

Wet and Dry : Lucille Nixon, Georgia O'Keefe, and Masaoka Shiki on Shasei

by M. Kei

Originally appeared in Atlas Poetica 14, Spring, 2014.

When I wrote 'The Labyrinth of Tanka' (*Modern English Tanka*, 2:3, Spring, 2008), I tackled the criticism that contemporary tanka in English was devoid of Japanese aesthetics and therefore not even tanka, but a sort of free verse mistakenly called tanka because it was published on five lines. In the article I outlined how several Japanese principles such as *miyabi* (courtly elegance, good taste), *aware* (pathos, the awareness of the perishability of beauty), and *yūgen* (mystery and depth) manifested in contemporary Anglophone tanka. Not intended as an exhaustive listing, it demonstrated that even when the terms were unknown, poets had successfully digested Japanese aesthetics and were manifesting them in their work.

At the time I wrote 'Labyrinth,' I was fully aware that I was ignoring a large body of tanka that did not embody these classical principles, so I fully expected to receive a rebuttal. Much to my surprise, it never happened. Therefore, I shall be my own contrarian and discuss the concepts of 'wet' and 'dry' tanka and 'shasei' in opposition to the classical poetics.

Masaoka Shiki (1867–1902) and the other tanka poets of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reformed the old waka, renaming it 'tanka' to signify the break with the past. They infused a moribund literature with new energy and possibilities, and revived it in a form, which although beholden to ancient roots, was a decidedly new flower.

The rule of literary decorum was dramatically broken by Yosano Akiko, who would turn out to be one of Japan's greatest poets. Defying expectations that a Japanese woman should be doll-like, decorous, and submissive, she wrote passionate tanka on any subject she pleased. She even dared to mention her breasts! For the modern reader 'breasts' elicit no particular embarrassment, but for the Japanese of the Meiji period, it was a scandal. Breasts had never been mentioned in tanka before. (1)

Yet breasts were and are essential parts of human life. Masaoka Shiki adopted the term *shasei* ('copying life') and introduced it to tanka. He had learned the term from Japanese artists who were studying and imitating Western art. (2) In 1898 he issued ten letters that sharply criticized traditional tanka. Shasei was a major technique to counter the staleness of the old waka. Although Western poets often assume that Zen is the source of this

apparently artless objectivity, it was not. It was exposure to Western art, especially realism and modernity, that gave Japan a new way of seeing the world. While fans of tanka know how indebted Western tanka is to Japanese aesthetics, few realize how indebted modern Japanese tanka is to Western aesthetics.

Shasei is popular in contemporary Anglophone tanka, although not many poets are familiar with the term. Shasei is a sort of snapshot, 'a sketch from life,' a highly imagistic poem that makes no overt emotional statement and into which the persona of the poet does not obviously intrude. Such seemingly objective tanka are 'dry' and may be contrasted with the subjective and personal style of traditional tanka, which we may designate as 'wet' (3) from the abundance of tears (real or implied) shed in it. Emotionalism is an ancient aspect of tanka poetry. Writing in the preface to the *Kokinwakashū*, Lord Ki no Tsurayuki (872?-945 AD) defined Japanese poetry as, "Our native poetry springs from the heart of man as its seed, producing the countless leaves of language." (4) Adopting shasei was therefore a rebellion against classical poetics.

Shiki and his colleagues deliberately embraced objectivity and realism. (5) One of his disciples, Nagatsuka Takashi, described writing tanka as "coming into direct contact with nature and depicting it from life." (6) On the other hand, another of Shiki's disciples, Itō Sachio, insisted it was impossible to achieve true objectivity because the personality of the poet was inevitably tied to the poem. (7) Even Shiki acknowledged that by choosing to write about one thing as opposed to another, a poet was creating a subjective experience. However, he did not see this as a flaw. "It is my basic principle to express as clearly as possible the poetic quality I myself feel to be beautiful." (8)

In the ideal sketch of life tanka, the surface is the thing; there is no difference between inner and outer, no veil between the thing and what we perceive. It is a direct seeing. It is what it is. There is no mystery to it. Unfortunately, this runs the risk of being superficial and banal. We like to adorn our walls with posters, calendars, prints, and other images we find appealing. There is no requisite that such images be 'great art,' we choose them because they appeal to us, not because they have been approved by an artistic authority.

Yet to characterize shasei in this way is to be short-sighted. The starkest shasei do not need to intrude an overt subjectivity; the image speaks for itself. Like a photograph, a tanka can be a thing of stunning beauty, great whimsy, or even pathos.

Today at Pearl Harbor,
From the shore line,
At highest tide,
A gossamer mist,
With the deepest stillness.

~Hagino Mastuoka (1963) (9)

It is not necessary to ban the poet entirely from shasei; many sketches of life are snapshots of the author or other people. The difference is that human beings are objects in the frame of the poem, rather than subjective actors. The presentation is dry; it is devoid of commentary by the poet.

On a country road
an old woman walks;
the autumn sun
casts her shadow
long and thin.

~Jun Fujita (1923) (10)

The surface may be the thing, but in spite of being laid out plainly, it defies easy analysis. This makes sketches from life some of the most complicated poems to interpret. Their utter simplicity renders them opaque; we cannot find clues from the poet to tell us what they mean. We must do the work of interpretation entirely by ourselves.

In the early years of tanka in North America, shasei was rarely attempted by non-Japanese poets and rarely successful. Consider the following:

Bamboo Temple

Deep blue iris grows
Around the bamboo temple
With mulberry trees
While actors in gay costumes
Chant the *tanka* verse.

~Eleanor Chaney Grubb (1949) (11)

Autumn in Japan

Mist, as delicate
As a bridal veil, surrounds
Mount Fujiyama.
The high, snowy crest glistens
Against a blue autumn sky.

~Grace Cecilia Callahan (1975) (12)

In these two Orientalist tanka, we have visions of a Japan that exists only in the authors' imaginations. They are titled and conform to the sanjuichi pattern of 5-7-5-7-7 syllables. Grubb intuitively feels that this is too long and deviates with a five syllable final line. (Tanka in English more closely approximates the light and fragmentary nature of the original when they have fewer syllables. Kozue Uzawa, editor of *Gusts*, recommends twenty. (13)) Callahan managed a competent poem considering the limits within which she was working. The rest of the poems in these two books make use of Oriental images, archaic and poetic diction. They personify. Their flowers "breathe" perfume; their winds "sigh." They do not trust the thing-as-it-is to be poetry.

During the twentieth century, American tanka poets tutored by Japanese-American teachers fared better. They strove for realism, sincerity, and artlessness. They eschewed Oriental images, but faithfully recorded details of various ethnic groups (including the Japanese) when they encountered them in real life.

Coming down
Three little boys
Swinging fishing poles
In their baskets
Three little rainbow trouts.

~Lucille Nixon (14)

Lucille Nixon was the first American not of Japanese ancestry to win the Imperial Poetry Contest (1957). Her teacher, Tomoe Tana, was herself a previous winner (1947).

Nixon and Tana edited and translated *Sounds from the Unknown*, an anthology of over one hundred Japanese Canadians and Americans. Nixon wrote the introduction and laid out the principles of tanka. Nixon did not mention shasei by name, but the concept is implicit in her writing. For example, she notes that most [Japanese tanka] poets in North America are Realists, as opposed to Symbolists or Romantics.

Lucille Nixon was mentored in tanka by Tomoe Tana, a member of the tanka circle run by respected

tanka poet and editor Yoshihiko Tomari. Tomari had been running a tanka circle in the USA since the 1920s, and was also active in Japanese tanka circles. It was his connections that enabled him to run a tanka contest for North American tanka poets that was judged by three major tanka poets in Japan, including Mokichi Saitō. (15) Nixon had the benefit of training under the auspices of a classic sensei-student relationship. She describes tanka thusly:

The image, in other words, the sensory intake, must be clear, but there must be enough space around it so that the reader may delight himself with it by using his own associations. The poet must not preach or editorialize *about* the image. [. . .] The poem should be a statement of what IS. (16) [emphasis in original]

Here we have an important point regarding tanka in general and shasei in particular: the poem, plain and without authorial commentary, lacking in ostentation and ornament, is the thing. The apparent simplicity of such works sometimes led people to wonder if they were poems at all. Nixon addressed that question,

Some Western critics argue that the traditional forms of Japanese poetry, the haiku and tanka, are not true poetry. Alas, they do not seem to fit into our Western forms and we have no term which truly describes them. If poetry is “a cry from the human heart”; if it is “the rhythmical expression of deep feeling”; or if, as another poet says, “Making a poem is a way of trying to understand experience and, therefore, the poet is creating a self as well as a poem,” why then we can say that the Japanese write the finest poetry of all. (17)

Writing about her own process of discovery, Nixon said,

[F]or years each spring I had admired a certain wild flower, the horse mint, for its lavender coloring, its fringed and delicate outline, so fragile though balanced on a stern and forbidding stem, but I had never noticed its tiny coral center. I couldn't believe that it was there when first I noticed it, and so I looked at the many blossoms to see if all were sent up from this roseate center, and sure enough, they were all the same, and had been for centuries, no doubt! I just had not been able to *see*. (18) [emphasis in original]

The emphasis on image in classical Japanese waka means that even the oldest poems partake to some extent of shasei, although the term was not invented until the Meiji era. The important thing about the sketch of life is

that it chucked out the old aesthetics such as *miyabi*, broke the rule of good taste that excluded ‘vulgar’ subjects (the female breast, for example) and introduced modern language and subjects (tuberculosis and trains). It disconnected from the classical past and plugged into modern reality.

In English, where contemporary life has always been accepted in tanka, the magnitude of the break cannot really be comprehended. In spite of the reverence many Western tanka poets hold for the classical Japanese poets, our method of writing using vernacular language, modern subjects, and direct experience are a product of Shiki's revolt against the very poets they hold dear.

Not as common as the wet style of tanka, shasei are still a major subset of tanka in English. The following examples come from *Take Five : Best Contemporary Tanka, Volume 3*, but shasei can be found in all the tanka journals, including those that embrace the wet style.

from the neon bridge
a line of red lights
turning green
all the way
to the church

~Carlos Colón

next day
the old, blind gelding
roams his pasture
searching in darkness
for the mare I shot

~Dave Bacharach

evening mist
winters our city streets . . .
in subways
lie bundle after bundle
of human-grey cold

~Dawn Bruce

new Jerusalem
railway station—
a soldier
asleep on the platform
gun pointing at Heaven

~Gerry Jacobsen

the pills
for each day
separated
into compartments
like tiny coffins

~Jack Prewitt

struggling
the old woman with a walker
crossing the icy road
her dog in a small bag
along with groceries

~Johannes S. H. Bjerg

in the silence
after the guests have gone
from deep inside
the heart of the dulcimer
a cricket begins to sing

~Karen Cesar

the last day of December
a grasshopper
gets off
a green pepper from Chile
and surveys his new home

~M. Kei

a winter storm
infiltrates our neighbourhood
silent, white
the handcuffed husband
head down on a squad car

~Marc Thompson

so light
it does not register
on the hand of the scales
a kitchen spider
caked in flour

~Matt Morden

she and he
lights at each end
of the house
turning on and off
at different times

~Roary Williams

at the Jewish deli
a bent man wearing a black hat
drinks his tea with a spoon—
an old woman alone
talking to her scrambled eggs

~Sanford Goldstein

Several of these poems edge away from a purely objective presentation. Pills are separated into compartments “like tiny coffins,” bundles of “human-grey cold” lie in a subway, a soldier’s gun points at “Heaven,” while a winter storm “infiltrates our neighborhood.” Such words are freighted with meaning that makes obvious the human agency that created them, but in fact, all of them betray the same human intention by virtue of appearing in print. They are ‘dry,’ but none of them is ‘objective.’

All poems—because they are poems—intend to evoke a response in the reader. They manipulate their words to achieve that effect. Even the driest tanka are, in fact, highly subjective. In Carlos Colón’s poem about the traffic lights, the human presence is implied. Who are they and what are they doing? Are they going to the church, or merely heading in that direction? Is it a wedding or a funeral? A social protest? Rush hour traffic? We have no clue what is actually happening in this scene. Maybe nothing is; maybe the poet’s sole intention was to capture a visually interesting scene, just like a poster of city lights. Or perhaps a larger theme of urban alienation is implied, as in the movie *Koyaanisqatsi: Life out of Balance*. As a result, this poem, which on the surface seems the most objective, is in fact the most subjective. Its meaning depends entirely upon the reaction of the reader—and the poet deliberately composed it that way.

Poets, like photographers, choose what they will depict, at what focus and distance, with emphasis on which particular details. They decide how to frame the image and how to present it. We speak of a photographer ‘composing’ a photograph exactly as we speak of a poet ‘composing’ a poem, and for the same reasons. Choosing what to include and what to omit is a subjective act by the poet: those choices are precisely what the reader perceives and reacts to. Their simplicity is deceptive; such artlessness is extremely difficult to accomplish. That’s why such poems are in the minority—but not a minor part—of tanka today.

Tanka is not just a short lyric originally from Japan composed of five poetic parts; it is a mode of perception, and the tools of tanka are all devoted to capturing and communicating the perception to the reader. Both wet and dry styles of tanka observe things and pass them through the subjective medium of the human poet.

Poetry, by definition, is subjective; if it is not subjective, it is not poetry.

This extreme focus on perception is not characteristic of Western literature. Certainly Western poetry is insightful with flashes of brilliant observation, but the relentless pursuit of plain sight is not the universal goal and practice of Western literature. Tanka is devoted to this intense level of seeing and has exerted itself for fourteen hundred years to develop the tools necessary to transmit it in the alien environment of the written word. The result is a form of poetry that is compact and illusive to a degree that exceeds any other poetry in the world. Poetry that lacks this illusive compactness cannot accomplish the goals of tanka and therefore is not tanka. Novices rapidly find out that this requires a tremendous amount of discipline.

The apparent artlessness of the best shasei requires an intense degree of artistry. The visual arts provide an example of the same principle at work: the art of Georgia O'Keefe. Wanting to make people actually stop and look, she blew up ordinary flowers, such as pansies, into giant canvases, the sheer size of which stopped the viewer in their tracks. The images themselves are deceptively simple—the structure of a pansy is not complex—yet rendered by the artist it rewards endless contemplation. O'Keefe had the acute vision necessary to see what is right in front of all of us, and to bring it to our attention so that we marvel at its beauty. O'Keefe's flower paintings are visual tanka.

It raises an interesting question: if a tanka, normally a miniature poem printed on a small page, were blown up to the size of an O'Keefe canvas, would it have the same impact? The 3Lights Gallery curated by Liam Wilkinson presented tanka (and haiku) online in a virtual art gallery in which the sidewise scroll was meant to create the sensation of poems as art objects hung on the gallery wall. The gallery presentation was successful and had an impact not replicated when the same exhibits were reproduced as books or PDFs.

In a similar vein, Giselle Maya's handmade books, by virtue of their tactile and visual sensations, create a frame that enhances the experience of the poems. Tanka is increasingly being performed, either as spoken word poetry, or as part of larger multi-media presentations of art, music, and dance, as in the case Poets on Site. Tanka is even incorporated into choral and symphonic works by professionals in the field of classical music. Tanka poetry from the ancient days has shown a powerful sense of accretion as they become part of prosimetrum of various sorts combining poetry and prose, appearing in tales, diaries, letters, and public performances, growing into sequences, renga, rensaku, and collaborative tanka. Modern experiments with extended tanka and shaped

tanka show that tanka is an exceptionally fertile medium for all sorts of creative developments. Skeptics might claim that these constant attempts to enlarge the tanka are evidence that tanka itself is too small to convey significant subjects, but I regard it as evidence of the opposite. Tanka is an exceptionally fertile seed from which many things can grow. If tanka were truly limited and limiting, it would have been abandoned long ago.

Shasei, by presenting the thing-as-it-is, depends upon the stark power of the image. This is something that translates well, making tanka one of the most portable forms of poetry in the world. The ballade and limerick do not adapt well to languages as varied as Chinese, Hebrew, Romanian, and Luganda. When the poet inserts subjective expression, he runs the risk of being stopped at the cultural barrier. Will readers in countries as diverse as Bhutan and Mexico understand the poet's message? By contrast, although the 'sketch of life' may be mysterious to the viewer, it is still viewable. The poem, by being utterly concrete, achieves the maximum of abstraction.

Critics who genuflect to the classical Japanese poets have missed Shiki's point entirely. When they castigate contemporary tanka and claim that it is not really tanka, what they really mean is that it is not waka. The break between the two is real—but the break was made by the Japanese themselves. By adopting the Western notion of the sketch of life, Shiki and modern Japanese poets created a hybrid literature that is as much Western as it is Eastern.

Shasei is what makes contemporary tanka contemporary. Shasei has its roots in the vision of the classical waka poets, but those classical poets deliberately chose to avoid seeing subjects—like war and disease—that modern tanka accepts. The rule of good taste is broken; shasei sees the thing-as-it-is. It does not editorialize. Shasei is a modern aesthetic for a modern poetry.

Citations:

1. Goldstein, Sanford, and Seishi Shinoda, eds. and trans. Akiko's Yosano's *Tangled Hair : Selected Tanka from Midaregami*. Rutland, VT and Tokyo, Japan: Charles E. Tuttle and Company, 1987, p 21.
2. Keene, Donald. *Dawn to the West : Japanese Literature of the Modern Era*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, p 50.
3. Goldstein, Sanford, and Seishi Shinoda, eds. and trans. *Red Lights : Selected Tanka Sequences from Shakkō by Mokichi Saitō*. Lafayette, IN: Purdue Research Foundation, 1989, p 38.

4. Ki no Tsurayuki. 'Preface.' *Kokinwakashū*. Adapted by Rex Pay, 2001, from *Primitive and Mediaeval Japanese Texts Translated into English* by F. V. Dickins. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1906. pp 379-391, <<http://www.humanistictexts.org/tsurayuki.htm>>. Accessed 25 November 2012.
5. Keene, p 55.
6. Keene, p 56.
7. Keene, p 56.
8. Keene, p 51.
9. Nixon, Lucille, and Tomoe Tana, eds. *Sounds from the Unknown*. Denver, CO: Alan Swallow, Publisher, 1963, p 43.
10. Garrison, Denis M., ed. *Jun Fujita : Tanka Pioneer*. Baltimore, MD: MET Press, 2007, p 59.
11. Grubb, Eleanor Chaney. *Blue Is the Iris*. Baltimore, MD: n.p, 1949, unpaginated.
12. Tanka Chapter of the California Federation of Chaparral Poets. *Tanka*. Hollywood, CA: Richards Offset Printing, 1975, p. 11.
13. Uzawa, Kozue. 'From the Editor.' *Gusts* 4. Lethbridge, AB, CAN: Tanka Canada, p 1.
14. Tomoe Tana, ed. *Tomoshihi : Lucille M. Nixon's Japanese poem, tanka collection and biography with her study of Japanese tanka poetry*. Palo Alto, CA. 1978, p 127.
15. Kubota, Utsubo, Saito Mokichi & Shaku Choukou, judges. *Zaibei Dourou Hyakunin Issue (One poem each from 100 of our countrymen in America.)* Tomoe Tana, trans. JP: Nippon no mado, May, 1951 [Japanese]; [English translation published Tana's *History of Japanese Tanka in America*, 1985.]
16. Nixon, pp xvii-xviii.
17. Nixon, p xvii.
18. Nixon, p xvi.