的に燃焼する情熱のけいれん的持続).<sup>5</sup> And besides, most tanka have an undercurrent of pathos or emotional impact—poignancy.

There is no defining the avant-garde tanka. Any tanka poets can be called the 'avant-garde,' who defy the norms of the modern tanka and tanka societies—such as the conventional tanka form or technical rigorism, the master-dominating system, and the existing tanka schools. Yet as far as a poem is called a tanka, its length must be more or less 30 syllables, its main poetical thought and its rhythmical tone must be those of the tanka. And the tanka in the English language which is quite different from Japanese must satisfy those few requirements if it is to be called a tanka. And those poems that satisfy them may be called 'free tanka' or merely 'English tanka.'

On the other hand, however, some poets might appear who stick to the rigorism and call their tanka only 'the English tanka' just as in the foreign haiku world there some haikuists who stick to the 5-7-5 syllable form with a season word.

The tanka and tanka-likeness having been defined, let's get to work on

translating tanka into English, and the products ought to be models for English tanka. The translation of tanka can almost follow the way haiku is translated<sup>6</sup> as you can guess from what has so far been stated.

Let's begin with the form which might be used by those who would follow the rigorism and call their poem 'the English tanka.' As the Japanese rhythm is such that you had better choose as many monosyllabic words as you can so that the rhythm produced by those words may come as close to that of the Japanese language as possible:

<i>Hisakata no</i>	The spring has come, and
<i>Hikari nodokeki</i>	Once again the sun smiles so
<i>Haru no hi ni</i>	Gently in the sky
<i>Shizugokoro naku</i>	That it almost makes me cry
<i>Hana no chiruran</i>	When cherry flowers droop and die

This is a noted classic tanka composed by Ki-no-Tomonori,<sup>7</sup> but it is a kind which might be produced even at present by some conservative tanka poets. The trouble with this tanka is the pillow-word "*hisakata no*" which is a mere embellishing phrase attached before the word "*hikari*," meaning "lasting longer, and harder than the earth." In translating it can be ignored, and the writer, grasping the meaning of the first three lines or the upper hemistich of the original, has rendered it into the 5-7-5 syllable lines in entirely different English words with two disyllabic words included. The last two lines or the lower hemistich was done in the same way, with two disyllabic words included. The original tanka is of a feminine tone as most tanka are. So the writer has given it iambic measure except for the middle short line, making the last three rhyme, and reduced the conceivable multi-syllabic words to a few disyllabic ones. Yet the writer does not think it a successful translation, because, although the upper hemistich of 5-7-5 syllables is effective in making imagery vivid, it is also apt to give something rigid or clumsy. Therefore this five-line form is usually suitable for a tanka of masculine tone:

<i>Oo-umi no</i>	Ocean-waves that rush
<i>Iso mo todomo ni</i>	and hurl like pounding thunder
<i>Yosuru nami</i>	against the rock-shore
<i>Warete kudakete</i>	Break and scatter, whirl and crash
<i>Sakete chirukamo</i>	with their wild tumultuous roar!

This translation of Minamoto-no-Sanetomo's tanka by Kenneth Yasuda has 31 syllables in 15 feet, the first and the fourth lines in trochaic measure, approximate-rhyming, which gives accents to the flow of the poem, and the third and fifth lines rhyme, adding to the tanka more repetitive rhythm. Even though the English version has an extra verb (six for the Japanese five verbs) and superfluous words (the English expression for '*todoroni*' is repeated) and such redundant words as 'their' and 'wild' because of Yasuda's intention to make it 31-syllables long, and although it also has too many multi-syllabic words—two compound words, one trisyllabic one, and four disyllabic ones—, it could be said to be a fairly successful translation because it can be read as a very dashing and powerful poem in a masculine tone.

Here is a successful, original English five-liner:<sup>8</sup>

The warming spring sun  
 Penetrates the frozen earth,  
 Once more awakens  
 The strong inner urge for life  
 Latent deep in roots and seeds.

Neal Henry Lawrence

It is a rigid 31-syllable tanka. It is of a masculine tone and possessed by strong life force with the vivid images produced by the first two preceding lines. The example by the same poet below shows that even a tanka of a feminine tone can be rendered in the fixed pattern if you are lucky enough to find appropriate words that enable you to produce certain rhythm:<sup>9</sup>

Like a bridal veil,  
 The flower-festooned branches  
 Of the cherry tree  
 Flow gracefully in an arc,  
 Lighted by the morning sun.

But if you did not happen to find happy words, you might need longer lines—six- and eight-syllable lines like those which make up Okinawan tanka:<sup>10</sup>

<i>Idete inaba</i>	Though masterless my home appear
<i>Nushinaki yado to</i>	When I have gone away,
<i>Narinu tomo</i>	Oh plum tree growing by the eaves,
<i>Nokiba no ume yo</i>	Forget not to display

*Haru wo wasuruna.* Thy buds in spring, I pray.

This English version of Minamoto-no-Sanetomo's tanka is "a five-lined verse of 8-6-8-6-6 meter, with the second, fourth, and fifth lines rhyming," which was made by William N. Porter "in the hope of retaining at least some resemblance to the original form, while making the sound more familiar to English readers."<sup>11</sup> It is a good work made of so many words.

And tanka in more than six lines can also be made:<sup>12</sup>

<i>Tada naranu</i>	My dear,
<i>Ikusa to otto wa</i>	You must have realized
<i>Shiri-itarurashi</i>	How extraordinary that war was.
<i>Atsuku sabishiki</i>	My dear,
<i>Me no wasure-erarezu</i>	Never can I forget your eyes
By Keiko Imaizumi,	Burning and full of loneliness
trans., by James Kirkup	When we had to part.

The original tanka has no words for "My dear," so those phrases could be said to be redundant (if you like) and it is, substantially, a five-liner, yet they are necessary to make the poem colloquially poetical. In translating tanka into English, the translator is sometimes compelled to make his English version into a six-liner because of its sentence structure or the volume of its contents, as we see some instances among Kenneth Rexroth and Ikuko Atsumi's translations:<sup>13</sup>

Is our love over?  
 If only I could ask of your phantom  
 reflected on the surface  
 of the pond we made  
 as a symbol of our love—  
 but the surface is covered with duckweed.  
 Mother of Michitsuna

On the other hand, here is an example of tanka in fewer lines rendered better—a re-written version of Sanetomo's tanka which appeared before in this chapter:

Ocean-waves that rush and hurl  
 Like pounding thunder against the rock-shore



Break and scatter, crash and whirl  
With their wild tumultuous roar!

The few minor flaws are retained as they are in the first version, and yet this one is better as an English verse, whose first and third lines rhyming are in trochaic measure, making the poem powerful; and the second and the fourth lines rhyming in iambic measure, making the poem more rhythmical and echoic. Again here the writer has made a quatrain version of the Ki-no-Tomonori's classic tanka:

On this calm spring day  
Of lambent warm light  
Why should the cherry petals fall  
Fluttering with unsettled heart?

It is rendered in four lines in the arrangement of 5-5-8-8 syllables, with no rhyming lines as the original has none, the first two lines in dimeter, and the last two in tetrameter. As is customary with the interpretation of classic tanka, the pillow phrase is ignored, and the rest of the tanka is translated rather faithfully. For your reference, the writer would like to add to the above one translated version, an ancient Greek tanka-like poem rendered into a four-liner by Richard Lewis, which has a theme somewhat like that of the Sanetomo's tanka on waves:

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We go through Poseidon's month.  
Ponderous clouds sag with water  
and furious storms break out  
collapsing the rain earthward.

Anakreon<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, even without any pillow words which are usually ignored by translators, if a Japanese tanka is translated literally, in most cases, it falls into a form of four, three or two lines, its length ranging from 20 to 30 syllables. Because the contents of a tanka is just a little bit of poetry, a thumbnail sketch like that of the haiku. How little content some tanka have is shown by the well-known tanka on *Yamato gokoro* (Japanese *samurai*-warrior's spirit) by Motoori Norinaga:

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<i>Shikishima no</i>	Should a stranger ask
<i>Yamato gokoro wo</i>	Of you who were born Japanese
<i>Hito towaba</i>	What your spirit's like,
<i>Asahi ni niou</i>	Say—the wild cherry flowers
<i>Yamazakura-bana</i>	Shining in the rising sun.

could be rendered into a one-liner:

*Yamato Spirit: the wild cherry blossoms in the rising sun.*

However the tanka should not, as a rule, be rendered into a poem of a less-than-18-syllable length as the haiku, for the tanka is a form of poetry with the poetic quality of sweeping serenity or spasmodic rhythm of a very short duration. So the tanka form should be composed of at least two or three lines. The writer does not agree to translating tanka into long one-liners like instances seen in *An Anthology of Japanese Poetry: From the Country of Eight Islands*<sup>15</sup> even though the Japanese tanka is usually written in one line, because the tanka is a short poem which has at least one pause within itself, making use of imagery or suggestiveness. The following tanka by Ishikawa Takuboku is translated as a haiku by Sanford Goldstein:<sup>16</sup>

<i>Morotomo ni</i>	all my rebellion
<i>Tachi-kie yukishiya</i>	gone
<i>Aragau kokoro</i>	with this haircut
<i>Waga tsuma no</i>	my wife
<i>Kureshi sanpatsu</i>	gave me.

This translation has only 15 syllables, less than a half of 31—shorter than the standard length of the classic English haiku. It is rather a common haiku judging from the number of syllables, even though its way of expression is tanka-like—subjective.<sup>17</sup> No, it would, indeed, be a real senryu in English, rendered in three lines:

All my rebellion gone  
 With this haircut  
 My wife gave me.

Here is an instance of a two liner—or a couplet as used to be called by some scholars in Japan:

*Hakucho wa*  
*Suijo no asha*                   The swan's a mute floating on water;  
*Waga katte*                       I've never heard her cry.  
*Hakucho no koe wo*  
*Kikishi koto nashi.*

Kuzuhara Taeko<sup>18</sup>

This is a contemporary tanka, whose metrical measure is 4-6-4-7-7 (or 5-7-5-8-7 according another syllable-counting method), and is made up of so little contents for a poem, that its English translation has only 15 syllables. Yet it is still longer than the standard length of the contemporary English haiku—12 syllables.<sup>19</sup> According to Kouch Doi's study, the tanka is, quantitatively, twice as long as the haiku. So in his opinion the tanka is equivalent to two hexameter lines:<sup>20</sup>

*Kusare yuku*  
*Hoka naki kouboku wo*       My youth I bury at the bottom of this pit,  
*Uchi-tsuzukuru*               Setting roof-props—only to end in decay.  
*Kono chizoko ni*  
*Umete-yuku seishunki.*

Keiko Imaizumi<sup>21</sup>

The original is in the metrical measure of 5-9-6-6-10 syllables, and the English version has 23 syllables in two hexameter lines. This can be rendered in a tercet which looks like a better poem:

My youth I bury at the bottom  
 Of this pit, setting roof-props  
 —Only to end in decay.

For your reference, here is a terza rima or a triplet from Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind":<sup>22</sup>

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,  
 Though, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead  
 Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

It has 32 syllables, the length for the 'classical English tanka,' and the quantity of its contents is also that of an average tanka. But this three-line form is rarely used by translators, because most tanka is divided into two



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parts: 5-7-5 • 7-7, so a couplet or a quatrain is most fitted as tanka's vehicle. Only contemporary tanka or classic ones, especially the ones with the pattern of 5 • 7-5 • 7-7 (七五調: 初句切三句切)<sup>23</sup> could usually be rendered into a tercet. For instance, Ki-no-Tomonori's tanka cited above with the first line of a pillow word could be made into this:

On this spring day of lambent warm light,  
Why should the cherry petals fall  
Fluttering with unsettled heart?

And another tanka pattern conceivable for a three-liner in translation is the 5-7 • 5-7 • 7 syllable pattern (五七調: 二句切四句切):<sup>24</sup>

<i>Miwa-yama wo shikamo kakusuka</i>	Why do you hide Mt. Miwa like that?
<i>Kumo danimo kokoro aranamo</i>	Oh Could's, if only you had a heart
<i>Kakusou beshiya.</i>	To pity me, how could you do that?

Poem 18, *Manyoushu*

The conceivable forms of tanka in English have so far been examined with stanzaic forms of the traditional English poetry in mind. But how about the limerick, the "cinquain" and the "lanterne"?

The limerick is a vehicle for light or humorous verse with its own metrical and rhyme scheme which is very different from that of the tanka, even though its length ranges from 26 to 33 syllables which could also be tanka's. So there is no question about its formal use for tanka poetry except its quantitative length which could be referred to as one of English tanka's.

The cinquain was originated by Adelaide Crapsey (1878-1914) whose tanka-like verse is "unique in American poetry and has brought personal recognition by American poets."<sup>25</sup> The form is in a strict pattern of lines having two, four, six, eight and two syllables.<sup>26</sup> Here is an example:

LAUREL IN THE BERKSHIRES<sup>27</sup>

Sea-foam  
And coral! Oh, I'll  
Climb the great pasture rocks  
And dream me mermaid in the sun's  
Gold flood.

This is good as a tanka-like poem. But why Crapsey developed this unique

form which has 22 syllables? It is supposed that she found the length of 31 syllables for a tanka poem in English too long, and decided that its average length should be 22 syllables, which is appropriate in view of the writer's suggestion. Yet she wanted to make its form made up of five lines. And thus that form was created in her mind. The writer thinks it rendered better in three lines:

LAUREL IN THE BERKSHIRES<sup>27</sup>

Sea-foam and coral!

Oh, I'll climb the great pasture rocks

And dream me mermaid in the sun's gold flood.

This reminds us of a tanka-like poem produced in the ancient Greek, and shows that in most cases to translate tanka or write English tanka in five-line forms is unreasonable.

The "lanterne," which is also contrived by the same poetess, is a still shorter poem of five lines in the arrangement of 1-2-3-4-1 syllables.<sup>28</sup> Obviously it is too short a form for the tanka poetry, and is of just the right length for haiku.

In conclusion, we can say that the English tanka could usually have a five-, four-, three- or two-line form, its length ranging from 31 to 20 syllables. There might appear tanka schools who insist that the English tanka should have a form of a quintet of 5-7-5-7-7 meter, a reflection of the Japanese classic form, just as in the foreign haikudom there are schools of poets who write haiku in the fixed form of 5-7-5 syllables. But others might prefer a couplet, a tercet or a quatrain as their form for tanka poetry. Theoretically, the five-liner is in most cases impossible for an English tanka form unless you are lucky enough to pick up happy words which enable you to compose a good tanka. 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:

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NOTES:

1 Or *Kokin Waka Shu* (古今和歌集), the first anthology of poems and songs collected

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by Imperial command. The 20 volumes of 1,100 verses, mostly of tanka, were edited by Ki-no-Tsurayuki et al. in 905.

2 *A Hundred verses from Old Japan*, trans. William N. Porter (Tokyo: C. E. Tuttle, 1979) is referred to. *The Hyaku-nin Isshu* or *One-Hundred-Persons-Each-One-Poem* is a collection of 100 tanka selected by Fujiwara Teika in the 12th century. They include poems written by 7 emperors, 1 empress, 20 court ladies, 57 courtiers and 5 priests.

3 Makoto Ooka, *Haiku no Hakken* (Discovery of Haiku) (Tokyo: Yomiuri Shinbun, 1983), p. 42.

4 Takashi Okai, *Gendai Tanka Nyumon* (Introduction to Contemporary Tanka) (Tokyo: Daiwa Shobo, 1974), p. 257.

5 Ooka, p. 57.

6 See Atsuo Nakagawa, *Studies on English Haiku* (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1976).  
7 (?-905?), a cousin of Ki-no-Tsurayuki's. One of the '36 Kasen' (Tanka Masters), and one of the editors of the *Kokin Waka Shu*. This tanka is included in the *Hyakunin Isshu*.

8 Quoted from Neal Henry Lawrence, *Rushing Amid Tears* (Tokyo: Eichosha Shinsha, 1983).

9 Ibid.

10 See Bntaro Taira, trans., *My Favorite Okinawan Poems* (Tokyo: Hokuseido, 1969).

11 Porter, p. viii.

12 Quoted from James Kirkup and Michio Nakano, *The Elegant Art of Translating Japanese Literature* (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1975).

13 See Kenneth Rexroth and Ikuko Atsumi, trans. and ed., *The Burning Heart: Women Poets of Japan* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977).

14 Quoted from *Muse of the Round Sky*, trans. and ed. Richard Lewis (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969).

15 Edited and translated by Hiroaki Sato and Burton Watson, published by Anchor Press in 1981.

16 Quoted from *This Tanka World* [: Poems of Ishikawa Takuboku], trans. and ed. Sanford Goldstein (West Lafayette, Indiana: Sparrow Press, 1977).

17 For the difference between the tanka and the haiku, see Marie Philomene, "Distinguishing Waka from Haiku," *Poetry Nippon*, Nos. 53 and 54 (March 1981).

18 Quoted from *Shikai*, No. 188 (December 1984).

19 See Atsuo Nakagawa, "A Note on the English Haiku Form: a Dimeter Tercet," *Poetry Nippon*, Nos. 61-62.

20 Kouchi Doi, *Kotoba to Inritsu* (Words and Rhythms) (Tokyo: Kenkyu Sha, 1970).

21 James Kirkup and Michio Nakano. The English version is a remake of the translation by the translators.

22 Quoted from *Shelley: Poetical Works*, ed. T. Hutchinson (New York and Toronto: OUP, 1970).

23 Matazou Yagi, *Waka Keishiki Ron* (Treatise on Waka Form) (Tokyo: Kinseido, 1934) is referred to.

24 Ibid.

25 Hazel B. Durnell, *Japanese Cultural Influences on American Poetry and Drama* (Tokyo: Hokuseido, 1983), p. 91.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 See Rosemary C. Wilkinson, "Tanka: An American Lyric" (unpublished yet, but to be printed in *Poetry Nippon* in September, 1985), which is referred to.

(To be concluded)