

Tanka Structure: The ‘Jo’ or ‘Preface’

by M. Kei

Previously published in Atlas Poetica 13.

Introduction

Structure is rarely mentioned in the discussion of tanka. Perhaps it goes without saying that tanka has structure, but since structure is what holds a tanka together, it is worth noticing, discussing, studying, and learning to do it better. This article will treat only one element of structure, the ‘jo,’ because it is common among poets heavily influenced by the Japanese classics. In fact, the jo is so common in English-language tanka (more than Japanese, even at its height of usage), that some poets name the jo as an essential part of tanka without knowing what it is, or even that it has a name of its own.

Note: The jo’s popularity makes it important to study and understand, but just because it is common does not mean that it is required. Tanka can be written in many ways.

Definition

The term ‘jo’ is translated in to English as ‘preface.’ It is an optional item; other items may be used to fill the space at the head of the poem. The jo by itself is ornamental, not substantive. It is the body of the poem that carries the meaning, a meaning enhanced by the jo. Thus, although the jo is an optional device and subordinated to the body in importance, it is not trivial.

Edwin Cranston defines it as “a longer preposited structure known as the jo, or

‘preface.’ The jo is typically a natural image or image cluster preceding the ‘main statement.’”(1) He observes that it performs a valuable imagistic function. We can see then that the jo very often contains an image, but the terms ‘jo’ and ‘image’ are not synonymous.

The jo is the origin a very common form of tanka in which the first one, two, three, or four lines provide a concrete image, often drawn from nature, while the remaining lines provide the substance that gives the poem meaning. The reader will recognize this as ubiquitous in contemporary English-language tanka. However, although the classical jo of the Nara period (710-794 AD) usually confined itself to the first one or two lines, it could be larger or smaller or in a different location. Therefore, although the word ‘preface’ is an appropriate description of its usual place in classical tanka, as early as the *Man’yōshū* poets experimented with putting the jo in other locations. There could even be two or more jo. This article will use the term ‘jo’ rather than ‘preface’ to avoid confusion when it appears in a nonstandard location.

In order to understand why and how the jo developed, it is necessary to investigate the earliest Japanese poetry that contained in the *Man’yōshū* (8th c. AD). The shortest possible Japanese poem was the ‘katauta’ composed of three lines in a pattern of 5-7-7 *on*, or ‘sound

units.¹ The body of the poem was contained in these lines; anything that came before it was a *jo*. Long poems, such as *choka*, contained multiple *jo* and considerable skill in their assembly was developed by poets such as Hitomaro.

Various poetic forms were used during the period leading up to the compilation of the *Man'yōshū*, including the 'sedoka' with a pattern of 5-7-7 / 5-7-7; the 'mondo' (a sedoka for two voices), the Buddha's footstep poem, 5-7-5 / 7-7-7, and the *tanka*, 5-7 / 5-7-7. Previously, Japanese prosody had been built on alternating long and short lines of variable length, but as *tanka* was embraced by the courtly poets, they formalized a preference for lines of 5 and 7 sound units (2).

By the time of the *Man'yōshū*, the 5-7-5-7-7 pattern dominated; so much so that 'waka' ('Japanese poetry') became synonymous with the form we now called 'tanka.' We can easily detect one of the earliest developments in *tanka* structure: a two line *jo* followed by a three line body.

Mulberry-scarf
White beachwaves come surging
Closer I cannot
Get to my harsh-hearted love,
So I pass my days in longing.

~Anonymous (3)

Although this style was popular, it was not required. Poets of the *Man'yo* era, as well as the periods before and after it, composed poems in which the *jo* consisted of one, two, three, or even four lines. Sometimes a double *jo* was used. The *jo* was commonly composed of place

names, stock epithets, mock-epithets, pillow words, and other rhetorical devices, but it should be understood that the *jo* is not itself a pillow word or epithet. It is an envelope that can contain a variety of items.

Just after the *Man'yōshū* was compiled, a new generation of poets flourished. Narihira's ode to cherry blossoms is a classic:

Ah, if in this world
there were only no such thing
as cherry blossoms
then perhaps in the springtime
our hearts could be at peace.

~Ariwara no Narihira (4)

The poem above shows how the break shifted from the end of line two to the end of line three during the *Kokinwakashū* era, leading to the structure of 5-7-5 / 7-7 (5). This form is so well known in English that it is mistakenly believed to have always been the only and most proper form of Japanese *tanka*. The structure is a fertile one, having further evolved into *renga/renku*, *haiku* and *senryū*, and other variations.

Independently discovered in English, the three line *jo* is sometimes known by the faux-Japanese name of 'taika' (6). This form has also been called 'haiku + 2' based on advice to novices of "write a haiku and add two lines of subjective response." Even so, the upper strophe of a *tanka* is not a haiku. It is not always a *jo*, either, but in most 'haiku + 2' poems the 'haiku' is indeed a *jo*.

The important point is the variety of *tanka* structures. The editors of the *Kokinwakashū* were at pains to vary their material by using poems with different structures. Poems with two

¹ The English syllable does not correspond to the Japanese *on*. Case in point, the word 'stretch' is one syllable, but five *on*.

line jo alternate with three line jo, mixed with poems with one or four line jo, or no jo at all. Some of the poems have a double jo, and the jo does not always come at the beginning of the poem. This is part of what makes the *Kokinwakashū* so readable were the same structures used all the time, the result would be monotonous.

Classic Tanka Structure in English

For Western poets who come to tanka through haiku, it seems ‘obvious’ that tanka ‘logically’ divide into a pattern of 5-7-5 / 7-7, and that the upper strophe is the body and the lower strophe is an addendum. Indeed, I have often seen poets workshopping poems in which they broke off the top three lines and presented them as haiku. When composed this way, the last two lines are rarely capable of standing on their own. This is the reverse of the Japanese practice in which the opening lines were dispensable while the last line(s) formed the body of the poem.

The cicadas sing
in the twilight
of my mountain village
tonight, no one
will visit save the wind.

~Ono no Komachi (7)

The verse above is one of the most famous in the Japanese canon. It is structured with a three line jo followed by a two line body. Each part is a coherent unit of meaning. L4-5 are not ‘tacked on,’ but are the heart of the poem. Neither part is a complete poem in itself; the two together form a gestalt that is greater than the sum of the parts.

the black negligee
that I bought for your return
hangs in my closet
day by day plums ripen
and are picked clean by birds

~Margaret Chula (8)

In Chula’s poem the jo comes in L4-5, providing the natural image that amplifies the content given in L1-3. In fact, the first three lines are almost a jo in themselves, but the inclusion of the first person pronoun infuses them with importance. By contrast, the jo at the bottom is an objective image that acquires meaning through its juxtaposition with the body. Comparison with Komachi’s poem above shows that although the black negligee and indents give this poem a modern face, it has a classic structure.

We can depict various structures schematically. Here are four simple patterns with the jo first:

L1 jo
L2 body
L3 body
L4 body
L5 body

L1 jo
L2 jo
L3 body
L4 body
L5 body

L1 jo
L2 jo
L3 jo
L4 body
L5 body

L1 jo
L2 jo
L3 jo
L4 jo
L5 body

As mentioned, the jo could come at the end or in the middle, or there might not be a jo at all. A tanka could even have two jo. A few examples:

L1 body
L2 body
L3 jo
L4 jo
L5 jo

L1 jo a
L2 jo a
L3 jo b
L4 jo b
L5 body

L1 jo a
L2 jo b
L3 jo b
L4 body
L5 body

L1 jo a
L2 jo a
L3 body
L4 jo b
L5 jo b

It is left as an exercise for the reader to imagine all possible permutations of jo placement and size. Clearly, the jo is a flexible and effective structure which accounts for its enduring popularity.

In the footsore hill
he old man who guards the mountain field
Keeps mosquito flares:
Always burning with a secret flame
Is the smoldering of my love.

~Anonymous (9)

The verse above has a four line jo with a two line body. L4 is a swing line that functions simultaneously as the last line of the jo and the first line of the body. When the first four lines are read together, they make a complete thought. Likewise, if the last two lines are read together, they also make a complete thought. Together, they create a larger, more complex thought.

Note: Punctuation does not always correspond with the break between the jo and the body.

cold wind
divorce papers served
the bottom falling out
of a distant cloud
rainshower

~susan delphine delaney (10)

Delaney has created a structure in which the body of the poem occupies a single line, L2, sandwiched between a one line jo on L1 and a three line jo on L3-5. L2 is the heart of the poem and powerful enough to warrant the unusual asymmetrical double jo.

it glides towards me
as I sit at the harbor
in our time apart
trying not to think of you
the sailboat without a sail

~Thelma Mariano (11)

In the poem above, Mariano has created a complex structure in which the body of the poem splits the jo into two parts; the sailboat of L1-2 and L5 is a single image that wraps around the body. L1-2 and L5 can be read together as a single coherent statement. Likewise, L3-4 make a coherent statement. The structure echoes and reinforces the speaker's sense of division and separation. Splitting a jo was not done in the old Japanese poems, but in Mariano's hands is highly effective.

Another structure is the inverted tanka in which the long lines usually found in L4-5 come first. The jo can occur in either the upper or lower strophe. This was done in the medieval period when a pair of linked verses was pulled out of a renga to be enjoyed as an individual poem. All the jo patterns, line length variations, and breaks, can be mapped onto the reversed pattern, thereby doubling the number of possible structures.

nakazora ni naru (7)
aki no yo no tsuki (7)
hito mo kozo (5)
waga mi mo towade (7)
fukeneri (5)

High up, there in mid-sky
the moon on an autumn night.
Nobody visits
and I go to see no one
night growing long.

~Tonna (12)

In this case, the jo occupies L1-2 and the body L3-4. L5 is a fragment that in the English translation is neither jo nor body. In Japanese,

L1-2 and 5 might form a grammatically coherent statement. If so, it's a split jo.

The inverted form is often seen in contemporary English-language tanka but is not done in modern Japanese tanka. English-language poets seem to have intuited that the pattern of 5-7-5-7-7 syllables (as opposed to sound units) is too long; often when a poem begins with high content lines, the poet shortens the following lines.

Against the door dead leaves are falling;
On your window the cobwebs are black.
Today, I linger alone.

The foot-step?
A passer-by.

~Jun Fujita (13)

Fujita's tanka contains two jo, L1-2 and L4-5. The body of the poem is a short L3. The inclusion of a personal pronoun on L2 blurs, but does not erase, the distinction between the first jo and the body. L3 can also be read as a swing line, but the gap between the upper and lower strophes prohibits that interpretation. This is another tanka that illustrates how complex tanka can be if they are not forced into a single pattern.

Historically, we do not see a flowering of inverted tanka; most poets of the medieval period were expending their creative energies on renga. This is not surprising; the dynamics of linked verse offered something entirely new and exciting.

her skirt brightens
in the sunlight at the door
quick! quick!
her scissor shadow
cuts me through

~Larry Kimmel (14)

A two line jo opens the poem by Kimmel. At first glance it appears to be the usual pattern of SLSLL, but the poem's hypometric lower strophe shows that L1-2 correspond to the long-long lines usually found in L4-5. The em dash at the end of L2 reinforces the division. The shortness of L3-5 echo the quickness of the scissor motion of walking legs; the format matches the content. L4-5 are the body, but L3 is neither jo nor body, showing us that the jo can accompany other structures within a tanka. This poem is made up of three strophes: the jo on L1-2, the undefined structure on L3, and the body on L4-5. It shows us a tanka can be extraordinary complex in structure in spite of being small in size.

Conclusion

As we can see, the jo works equally well using a variety of forms. Combining various line lengths with various sizes and placements of the jo gives scores of possible physical structures while still preserving the discipline of a formal form. The jo may not be the only structure used in tanka, but it is an important one. Understanding it will enhance both the poet's skill and the reader's pleasure.

(1) Cranston, Edwin A., ed. and trans. *A Waka Anthology; Volume One: The Gem-Glistening Cup*. California: Stanford University Press, 1998, pp xxiii.

(2) McDonald, Richard. 'What Is Tanka?' Sangeet's Haiku and Poetry Corner. 2006. <<http://home1.pacific.net.sg/~loudon/rick.htm>>

(3) Appears in Cranston, Edwin A., ed. and trans. *A Waka Anthology; Volume One: The Gem-Glistening Cup*. California: Stanford University Press, 1998, pp 698-699.

(4) Appears in Carter, Stephen D., ed. and trans. *Traditional Japanese Poetry: An Anthology*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991, p 77.

(5) Cook, Lewis. 'What is the Kokin Wakashu?' Japanese Text Initiative. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Library. 31 August 2004. <<http://etext.virginia.edu/japanese/kokinshu/intro.html>> Access 24 August 2012.

(6) McClintock, Michael. 'About Taika.' Tanka Central. 2006. <<http://www.themetpress.com/tankacentral/library/research/taika.htm>> Accessed 24 August 2012.

(7) Appears in Hirschfield, Jane. ed. and trans. *The Ink Dark Moon: Love Poems by Ono no Komachi and Izumi Shikibu, Women of the Ancient Court of Japan*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990, pp 11, 178.

(8) Appears in McClintock, Michael, Pamela Miller Ness, and Jim Kacian, eds. *The Tanka Anthology*. Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2003, p 31.

(9) Appears in Cranston, Edwin A., ed. and trans. *A Waka Anthology; Volume One: The Gem-Glistening Cup*. California: Stanford University Press, 1998, pps xxv, 689.

(10) Appears in Kei, M. ed. *Fire Pearls: Short Masterpieces of the Human Heart*. Perryville, MD: M. Kei, Publisher, 2006, p 62.

(11) Appears in Kei, M. ed. *Fire Pearls: Short Masterpieces of the Human Heart*. Perryville, MD: M. Kei, Publisher, 2006, p 83.

(12) Appears in Carter, Stephen D., ed. and trans. *Just Living: Poems and Prose by the Japanese Monk Tonno*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003, p 167.

(13) Appears in Garrison, Denis M., ed. *Jun Fujita : Tanka Pioneer*. Baltimore, MD: MET Press, p 70.

(14) Appears in Kei, M. ed. *Fire Pearls: Short Masterpieces of the Human Heart*. Perryville, MD: Keibooks, Publisher, 2006, p 19.

See also 'Tanka : Structure' in ATPO 16.