

# The Road Ahead for Tanka in English

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## *Introduction: Five Lines in Search of a Context*

Contemporary tanka practice in English displays a marked tendency to combine and integrate discrete units and thereby extend and amplify its abbreviated form. This desire for a larger structure has centered itself, to date, on the elaboration in poetic composition and theory of the tanka sequence. The sketchy properties of tanka—understatement, suggestion and emphasis on what is not said as well as what is—invite such expansion (Garrison, 4-5). These evolving poetic forms approximate the schematic organization of Western stanzaic verse yet may allow or demand—though this is a matter in dispute—greater autonomy to the individual tanka than a stanza might possess in the Occident (McClintock, 23 and Kei, 193-194).

A parallel process is evident in the classical and medieval history of Japanese waka, the forerunner of English tanka, where integration of individual poems into larger cohesive works advanced roughly contemporaneously along two separate lines: adaptation to certain prose genres and incorporation in imperial anthologies.

Even after it is clear to us intellectually that we should not consider Japanese literary works in terms of our own genres, we may find it difficult emotionally to accept the fact that the same work may be called a tale (*monogatari*), a diary (*nikki*), or, significantly, a poetic collection (*kashû*). The shorter Japanese poetic units are quite simply more adhesive to fictional—or even nonfictional—strands of prose than our

own discrete, autonomously conceived poems. To a very considerable extent, then, a court poem is five lines in search of a context. But the context need not be made of prose. Collections such as the imperial anthologies show the same tendency to integration as do the diaries. The two main groups of poems in an imperial collection led the way to the practice of bringing separate poems together into a whole. The seasonal poems were arranged by a very natural temporal progression . . . . A temporal progression was also natural to the love poems, which were arranged in the pattern of a courtly love affair. (Miner, 28)

Anthologies of English tanka observe Western convention which honors authorial identity and intent. Hence, poems in such collections are presented alphabetically or chronologically under each individual author's name. Organizing the texts of many poets temporally in seasonal or love sequences is generally shunned. Given the history and strength of the tradition, the liberties that editors of the Japanese classics demonstrated in relation to the individual waka are unlikely to find adoption. Practical issues of copyright, too, militate against the ancient mode of textual exegesis by setting a waka in a novel context.

What of prose, then? Exactly how did Japanese poets employ prose in relation to waka? Are such principles, more pertinently, applicable today as a supplementary or alternative architectonic scheme to the tanka sequence?

***Preface and Poem-Tale:  
The Jewel of Waka in its Prose Setting***

Prose genres of the classical and medieval Japanese periods prove notoriously difficult to define as noted by Miner and others (McCullough, 6-7). For the purposes of our abbreviated

discussion, the lengthy and ambitious works of romance, chronicle, diary and travel, such as *Tale of Genji*, *Tale of the Heike*, *Diary of Izumi Shikibu* or *Account of a Journey to the East*, can be largely set aside. Answers to our inquiries may be more readily found in a brief survey of those nascent forms of Japanese prose that lie closer to oral traditions: the preface or headnote (*kotobagaki*) and the poem-tale (*uta monogatari*).

Myths, folktales and anecdotes from eighth-century documents betray an earlier oral provenance and constitute Japan's oldest surviving tales. These stories are called *setsuna*

... a term translatable as “explanatory talk,” “informative narration,” or simply “telling.” *Setsuna* have in common brevity; an uncomplicated plot unfolded in plain, direct language; character delineation through dialogue and action rather than through description or psychological analysis; and a predilection for amusing, startling, dramatic, or marvelous subject matter. (McCullough, 7)

The preface and poem-tale share in the episodic nature of *setsuna* while adding to its folk origin the early sophistication of a literate culture.

The prefatory notes that introduce waka are of two kinds. One is purely functional and expository in the narrowest sense, being concerned with providing the reader only with a factual summary of such basic information as the time and place of composition, the name of a patron, the public occasion of the writing or the set topic (*dai*) of a formal poetic gathering. A few examples from the imperial anthology, *Kokinshū*, will suffice: “On white chrysanthemums,” “From the poetry contest held at the residence of Prince Koresada,” “Composed when he had retired to a mountain village . . .” or, the common and laconic entry, “Topic unknown” (Rodd, 127-128). The second type of

headnote or preface opens itself to the anecdotal and expressive relation of material, subjective or objective, that interacts with the waka to follow and establishes a context that, to some degree, conditions the waka's interpretation just as the poem, in a retrospective turn, sheds new light on the preceding prose. The merely summary and factual preface holds no interest as literature, so we are concerned here solely with the latter type.

A concise description of the poem-tale follows:

The actual formal structure of *Genji* is the episode, and this concept of form is first realized in *Tales of Ise*..... The unique contribution of *Tales of Ise* is the dialogue of formal elements achieved in its structure by the interrelation of lyric and narrative qualities....

The narrative sections of *Tales of Ise* seem almost to be afterthoughts which have been displaced and put before the uta. The narrative quality of the prose style, terse and often ambiguous, seems definitely dependent upon the lyrical nature of the poetry. This relationship creates a structural tension as a binding force which arises from the episodic quality (*tampensei*) of the whole. While the episodic structure of the *Tale of Genji* appears much more extensive, it is proportional to the broad scope of the work: the unity and completeness of the individual episode (or volume) remain inviolable. (Harris, 22-23)

One comment above is particularly striking: the suggestion that the prose in *Tales of Ise* is like an "afterthought" to the poem. Not only in *Ise* but in many of the diary, romance and travel classics, the careful reader will perceive how frequently the waka supersedes the prose in importance. This disparity may be partially accounted for by the observation that poetry existed as

an established medium long before the development of prose. It is very likely, also, that the waka preceded the prose, more often than not, in the act of composition. This elevation or enthronement of waka within prose is comparable to a jeweler's practice of choosing a proper gold or silver setting for a precious gem. To name this common early approach the lapidary style, therefore, would not be far afield.

### *Examples from Narihara and Saigyô*

*Tales of Ise* provides a convenient starting place for this discussion. One of the earliest surviving poem-tales, *Ise* preserves the genre in unadulterated form. Furthermore, since it purportedly relates the many amorous adventures of the ninth-century courtier Ariwara no Narihara while showcasing many of that poet's waka, *Ise* can be usefully compared to prefatory notes by Narihara, excerpted from the poet's personal manuscript collection and incorporated in the *Kokinshû*.

The first Narihara waka is preceded in the *Kokinshû* by a prosaic and spare headnote of little intrinsic interest:

Sent with a formal cloak to the husband of his  
wife's younger sister.

when the color of  
royal purple is deepest  
it casts its glow as  
far as I can see over  
all the plants in the meadow

*Kokinshû* #868 (Rodd, 298)

Little social context is discernible in Narihara's preface other than a blank statement of familial relations. The fact that the "royal purple" of the waka, however, "casts its glow" evenly "over / all the plants" implies that social discrimination of one

sort or another is ameliorated by the gift of the cloak.

Compare the much expanded and poetic preface for the same poem now as presented in *Tales of Ise*:

Long ago there lived two sisters. One married a poor and common man while the other had a husband of high birth. The sister who was married to the commoner was washing her husband's Court cloak at the end of the twelfth month and shaping it with her own hands. Though she was trying to do her best, she tore the shoulder of the cloak because she was unused to such mean labors. She was at a loss for what she should do and thus fell to weeping and weeping. The man who was high born heard of this and felt that it really was too unfortunate. Thus, he picked out a truly magnificent cloak of the sixth rank and had it taken over with the poem.

*Tales of Ise* 41 (Harris, 80-81)

The conflict, barely legible in the *Kokinshū*, shows through clearly and poignantly in the *Ise* version where the reader, with the aid of the longer headnote, perceives the financial and class distinctions that divide two sisters and their respective husbands. While limiting, to a degree, the reader's free interpretation of the waka, the prose adds great depth to the significance of the gift of the cloak and to the consolation afforded thereby. The fine and telling anecdotal description of the wife's frustration and difficulty, over "mean labors" that she was unaccustomed to, carries much of the emotive content that is absent from the *Kokinshū* variant.

A subtle or slight change in a preface often accomplishes a pronounced shift in a waka's context. Narihara's celebrated

farewell poem to a woman of Fukakusa (i.e., “Tall Grasses Village”), in which he mourns that his cultivated place will become wild and overgrown, and his anonymous lover’s reply, wherein she compares her fate to that of a crying quail, are preceded in the *Kokinshū* by the flatly factual, “When he had been living in Fukakusa, Narihara sent this to someone there to tell her he was going to the capital” (Rodd, 328). The waka in question gain nothing by this exposition. Simply turn, however, to the headnote in *Tales of Ise* 123: “Long ago there lived a man. Did he not gradually become tired of a woman living in Tall Grasses Village? for he recited this poem....” (Harris, 155) The rhetorical question, with its emphasis on the verb “to tire,” empowers Narihara’s lament but truly enlivens the lady’s quail against the desolate background of tangled grasses and thickets:

if all becomes dense  
fields I will pass my years  
crying like the quail—  
for surely you will come if  
only for a few days’ hunt

*Kokinshū* #972 (Rodd, 329)

The two prefatory notes are of approximately equal length, yet how tragic the atmosphere and desolate the landscape are rendered in the *Ise* version.

Another interesting comparison can be made between a preface and waka drawn from the twelfth-century monk Saigyô’s private poetry collection with the presentation of the same poem in *The Tale of Saigyô*, “a biography (*denki*) written in the tradition of the poem-tale” (McKinney, 1). The term biography here must be granted considerable latitude as the intent of the narration is to frame a moving and moral tale around Saigyô’s most famous poems. The life is composed, therefore, of equal parts of fact and fiction.

From Saigyô's private collection of his waka:

At a point in time when I was feeling desolate,  
I heard the voice of a cricket very close to my  
pillow:

At that turning point  
With my head for the last time  
Pillowed in sagebrush,  
I'd have this chirping insect  
Still be what's closest to me.

(LaFleur, 38)

The "turning point" of the waka denotes the death-bed of the poet, the chirping of a cricket the immediate impetus for a meditation on mutability and dissolution. Examine what liberties the anonymous author of the poet's "biography" takes with this material, however, in revising the context from that of the poet alone to the poet in public attendance at the performance of Obon rites for the dead:

On the evening of the fifteenth day of the  
seventh month of the following year, the moon  
shone particularly bright. Seeing all the people  
of the capital, both high and low, gathered at  
the graveyards of Funaoka and Rendaino to  
hold services for the dead, Saigyô was deeply  
moved.

If only I could hold  
within myself the clarity of this moon  
to light the way  
for those along the mountain path  
into death.

On seeing a crowd of people holding lights:

On this one night  
in early autumn  
the vast  
numbers of the dead  
are visible.

Hearing the soft chirping of autumn insects:

When I lie down on that day  
pillowed at last under the wormwood,  
I hope I may  
have the intimate voice  
of the little cricket by me.

(McKinney, 65)

*The Tale of Saigyô* author not only shifts the waka from a private meditation to a religious observance in the capital but further prefaces the cricket verse with two other waka: one on the clear moon, another on autumn night. Saigyô's waka continues to contemplate death but the context, again, abandons the poet's person for the objective and communal scene of Obon. The waka's tragic implications gain focus and intensity thereby.

### *Examples from Shôtetsu*

To weigh the potential of the fully-developed preface or poem-tale, the ninth and twelfth-century figures of Narihara and Saigyô must be left behind for an examination of the early fifteenth-century waka master and Zen monk, Shôtetsu. With this poet, only his original prefaces as presented in his personal poetry manuscript remain to posterity; there are no independent poem-tales for comparison.

That a majority of Shôtetsu's headnotes are narrowly descriptive and functional should neither surprise nor detain us. His

exceptions, while rare, leap from the page as uniquely artistic and captivating documents that also possess a startlingly modern spirit.

“Beginning of Spring”

On the night of the second day of the First Month of 1450, I had a dream in which there was a votive sequence for the gods at the home of Komobe Yukimoto for which I was asked to produce the first poem, on the topic “Beginning of Spring,” which I composed and then woke up. Bemused by the episode, I quickly wrote the poem down on a scrap of paper but said nothing about it to anyone. Then, in a dream on the 28th day of the Twelfth Month of 1454, Yukimoto summoned me for a votive sequence and said that the first poem, on the beginning of spring, should be just the one I had composed! So fascinated was I that the poems were identical that when I presented a votive sequence I used this “dream poem” as the first poem.

At house after house  
they seem to be  
    awaiting  
the coming  
    of spring.  
In the garden,  
    late at night—  
doing  
    the morning cleaning.

(Carter, 168)

One imagines that even Coleridge, with his interrupted reverie

of Xanadu, might approach Shôtetsu's little narrative with awe. The monk's matter-of-fact relation of the remarkable provenance of his waka catches our interest, quite naturally. Against that background, Shôtetsu's waka assumes a plenitude of readings, especially in the oneiric portrait of an entire neighborhood busily engaged in "spring cleaning" in the middle of the night. The waka master's aesthetic and religious convictions both play a role here in the perplexingly mysterious ambiguities of his prose and waka.

Other examples from Shôtetsu might be quoted profitably but perhaps an abridged discussion of one other brilliant preface will suffice. The untitled work in question begins with the poet's lyrical prose description of an inkwell stand in the possession of a high-ranking government bureaucrat. Shôtetsu demonstrates no lack of imagination in his beguiling delineation of the scene painted on this stand: "a place where plum blossoms floated on a stream, above which a man stood on top of a bridge, with mountains in the distance and half of the moon visible on the mountain rim" (Carter, 5). The poet invites his reader to linger with him upon the expansive landscape that unfolds before a nearby stream and recedes to the faraway mountains and, even further, to the unapproachable half-moon. As if this digression on an imaginary terrain were not sufficient, Shôtetsu proceeds to inform his patient reader not only that a Chinese poem is inscribed "next to the plum trees" but to quote the poem verbatim with its description of the man on the bridge, "walking stick in hand." The master then digresses from the Chinese poem, by a similar method of association, to his own waka with its summary of the hesitant movement of the stream and of the moon itself, for the poet hearkens back to the heavenly body fixed at the mountain rim and imagines that it cannot decide whether to rise or set. An everyday household item and human artifact, an inkwell stand, substitutes here for the grandeur of a landscape scene with a sensibility that is unique and timeless.

### *Conclusion: Unanswered Questions*

The brief survey above sought to depict how Japanese classical and medieval poets employed prose in relation to waka. Considerations of space limited this review to discussion of the most elementary prose genres, the preface (*kotobagaki*) and poem-tale (*uta monogatari*). The wedding of prose and poetry in longer forms, such as the diary (*nikki*) or travel account (*kikô*), generally continues to revolve around the narrative episode as the basic prose unit of construction with the temporal elements of a courtship or itinerary, respectively, determining the selection and order of multiple scenes.

The rhetorical question advanced earlier in reference to prose and waka integration—“Are such principles, more pertinently, applicable today as a supplementary or alternative architectonic scheme to the tanka sequence?”—may be answered only by the practice of today’s and tomorrow’s tanka poets.

This unanswered question itself poses other problematic inquiries:

- To what degree does the addition of prose limit the field of possible meanings for a given tanka?
- Is the prose invariably dependent upon or subservient to the tanka or is it not, on occasion, an equal or greater partner?
- Can exposition proper not inform the composition of a preface or poem-tale and acquire poetic value, either by the diction and rhythm of what is said or by the presence in the description of matter that resonates with the tanka?
- Are longer prose genres, such as diary or travelogue, still valid for use with tanka?

- Are Western prose genres that were unknown to classical or medieval Japanese poets adaptable for use with tanka?
- To what degree, if any, must the quality of prose with tanka differ from that of prose with haiku (haibun)?

Other questions not anticipated here are certain to follow practice. If one considers the many parallels between the history of Japanese waka and tanka in English, isn't the adoption of a prose accompaniment to tanka inevitable?

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