

Tanka : Structure

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In a previous article, “Tanka Structure : The ‘Jo’ or ‘Preface,’” (ATPO 13), I discussed the ‘jo’ in detail, so I will omit it here.

Introduction

In the various debates over what constitutes tanka, structure is rarely mentioned. Perhaps it goes without saying that tanka have structure, but since it is what holds a tanka together, it is worth analyzing .

Structure is what distinguishes poetry from ordinary speech and also from prose. Prose has structure, but it is a different sort of structure. Ordinary speech has some structure, but what structure it possesses is often undermined by lapses in logic, tangents, and fumbling around looking for the right words. The structures of poetry, especially of tanka, derive from their prosody: Tanka were and still are songs. This is why tanka is usually described as lyric poetry.

Even so, there is very little discussion about tanka structure or how different sorts of structures serve particular purposes better than others. This article is an attempt to identify various forms of structure as an aid both to reading and writing tanka.

Refrain

The very oldest tanka made use of structures familiar in Western songs, such as the refrain. A refrain is a line or word that is repeated at different points in the song. The structures often looked like those below, but could vary:

L1 body
L2 refrain
L3 body
L4 body
L5 refrain

L1 body
L2 body
L3 refrain
L4 body
L5 refrain

L1 body
L2 body
L3 body

L4 refrain

L5 refrain

As the refrain proper declined in popularity, its work was often done by repeating words or sounds, thus keeping up the musicality of the verse while diversifying the vocabulary and expanding the meaning. In other words, alliteration, consonance, and assonance came to replace repetition.

Yakumo tatsu
Izumo yaegaki
Tsumagomi ni
Yaegaki tsukuru
Sono yaegaki o

*In eight-cloud-rising
Izumo an eightfold fence
To enclose my wife
An eightfold fence I build,
And, oh, that eightfold fence!*

~Attributed to Susanoo no Mikoto, trans. Edwin Cranston, WAKA-1 p 7.

In the tanka above, the oldest in the Japanese canon, L2, 4, and 5 are refrains, although L1, with its repetition of the 'ya' sound and the number eight, almost qualifies as a refrain, too. Variations of the refrain as seen in this verse were common in Japanese prosody. When courtly culture adopted tanka, refrains went out of fashion. The intense compression which is now regarded as a hallmark of tanka eliminated redundancy. Nonetheless, syntactic doubling remained in use as did repetition.

Incantations

Incantations are a subset of songs, so although not technically a 'structure,' it's worth giving them some attention. Already archaic by the time of the Man'yōshū, these tanka were sung as prayers or magic spells. In modern English-language tanka they are part of a subset of poems that may be referred to as 'magic realism.' Now most commonly written by tanka poets of color to invoke and celebrate their heritage, they are occasionally written by others.

Kyo wa nigashi
Haru no yube o
Oku-no-in no
Nijugo bosatsu
Uta uketamae

Bitter the sutras:

*O twenty-five Buddhist saints
Of the innermost shrine,
Accept my song
This spring evening.*

~Akiko Yosano, trans. Sanford Goldstein & Seishi Shinoda, from *Tangled Hair*, pps 4, 111.

electrify me
spin your youth in a charm,
awaken runes
dormant with age and distance,
ripen once more this old tree

~John Daleiden, FRPL-1, p 21.

John Daleiden is a poet whose work ranges from classically styled tanka to those which invoke the voodoo of the Caribbean. In this tanka, the incantatory rhythm and images build to an ecstatic climax. The verse also utilizes a reversed structure in which the body placed on L1 is followed by a four line jo whose concluding L5 provides the flash of knowledge necessary to properly interpret the erotic subtext and invest L1 with its full meaning.

It may seem strange to identify a two-word line as ‘the body,’ but when I say ‘body,’ I mean it is the point of the poem. The body is the action, situation, or problem that causes the poem to exist. L2-5 exist to support and amplify the body. As striking as the imagery is, it is not the only way the point could have been illustrated. The imperative in L5 might tempt the reader to interpret it as the body of the poem, but L1 is also an imperative and a stronger one because of its directness and brevity. L5 exists to illustrate L1, not the other way around.

Narrative

Narrative is another structure that was popular with the old poets. It is not necessary for narratives to begin at the beginning and go on to the end; they could begin in the middle and imply the end, or begin at the beginning and leave the end unstated, etc. Completion is not required.

ima sara ni
ware Fa kaFerazi
taki mitutu
yobedo kikazu to
toFaba kotaFeyo *

*From this point on
I shall not return;*

*We saw the [water]falls
And called him, but he did not hear—
Should anyone so enquire, tell them that.*

~Archbishop Henjō, trans. Unknown, *2001 Waka for Japan 2001*.

* *Romaji is in Early Old Japanese. Most old tanka are transcribed into modern Japanese, then translated.*

Henjō's poem sketches a sequence of events but clearly indicates that they are part of a larger story. We can't guess what brought the speaker to his current situation, but the sense of being in the middle of a story is strong.

Since it is difficult to get an entire story into something as short as a tanka, many narrative poems are 'shasei' or 'sketches of life.' Shiki particularly advocated sketches of life as part of his reform to put tanka back in touch with the lives of real people. Sketches from life make up a large part of modern tanka.

kisha no oto no
hashiri sugitaru
kaki no to no
hari yawaraka ni
harusame no furu

*the roar of a train
hurtling by;
and lingering round
these budding treetops
whirling wreaths of smoke*

~Masaoka Shiki, trans. Sanford Goldstein & Seishi Shinoda, *Songs of a Bamboo Village*, pps 212, 271.

Cause and Effect

Narrative has a cousin, namely, cause and effect. With this structure, A causes B. The causal effect may be real or imaginary and sometimes reaches the level of hyperbole. In the subjective experience of the poem, the external and internal are linked.

dawn
and you open
your deep-green eyes
blackbirds stir
somewhere in the conifers

~John Barlow, TTA, p 14.

In Barlow's poem the juxtaposition of eyes and trees makes it seem as if the beloved opening her/his eyes causes the blackbirds to stir. The depiction of the beloved's eyes as deep-green parallels the greenness of the conifers, strengthening the notion that the eyes' opening causes the birds to respond. 'Bird' is also British slang for an attractive young woman, as well as the stimulation of the male who observes her. Thus there is an erotic subtext which provides an even more direct cause and effect.

Dawn suggests that poet and his beloved are in bed together. The use of the term 'conifer' softens the obviousness of the phallic pine tree (as well as alluding to 'morning wood'). The beloved (presumably a woman) opening her eyes can also be taken as representation of a more erotic action. Barlow's poem is a masterpiece of artlessness and good taste, and on both levels, cause and effect pull the two parts together and intensify the poem.

Conversational Poem

Narrative has another cousin, the conversational poem. In such a poem, one speaker recites the first half of the poem and the second person answers. These poems could be composed by one person or by two, or by one person creating two persona. This also includes rhetorical questions in which the speaker answers himself, or professes himself unable to answer. They can even cover philosophical questions. In fact, the speaker doesn't even have to be human. It could be a frog, mountain, god, or any other personified or imagined entity.

ayaushi
ima wa nogarene
to koe kaete
mayami wo nozoku
sudeni kage nashi
danger!
get out this moment!
calling out
I peer into the darkness
no sign of life anywhere

~Toki Zenmaro, trans. Makoto Ueda, MJTA, p 103.

This poem, with its unknown voice calling out a warning too late, was written on the day of the Great Tokyo Earthquake. The poet's home and neighborhood were destroyed by the resulting fire. The poet has taken the well-worn technique of the rhetorical question in an entirely new direction and thereby given voice to desolation.

Ellipsis

A rare form of structure in old tanka was ellipsis. Ellipsis . . . when a line or poem trails off into three dots indicating that the speaker's voice is trailing away rather than coming to a full stop. It is more common in English than Japanese. Ellipsis is often used as a crutch by a poet who doesn't know how to end the poem. That a poem should imply more than it says does not mean that it is incomplete.

trust has nothing
to do with it, either
you have the courage
to step off the cliff of love
 . . . or you don't

~M. Kei, MET 1, p 96.

In the poem above, formatting is used to give visual representation to the 'cliff of love' and the sometimes frightening choices it presents. L5 is unusual in beginning with an ellipsis, but it slows the reader's transit from L4 to L5, which reinforces the gravity of the choice and sensation of leaping. The poem may appear closed, but it doesn't answer the question posed. In fact, we don't even know who is making the choice. Is the speaker stating his own dilemma? Is he describing the dilemma of some other person? Is he sharing homespun wisdom of a general nature? As concrete as the poem seems, it circles around itself; even its content is elliptical.

Lines and Phrases

Tanka are conventionally written on five lines in English, but other lineations have been tried. Unusual lineation appears in some of the earliest efforts by non-Japanese to write tanka; at least one example occurs in the 1959 anthology *Japan: Theme and Variations*, and before that, occasionally in Jun Fujita's work. More recently, translator Steven D. Carter has been breaking up tanka into multiple lines.

nakinuredo
wakare mo yarade
tori no ne no
kikoenu made ni
akuru yowa kana

*We heard the call—
 but still
 we put off parting;
until
 —before we heard
the cock calling once again—
 night had given way*

to dawn.

~Monk Tonna, Tran. Steven D. Carter, *Just Living*, p 89.

Tanka in Japanese are traditionally written on one or two lines, or broken wherever the calligrapher finds aesthetically pleasing. Tanka in English are usually written on five lines, but have also been written on one, two, three, four, or more lines. The number of lines should be made to serve the structure of the poem, but generally speaking, poets working in English allow the line breaks to define the structure. Sometimes this is done deliberately as demonstrated by effective use of hypo- and hypermetric lines, punctuation, white space, caesura, enjambment, capitalization, etc. A handful of poets, such as Denis M. Garrison, regard the line and poetic phrase to be identical in tanka. He emphasizes the importance of the line in his poetry by capitalizing the beginning of lines.

Tanka in Japanese and English are made up of five poetic phrases. Putting each phrase on its own line makes clear how the poem is to be read, but this also deprives the poet of various tools, such as enjambment. Academic poets, such as Sonia Sanchez and Quincy Troupe, use enjambment to fit their lines into the sanjuichi pattern of 5-7-5-7-7 syllables. Objections to enjambment are generally objections to poems being forced to fit the sanjuichi pattern without concern for the five internal poetic phrases that define tanka. Just because a poem is formatted on five lines doesn't mean that it is composed of five poetic phrases.

On the other hand, highly skilled tanka poets can place the poetic phrase in tension with the sentence, line, and line break with powerful results.

this past August,
all at once, the abuse of a decade
condensed into a bullet
 there's a house for sale
 in our neighborhood

~Larry Kimmel, TAK5-1, p 104.

L2 is composed of two grammatical phrases but forms one poetic phrase; it is a single unit of prosody and meaning in spite of the pause in the middle. The pause collapses two phrases with opposite meanings into a single entity. The swiftness of the action focusses a long decade into a lethal bullet on L3. The explosive intensity of L3 opens up into the slower, uneventful L4-5, mimicking the slowness with which a house is sold. (Especially one with a tragic history.)

L1-3 is a grammatically correct sentence, and so is L4-5. Yet even though the first sentence has twice as many syllables as the second sentence, it is subjectively perceived as faster. The division of the sentence into short phrases hits us like a spray of bullets. It is followed by the slow, staring shock of the aftermath depicted in the second sentence.

The poem doesn't tell us exactly what happened, and it doesn't need to. The poet's skill has depicted the whole history and its fatal results by manipulating phrases, sentences, lines, and line breaks.

Direct Expression

Direct expression has been more common in Japanese tanka than ellipsis and unusual lineation. In 'direct expression' the poet says what is on his mind, plainly and directly. It is sometimes called 'abstract' because it often lacks concrete imagery. Several of Ono no Komachi's famous love poems employ this structure. The danger of direct expression is that a poet may say what's on his mind and call it poetry when it's really nothing more than a journal entry.

Aru wa naku
naki wa kazu sou
yo no naka ni
aware izure no
hi made nagekan

*In this world
the living grow fewer,
the dead increase—
how much longer must I
carry this body of grief?*

~Ono no Komachi, trans. Jane Hirschfield & Mariko Aratani, *The Ink Dark Moon*, p 45.

In this poignant lament, Komachi says exactly what is on her mind. There is no mystery, no implied further meaning, just the unanswered question posed by all who suffer. Hers is a naked expression of mortality without any sort of ornament and needs none.

Indirect Expression

This leads to 'indirect expression.' In such poems the poet uses analogy, metaphor, parable, symbols or other indirect methods of representing a subject which might never be plainly stated.

Amabito no
isoshiku kaeru
hijiki mono wa
konishi hamaguri
gona shitadami

*Fishermen home from
their day's work:
on a bed of seaweed
little top shells, clams,
hermit crabs, periwinkles.*

~Saigyō, trans. Burton Watson, *Poems of a Mountain Home*, p 190.

At first glance, Saigyō's poem appears to be a sketch of life depicting the end of the day for fishermen. Yet Saigyō has chosen to depict the most humble inhabitants of the sea: little clams, crabs and periwinkles. Fisherfolk, like periwinkles, were barely noticeable to the nobility. It can be interpreted as a sort of rustic still life and appreciated on that level. Like Marie Antoinette playing in her village, the aristocrats of Heian Japan would pick shoots in the country and engage in other highly sanitized rustic observances.

However, the poet was a monk who left the vanities of the Imperial circle to move through the real world. Therefore, we might suspect he had a deeper reason for presenting this image. Specifically, if this handful of seaweed and small creatures constitutes the fishermen's catch, how were they going to feed their families?

A Buddhist monk presumably had compassion for the sufferings of the common folk, but the era's rule of good taste prohibited including such vulgar topics in poetry. Saigyō worked around that by presenting what appears to be a still life of charming sea objects. Japan is an island nation and fishing has always been a staple of the diet; surely his readers must have seen the implication. We are so accustomed to viewing classic tanka through rose-colored glasses that the larger context escapes us.

Found Tanka or Kyōka

Among modern poets, new methods of structure have been employed, such as the 'found tanka.' More correctly a 'kyōka' ('mad poem'), a 'found tanka' detects the rhythms of tanka/kyōka in the natural utterance of some famous person, usually a political figure, and sets them into tanka form to parody both politics and tanka. It can be argued that the poet is not the creator of such works, but it was the poet's creative skill that discovered structure and made it visible to others. This is not high art, but it is still creative. Wordplay and wit are staples of the genre.

The First Lady: A Found Tanka

Afghanistan will
be wonderful for tourists
it is so exotic
and has a very, very
fascinating history.

~Stephen Lawrence, *New Verse News*.

Various other forms of wordplay appear in both ancient and modern tanka and kyoka, including syntactic doubling, puns, zeugma, pivot words, swing lines, palindromes, acrostics, cryptics, hidden names, lists, riddles, and other games, but I shall not go into them in detail. Suffice it to say, word games are part of the tradition.

Minimalism

Another modern structure is minimalism. Some critics object that minimalist tanka are nothing more than haiku stretched out over five lines. Such an objection ignores that haiku and tanka are both defined by more than just their length.

biting
into the peach
it seemed
it did
kiss me

~Michael McClintock, TTA p 106.

McClintock, who is widely recognized as an expert on both haiku and tanka, has given us a poem composed of five phrases on five lines, a widely accepted convention in tanka. If this is a haiku, where should the line breaks be? The poem can't be formatted on three lines without altering the rhythm in infelicitous ways. It is a minimalist tanka.

Extended Tanka

Extended tanka are another modern form. They include longer total length and syllable count than the usual 31 syllables. Extended tanka should not be confused with a bloated tanka in need of editing. In an extended tanka, every word is necessary.

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, *Tanka : Poems in Exile*, p 52.

In this complexly structured poem, Fujita uses two jo and a body of one line. The first jo, L1-2, is made up of two extended lines, each of 9 syllables. The body on L3 contains 7 syllables. Its intermediate length mediates between the hypermetric first jo and the hypometric second jo. The break after L3 is enforced with a blank line, then the minimalist closing jo of L4-5 is presented. Within the closing jo, the structure of rhetorical question and answer is used. L3 and the break imply that the poem is done, but the sudden sound of L4 raises interest and brings the poem to a climax that resolves in L5. This poem about loneliness and longing is structured like a suspense thriller: a long, moody build up, a sudden irruption, followed by a swift denouement. It uses classic tanka techniques in thoroughly modern ways.

Conclusion

Most modern tanka poets seem to develop their structures intuitively and without a conscious awareness of what they are doing. Therefore, it is a useful exercise for a poet to reread tanka he or she likes and ask, “What is the structure of this poem? How does it work to convey the content?” While some readers fear that ‘too much analysis’ might ‘ruin the magic,’ only a weak poem could be embarrassed by close examination. Analyzing a good tanka deepens our understanding and appreciation for it.

Poets should also go through their own poetry and ask themselves what structures they use. If a structure is muddled or nonexistent, that may be a sign of a defective poem, as well as suggesting what can be done to repair it. The poet should also look to see if he or she has fallen into the habit of using the same structure repeatedly. Would the work be more interesting if a different structure was used? These and many other questions can help improve both our writing and our appreciation of tanka.

Unfortunately, this article has omitted some very important considerations regarding structure, such as how to integrate structure with content. It is impossible to cover all possible aspects of structure in a single article. Hopefully the material provides a jumping off point for poets and readers to further their own skills.

Recommended reading: “Tanka Structure : The ‘Jo’ or ‘Preface’” by M. Kei in ATPO 13.

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