

# *The Problem of Tanka : Definition and Differentiation*

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*Previously published in Atlas Poetica 18. Summer, 2014.*

## 1. Introduction

Anyone who reads tanka in English has noticed a trend of the late 20th century that presents a unified and instantly recognizable form and content. Once known as “tanka spirit,” this set of characteristics was widely accepted as defining the form in English. Then, starting in 2006, with the publication of *Modern English Tanka*, a far more diverse genre of tanka began to be published and continues to this day. With the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to see that the tanka of the late 20th century and early 21st century was not a universal definition, but merely a powerful vogue. I call it the “New Wave” because it departed in significant ways from the tanka that had been previously published, and because, like a tsunami, it overwhelmed the previous approaches.

Tanka embodying “tanka spirit” have been published both before and after the period of 1986–2005, but they did so in competition with a wide variety of other approaches. The period before the New Wave was characterized by a highly diverse and experimental body of poetry, both in translation and by native English speakers, and translations from languages other than Japanese, such as Spanish. (1) Most of this previous body of literature was unknown to poets and readers of the New Wave, and where known, frequently dismissed as unworthy and irrelevant.

During the New Wave, tanka was something magical and mysterious that only the hierophants of tanka could understand. Novices could learn only by long toil at the knees of dead Japanese masters and their self-appointed acolytes. Little attention was given to tanka in English, and those who wanted to learn about tanka were constantly referred to classical and sometimes medieval Japanese poets and editors—as if nothing had happened in the intervening eight centuries!

## 2. Background

Adapting tanka to English was no easy task. Although the earliest known publication of English-language tanka occurred at the tail end of the 19th century (Lafcadio Hearn’s translation and anthology, *Japanese Lyrics*, 1894), it was not at all obvious how to render tanka into English. The two major attempts of the early 20th century were the tanka of Sadakichi Hartmann (1867–1944) and Jun Fujita (1888–1963).

Writing in *Drifting Flowers of the Sea* (1904), Hartmann composed tanka in what is now called the “sanjuichi” form, from the Japanese word for “thirty-one.” His tanka were metered and rhymed poems of thirty-one syllables in the classic Japanese pattern of 5-7-5-7-7. Clearly Hartmann, Japanese-born and well educated in Japanese and Western literature, conceived of tanka as a formal verse, so he added the formal Western elements of meter and rhyme to his Japanese structure. (2) His results are musical, but they aren’t good poetry. A single example of his work will suffice,

Like mist on the leas,  
Fall gently, oh rain of spring  
On the orange trees  
That to Una’s casement clings—  
Perchance she’ll hear the love-bird sing!

Sadakichi Hartmann (3)

Here we have an orange tree instead of a cherry tree, but the archaic, consciously poetic diction deliberately mimics the classical diction of *waka*, as tanka was known before it was reformed at the end of the 19th century.

Jun Fujita, publishing in *Poetry Magazine* from 1919–1929, left behind a small body of tanka poetry and literary criticism. In 1922 he criticized

Yone Noguchi, another Japanese North American, for adopting the “carcass” but not the “essence” of Japanese poetry. (4) In discussing a poem about a waterfall, Fujita noted that Noguchi focussed on the roar of the waterfall rather than its silence. Fujita stated,

To feel and create this poetic silence, and through it to suggest the roar, the power, and the majesty of the fall without describing it, is the mission of Japanese poets. (5)

Fujita’s own work embodies his principles.

While you pant deliriously, I awake  
To the bold moon,  
The somber hills,  
And myself.

Jun Fujita (6)

The five poetic phrases of tanka have been formatted as a quatrain, no doubt to meet Western expectations of what a poem is supposed to look like, but it is highly irregular: 11-4-4-3 syllables. If the first line is broken into two, the pattern becomes 8-3-4-4-3. Obviously, formal form, archaic poetic diction, and classical subjects are not what Fujita conceived tanka to be. Although Hartmann and Fujita are treating the same subject, love (or at least passion), Fujita’s approach is thoroughly modern.

Although many newcomers begin by writing the sanjuichi form of tanka, they usually abandon it once they become more knowledgeable. Dr. Richard Gilbert’s article, “Stalking the Wild Onji,” (7) has been influential in explaining the difference between Japanese and English metrics and the implications for prosody. The problem of tanka is how to adapt a formal form into a language that simply does not behave like Japanese. Clearly, Hartmann’s solution is not satisfactory while Fujita’s solution gives good poems that don’t look like classical Japanese poems.

The quest to adapt tanka into English is more arduous than for other European languages. Romance languages adapt well to the sanjuichi

pattern because their own vowels and syllable lengths are closer to Japanese than English; a sanjuichi written in Spanish or Italian doesn’t struggle to balance the Japanese aesthetics with the requirements of the form. This may be why tanka was readily taken up in Romanian (8) and also had a vogue in Catalan. (9) It may be that the struggle for adaption and the resulting variety is part of the definition of tanka in English. What follows is a survey of numerous methods and attempts to adapt tanka into English.

### 3. The New Wave

#### 3.1 The Wind Five Folded School of Tanka

The Wind Five Folded School of Tanka was one of the most prolific and influential schools of tanka to arise during the New Wave (1986–2005). Led by Jane and Werner Reichhold, it had a major influence on poets of the period. An early adopter of the World Wide Web, the Reichholds were able to disseminate their approach to a broad audience at a time when very few tanka venues attempted to do so. A tireless advocate for women poets past and present, Jane Reichhold became the heroine of a generation.

Reichhold’s editorial vision is embodied in the multitude of publications which she and her husband wrote, edited, or published, including *Lynx, a journal for linking poets*, the Tanka Splendor Award, numerous publications through her small press, AHA Books, and its online presence, AHA Poetry, as well as her own poetry and articles, but she only recently organized previously existing articles into a series of lessons she calls the “Wind Five Folded School of Tanka,” named after the *The Wind Five Folded* anthology, which she and her husband co-edited and published in 1994.

In her lessons, Reichhold describes tanka as:

- subjective (meaning you can add your opinion, or that of anyone else)
- emotional, opinionated, hot (often sensual), and lyrical
- can discuss the most intimate body parts and functions

- use an “elegant” language, and choose elevated euphemisms to cloak the unspeakable
- are made of sentence fragments and phrases and should not read like a complete sentence
- in English, we use the line length to indicate the length of the 5 or 7 sound units
- are usually written completely in lower case except for proper nouns
- can or don’t use some punctuation. Sentence punctuation is really wrong
- use the technique of showing an association, comparison or contrast between images.
- taking an image from nature and associating, comparing or contrasting with the emotional situation of a person (it rains, I cry) (10)

The following tanka is an example of Reichhold’s poetry from *The Wind Five Folded*,

now as night  
 everything returns to being  
 clotted moonlight  
 stones sleep to be clocks  
 pendled by tides they tick

Jane Reichhold (11)

Reichhold has identified the pivot as the defining feature of tanka and stated her opinion unequivocally, “In fact, if anyone asked what makes a tanka a tanka, I would have to say that it must have a pivot.” (12) She cites ancient Japanese tanka with a bipartite structure in support of this, but defines “pivot” very loosely, allowing for “implied pivots.”

This is not born out by an examination of either ancient or modern poetry or critical writings. While a “turn” forming a contrast between the upper and lower strophes of a bipartite tanka is common, many tanka do not exhibit this. Many tanka do not even have a bipartite structure. Professor Sanford Goldstein, as editor of *Five Lines Down*, wrote,

I do not feel I would restrict tanka rhythms to this 3/2 approach. Why not a rhythm of 2/3 or 1/4 or even a rush of five lines down? (13)

Examples can be found as far back as the *Man’yōshū*. Likewise, numerous verse forms also feature a turn, such as the sonnet, but that doesn’t mean a sonnet is also a tanka.

A few other writers were even stricter in their definition of pivot, most notably Donna Ferrell, who equated the pivot with the swing line (a line that can be read either with what precedes or what follows to form two coherent strophes), a view she often espoused in postings to her online forum, “Mountain Home,” founded in 2000. (14)

Modern waka looks to the best of the Court tradition for examples of form and spirit, and to our own experience for authenticity of expression. Just as classical waka came to be defined by the uta, or “short poem,” modern waka is primarily expressed in the five-line form familiar to readers of contemporary tanka. Modern waka features a grammatical “pivot” similar to that of classical poetry. (15)

The loneliness  
 Of a single firefly blinking  
 In the gloaming;  
 A rose slowly fades  
 Into the darkness of everything.

Donna Ferrell (16)

The Modern Waka school of tanka did not differ in significant ways from the Wind Five Folded School. The principle difference was a narrow choice of models, explicitly classical, and especially Saigyō (1118–1190 AD). Mountain Home (*Sankashu*) was the name of Saigyō’s most famous work. Ferrell did not publish any articles. Her editorial vision was manifested through her own poetry and her commentary on poetry workshopped in the Mountain Home forum. She rarely published outside of her own forum, and the email list has not had any significant traffic since 2010. (17)

The notion that tanka have a bipartite structure is a common one, but the two-part structure is not found in the oldest tanka: the famous wedding song of the god, Susano-o no Mikoto. The pattern in his tanka is the ancient tripartite structure of the original tanka: line 1 and 2 are a unit, line 3 and 4 are a unit, and line 5 is a unit. There is no “turn” here, but a steady building of repeated elements with pleasing rhythm and alliteration.

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! (18)

However, as editor Edwin Cranston notes, this is the modern form of the poem. The earliest Japanese poems were frequently irregular. (19) Even today tanka is often irregular. (20) Ultimately this has led to the creation of gogyoshi, a five line Japanese poem without any requirements regarding line length at all. (21)

Aside from structure, the assertion by Reichhold that tanka juxtapose nature and emotion must be contested. This is a common technique in contemporary Anglophone tanka, and it has antecedents in Japanese classical tanka, but is not a requirement. Case in point, the works of Sanford Goldstein do not adhere to this prescription. Goldstein, a retired English professor who pursued a second career teaching in Japan, has translated (along with his partners) numerous works of modern Japanese literature, including the major tanka poets, such as Yosano Akiko, Masaoka Shiki, Ishikawa Takuboku, and Saitō Mokichi. Goldstein has been writing and publishing his own tanka in English since the 1960s. His approach to tanka is very different from either the Wind Five Folded or Modern Waka schools.

another  
Father’s day  
I did  
not visit  
his grave

Sanford Goldstein (22)

Another of Reichhold’s points to be contested is that tanka must use elevated language and euphemism to cloak “unspeakable” subjects. This prohibition certainly applied to the classical waka, but it does not apply to modern tanka in Japanese.

I leave my house  
preoccupied with thoughts;  
a dog with saggy balls  
passes  
on the street

Ai Akitsu (23)

Dead of night  
returning home exhausted  
from the interrogation—  
my period begins to flow  
like rage

Motoko Michiura (24)

Menstruation, interrogation, canine genitalia, and other “unspeakable” subjects do not appear in either the Wind Five Folded or Modern Waka schools of tanka, not even cloaked in euphemism. However, in the early 21st century have we started to see taboo-breaking tanka in English.

there’s always a monkey  
beating off at the zoo—  
school boys laugh,  
the facts of life not fitting  
into the teacher’s plan

Bob Lucky (25)

The aesthetic espoused by Jane Reichhold is *miyabi*, literally “courtly beauty.” In other words,

poetry considered to be in good taste by the culture and aesthetics of the Imperial court of the Heian period (794–1185 AD). It is frequently coupled with *fūryū*, “elegance,” as in Reichhold’s points above. Father Neal Henry Lawrence, Benedictine monk, priest, missionary, and tanka poet, wrote, “Like Japanese tanka, tanka in English must never be vulgar, but always in good taste.” (26) Father Lawrence would probably not approve of poems about dog testicles, monkey masturbation, menstruation, or getting arrested.

Above and beyond that, Reichhold’s characterization of tanka as “feminine” does a real disservice. While it is true that women were successful tanka writers, we must also acknowledge that the context in which they wrote was one dominated by men. All the editors of the *Man’yōshū*, *Kokinwakashū*, and *Shinkokinwakashū* were men, and men made up the majority of tanka poets published in those anthologies. Likewise, the famous tanka poets of the Meiji and Taisho periods that transformed waka into tanka were largely male: Masaoka Shiki, Saitō Mokichi, Takuboku Ishikawa, Yosano Tekkan, etc. Yosano Akiko shocked Japan by refusing the role of the demure and proper Japanese wife to become Japan’s most famous tanka poet. To label tanka “feminine” ignores that women tanka poets had to compete and succeed in a milieu dominated by men. That they did so makes their achievements even more impressive.

The elements stereotyped as “feminine” in tanka are emotional expressiveness and sensitivity to the natural and human environments. These are the traits of good poets regardless of gender. It patronizes women to contrast them as feminine, emotional and subjective, versus objective, rational and masculine men. In tanka, the full range of expression is open to all poets.

### 3.2 Orientalism

Orientalism is an aesthetic that has influenced tanka in English from its origin. The earliest tanka in English, by Sadakichi Hartmann (in *Drifting Flowers of the Sea*, 1904), are Orientalist in nature, embodying as they do a *japonisme* that represents an imaginary and Romanticized Japan. Given that Hartmann migrated from

Japan to the West when he was a teenager, it is perhaps not surprising that he came to view Japanese poetry through Western eyes. All other Japanese Canadians and Japanese Americans whose work I’m familiar with are devoid of Orientalism. With the exception of Hartmann, Orientalism is an approach typically utilized by Western poets.

It is not surprising that novice poets respond to the exotic content of tanka without understanding the underlying principles, so it is inevitable that newcomers to the field will produce tanka about cherry blossoms, kimonos, and temples. However, some poets and editors participate consciously and deliberately in Orientalism. They usually do so with the best intentions and the belief that they are accomplishing good in the world.

Case in point, Charles E. Tuttle, founder of the publishing house that bears his name, did excellent work publishing books in English on Japanese subjects. However, the anthology he edited in 1957, *Japan : Theme and Variations*, is rife with Orientalism. Tuttle tacitly admits as much,

The older images of dainty geisha, pagodas and arched bridges, and jeweled landscapes yet remain—although often in bright new contexts. (27)

A single example of “jeweled landscapes” will suffice:

The snow has fallen  
on the black branches of plum  
and cherry; on all  
the hills the moon walks, but you  
still hide behind your tall screen.

Florida Watts Smyth (28)

Smyth’s work is not devoid of merit, but it is predicated on the belief that tanka is written in a pattern of 5-7-5-7-7 about classical Japanese subjects. She manages to pack the piece with Oriental tropes: snow, cherry trees, plum trees, moon, and a Japanese screen, all while impersonating a courtly lover.

Forty years later, a more sophisticated treatment of the same theme is provided by Jeanne Emrich.

why do I feel  
so empty tonight?  
moonlight streams in  
at every window  
and you await me

Jeanne Emrich (29)

Emrich captures the classical trope of a woman waiting for her lover by moonlight without resorting to any flagrantly Oriental motifs. At 4-4-5-5-5 syllables she doesn't embody either the 5-7-5-7-7 or short-long-short-long-long formats, but what she has written is a very traditional tanka in subject matter and aesthetics. If it were translated into Japanese, it would be entirely acceptable to the ladies and gentlemen of the Heian court. She demonstrates that Japanese aesthetics can be used without Orientalism.

Let us consider how Japanese aesthetics could be applied to a different culture. John Daleiden chose a Haitian theme:

Haitian woman,  
spawn of powerful genes—  
work your spell  
use your voodoo fingers  
to enliven this old man

John Daleiden (30)

It is hard to imagine a subject that deviates from the tanka norm as much as voodoo. In fact, if anyone had suggested that there might be something compatible between tanka and voodoo before reading this poem, the reader could be forgiven for being skeptical. Daleiden uses the melody of tanka, and he applies tanka aesthetics: compaction, evocative detail, suggestion, allusion, subjectivity, and eroticism. Words like "Haitian," "spawn," "spell," and "voodoo" are heavily freighted with associations that amplify the poem beyond what is written on the page.

In order to critique Orientalism, we must also be certain what it is not. Mention of Asian topics is not inherently Orientalist. Many people travel or live in Asia and record their experiences authentically. Orientalism, as per Edward Said, is the projection of an Oriental fantasy upon Asia by Westerners, instead of seeing Asian people for who they are. (31) In addition, even when there is a sincere desire to engage, care must be taken to avoid "tourist tanka," by which we mean superficial works that record the traveler's reactions to an exotic locale.

Thai massage  
at the women's prison—  
she works on my feet  
and plans her escape;  
I can feel it

Bob Lucky (32)

Although Lucky went as a tourist to Thailand, his experience and thoughts go well beyond the usual tourist venues. Dark, yet humorous, trivial, yet troubling, he gives a complex and ambiguous description of an unexpected scene. Lucky's poem exposes the power imbalance inherent between the Westerner free to fantasize about exotic Oriental women and the Asian woman who has no choice but to endure a stranger projecting his fantasies onto her, a literal prisoner at his feet.

### 3.3 Zen, Introspection, and Realism

A significant motivator of Orientalism during the New Wave was Asian spirituality. Zen in particular and Buddhism in general became popular in the West. Certainly religion influenced tanka in Japan, and religion of any sort is a legitimate topic for tanka, but during the New Wave, a subset of tanka were appreciated not so much for being poetry, but for being homilies from or homages to Eastern spirituality.

Classical tanka were influenced by Zen and Buddhism, sometimes in overt ways, but usually less so. The Zen master was supposed to be detached from the suffering of the world, but ironically, that very detachment led to an

awareness of the transience of the world, which inspired feelings of pathos, which in turn became highly subjective tanka in which the feelings of the poet were the focus of the poem. This self-referential irony is depicted in the Buddhist monk Saigyō's (1118–1190 AD) tanka,

even someone  
free of passion as myself  
feels sorrow:  
snipe rising from a marsh  
at evening in autumn

Saigyō (33)

The transience of the world, represented by the Japanese term *aware*, the pity of things that pass away, is an integral part of Japanese aesthetics as incorporated into Anglophone tanka. Although *yūgen* (mystery and depth) and *ma* (negative space) have been championed by Robert Wilson and Denis M. Garrison respectively as essential to understanding Japanese tanka, it is *aware*, along with *miyabi*, that has had the most influence on tanka written in English. The two go hand in hand to form a genteel nostalgia that addresses everything from a broken heart to wrestling with cancer. The refined approach dignifies subjects that might otherwise appear banal or trivial, and allows poets and readers to experience the value of ordinary things. At its best, it leads to personal epiphany . . .

I am  
I am not  
I am  
as I walk in & out  
of mist

A. A. Marcoff (34)

Standing  
On the wide desert,  
Before the silent wind,  
My body sank  
Into nothingness

Fumiko Ogawa (35)

. . . but at its worst, self-indulgent navel-gazing.

The hunger for significance marks many tanka poets. Most of them are ordinary people leading ordinary lives. They feel something is missing and they fill it with themselves. This is both bad and good. Good, when it teaches them to value themselves and what they find around them, but bad when it entraps them in a literary solipsism in which nothing outside the self and its sensations are of interest. As long as tanka poets devote themselves to capturing “the moment,” they miss out on bigger topics and the growth that comes from grappling with things larger than the self.

Then again, is tanka really an adequate tool for dealing with large scale subject matter? Can it cope, for example, with a world war?

where Hitler danced  
his little jig  
outside Paris  
a mime and a monkey  
on the spot where he stood

Michael McClintock (36)

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

Hagino Matsuoka (37)

Yes. The reason that so few exist is not because tanka is inadequate, but because poets are. Tanka's art of implication enables the poet to incorporate far more into the poem than is written on the page—but the poet has to believe it is possible before he will even try.

The trick to writing tanka is to *see*. Not just the self, but everything in the universe, large or small, near or distant, familiar or strange, and to value it. When this method of seeing is applied without reservation, it allows us to overcome our own limitations. The world is out there. As poets, all we need to do is report it. Lucille Nixon, the editor of *Sounds from the Unknown*, talks about this:

For example, for 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*. (38) [emphasis in original]

The poets in *Sounds from the Unknown* (1963) often record scenes of nature, but they also talk about war, immigration, discrimination, internment, people of color, oil wells, factories, stoves, and buses.

I scoured tanka literature for Hurricane Katrina poems after the disaster in 2005, but found nothing. In the years after, only a tiny number of tanka appeared, such as:

Surrounded by detritus  
A fallen tree, wrecked car,  
One FEMA trailer  
The house behind broken,  
A string of Christmas lights glow.

Mark Burgh (39)

By contrast, there was an outpouring of poems in the aftermath of the triple disaster in Japan in 2011.

Dosimeters  
hanging from their necks  
even when the children  
play tag with me  
in the green park.

Taro Aizu (40)

It is understandable that Aizu, a former resident of Fukushima, would write about the disaster when he returned to visit his family who still live there, but why is it that American tanka poets seemed more moved to write about the

tribulations of the Japanese than their fellow citizens? There are two possible explanations: one is that everything having to do with Japan is better—a point of view that naturally follows from the insistence that we must genuflect to ancient Japanese tanka masters; but the second is that in 2005 and the years immediately after, the grip of mannered *miyabi* and personal subjectivity had not yet been broken. If all the tanka they had ever seen was about love, cherry blossoms, and Zen, how could tanka poets even begin to grapple with the horror that befell New Orleans?

The Japanese American and Canadian poets of the mid-20th century grappled with big topics and succeeded. It was a manifesto for them. The Totsukuni tanka circle led by Tomari Yoshihiko was composed of “realists as opposed to the romanticists or symbolists.” (41) Lucille Nixon directly linked realism to Masaoka Shiki and modern American practice, but the generation of non-Japanese poets immediately after her did not value *Sounds from the Unknown*. It was not until after the MET revolution of the 21st century (see below) that tanka poets came to value this anthology.

The very different responses to Hurricane Katrina and the triple disaster in Japan show that tanka in English has undergone significant development in the six years that separates the two events. The frank depiction of destruction and human suffering is no longer taboo.

## 4. Destabilization of Tanka Assumptions

### 4.1 Modern English Tanka

The publication of the journal *Modern English Tanka* (MET), beginning in 2006, destabilized the world of late 20th century tanka. Denis M. Garrison, a long time poet and editor of short form poetry, founded MET as a deliberate escape from the orthodoxies of tanka. In the inaugural issue, Garrison wrote in his editorial,

It's time to write, read, critique, and study our English tanka, *per se*, which presupposes the skillful use of our living language rather than



some faux-Japanese-English [. . .] *Modern English Tanka* is dedicated to publishing and promoting fine English tanka—both traditional and innovative verse of high quality—in order to assimilate the best of the Japanese uta/waka/tanka genres into a continuously developing English short verse tradition. [. . .] It is not the goal of *Modern English Tanka* to either authoritatively define English tanka or sponsor any particular formula or template. (42)

For the next three years, an outpouring of tanka of all kinds filled the 250 pages of each issue of *Modern English Tanka* (MET) four times a year. Publishing approximately 500 poems per volume, the roughly 6000 tanka published by MET provided an outlet for tanka that had previously been kept in drawers. One of the frequent contributors was Sanford Goldstein, the master of English-language tanka. Although he had previously published several chapbooks and was co-editor with Kenneth Tamemura of the short-lived journal *Five Lines Down*, MET gave his work a wide exposure that served to cement his reputation as the leading tanka poet working in English. He wasn't the only one. Several poets who couldn't get published under the old regime rocketed to prominence after publishing in MET.

Garrison didn't stop there. He established Modern English Tanka Press (MET Press) to publish additional journals, collections and anthologies. The MET stable of journals included *Modern Haiga : Graphic Poetry* (MDHG); *Prune Juice : A Journal of Senryu and Kyoka* (PRUJ); *Atlas Poetica : A Journal of Poetry of Place in Modern English Tanka* (ATPO); *Modern Haibun & Tanka Prose* (MHTP); *Concise Delight Magazine of Short Poetry* (CNDL); and *Ambrosia : Journal of Fine Haiku*. When health problems forced him to curtail his commitment to poetry, *Atlas Poetica* and *Prune Juice* found new homes and continued publishing in the hybrid print and online editions he pioneered. The other journals closed, and tanka was poorer for it.

Another paradigm changer was the anthology *Fire Pearls : Short Masterpieces of the Human Heart* (FRPL) published by Keibooks in 2006. Edited

without dogma as to form or content, *Fire Pearls* was the first of the post-New Wave anthologies, the first thematic anthology, and the first sequenced anthology in English. (43) The only previous book length sequence was Jun Fujita's *Tanka : Poems in Exile* (1923), although there were some chapbooks, such as Goldstein's *At the Hut of the Small Mind*. (44) Prior to *Fire Pearls*, anthologies were usually organized alphabetically by poet's name. *Fire Pearls* divided nearly four hundred poems into five seasonal categories. Within each category, poems were sequenced to create relationships.

*Fire Pearls* was followed by a series of anthologies published by MET Press, including *The Five Hole Flute* (FHFL) (sequences), *Landfall : Poetry of Place in Modern English Tanka* (LNFL), *Five Lines Down : A Landmark in English Tanka* (FVLD) (an omnibus of the journal), *The Tanka Prose Anthology* (TKPA), *The Ash Moon Anthology : Poems on Aging in Modern English Tanka* (ASHM), *Streetlights : Poetry of Urban Life in Modern English Tanka* (STLT), *Take Five : Best Contemporary Tanka, Volumes 1–3* (TAK5:1–3) (TAK5:4 was published by Keibooks), as well as collections by established and emerging poets. MET Press also brought out *Jun Fujita : Tanka Pioneer*, a collection of all of Fujita's poetry in one omnibus edition with an introduction that traces the establishment of tanka in English in the early 20th century. MET Press also published Goldstein's *Four Decades on My Tanka Road*, an omnibus of the master's previous hard to find chapbooks, Alexis Rotella's *Lip Prints*, and others.

Garrison also provided technical assistance and mentoring to various poets, editors, and small presses who were able to copy the method he pioneered to publish poetry: print-on-demand (POD) publishing combined with online editions. He demonstrated that having a free online edition did not hurt print sales, but provided tens of thousands of readers the opportunity to enjoy and learn about tanka. The print circulations of Anglophone tanka journals (with the exception of Japan's *The Tanka Journal* (TTJ)) are minuscule, numbering only a few hundred subscribers. It is the online journals and websites that collectively

reach as many as a hundred thousand readers a year.

In the ensuing years numerous projects have come to fruition in the hands of a variety of editors and poets, but covering those developments in depth will be deferred to this author's *History of Tanka in English*. What is important is the sheer mass of MET Press publication. It was not just a shot across the bow of New Wave tanka—it was an entire broadside. The challenge would not go unanswered.

Established journals were unwavering in their commitment to their editorial ideals, but they could not prevent new journals from being founded, so they had to compete for readers and submissions from a much more diverse and demanding audience. Some of them folded. So did some of the new venues. Blowback came from various quarters, sometimes from established poets who passed judgment, claiming that not only were some poems not tanka, they weren't even poetry! Most of the criticism was informal via email discussion groups and similar forums. On the other hand, some established poets, such as Alexis Rotella, who had been publishing Japaniform poetry since the 1970s, embraced the new possibilities. Rotella founded *Prune Juice : A Journal of Senryu and Kyoka* precisely because she wanted to “get things moving.” (45)

#### 4.2 S-L-S-L-L as ‘Traditional’ Tanka

The formal response came in the summer of 2009 in the form of a jointly authored article by Amelia Fielden, Robert Wilson, and ironically, Denis M. Garrison. They published “A Definition of the ideal form of traditional tanka written in English.” It appeared in both Wilson's journal, *Simply Haiku* (SH), and in Garrison's *Modern English Tanka* (MET).

While there are linguistic and orthographic differences between Japanese and English that cannot be fully resolved, we believe that it is possible to follow the centuries-old waka/tanka formal poetic tradition to a substantial and meaningful degree. We do not seek to define nor deal with avant-garde innovations based on tanka in this paper, nor do we seek

to restrain poetic experimentation by any poet. (46)

They laid out seven “essential guidelines for writing ‘Traditional Tanka in English’ in the ideal form,” (47) which include but are not limited to a set syllable count of 19–31 English syllables, a set pattern of lines in the form of short-long-short-long-long with an ideal syllable pattern of 3-5-3-5-5 but permitting minor variations, a stop to end each line (“five phrases on five lines”), and a strong fifth line that should not be shorter than the others. They accepted various subjects and treatments with the exception of polemics or didactic works.

My own analysis of syllables in a tanka leads me to believe that their proffered syllable count is too long to approximate the usual Japanese rhythm. I recommend 17–26 syllables, but I accept considerable variation. This is because the English syllable is far more dynamic than a Japanese unit of sound. “Radio diva” is five syllables, but “stretched” is only one.

Kozue Uzawa, a Japanese-Canadian tanka poet, editor, and translator, recommends twenty syllables.

As for syllable counting, I personally like to use about 20 English syllables because this shortness is very close to Japanese [sic] tanka. If you don't like to count syllables, just count words. Use 10 ~ 15 words, or up to 20 words at maximum. (48)

This was adopted and announced as editorial policy for *Gusts*, the journal of Tanka Canada, in issue 7, Spring/Summer, 2007. Uzawa, along with Amelia Fielden, edited and translated the highly regarded *Ferris Wheel : 101 Modern and Contemporary Tanka* in 2006. Her own poetry reflects this preference for twenty syllables.

white pulp  
of a baby pumpkin  
no smell  
no taste, simply soft  
seeds not yet formed

Kozue Uzawa (49)

Saeko Ogi is a tanka poet and translator who was born in Japan. She currently lives in Australia. In an interview with Guy Simser, she describes tanka in English as commonly having a pattern of 3-4-3-4-4 syllables, or eighteen syllables total—less than the lower bound set by Wilson-Fielden-Garrison. When translating English to Japanese, she renders them as 5-7-5-7-7. (50) Although Ogi provides no evidence in support of her contention that “most” tanka in English are 3-4-3-4-4 in pattern, that someone who is a highly experienced poet and translator regards it as normative shows yet again that there are legitimately varying opinions regarding proper form in English.

Regardless of the various pronouncements made, when we look at tanka as it is actually written by highly qualified and well-regarded poets, we see immense variation. Hypometric and hypermetric lines are common. For example, Sanford Goldstein’s tanka range from twelve to thirty-six syllables in length. Goldstein quotes Takuboku in an editorial in *Five Lines Down*,

Some may criticize us by saying this will destroy the rhythm of tanka itself. No matter. If the conventional rhythm has ceased to suit our mood, why hesitate to change it? If the limitations of thirty-one syllables is felt inconvenient, we should freely use lines with extra syllables. (51)

In fact, it is not entirely clear that the Japanese count “syllables” at all, as per Richard Gilbert. That is why advocates of the “traditional” style have offered S-L-S-L-L as an alternative. The trouble is, short and long what? sound? printed line length? absolute or relative length?

Not only do English syllables differ in sound, they also differ in appearance. Examining the formatting of numerous S-L-S-L-L tanka suggests that the de facto definition of short and long has nothing to do with prosody but is an artifact of formatting. Thus numbers and symbols are used for short lines that when spoken

aloud are longer than their printed length, sometimes even longer than the poem’s “long” lines.

We can see the artificiality of this dictate when it results in a mangled line for no good reason except to conform to the format.

this moon  
watching her dance  
on the  
shorelines as if  
the stars exist

Robert D. Wilson (52)

Wilson isn’t usually as egregious as this, but it’s hard to find a better example of why it’s wrong to let the format dictate the line breaks. The real poem is:

this moon  
watching her dance  
on the shorelines  
as if  
the stars exist

“As if” can justify a line of its own, but “on the” cannot. The poem has been forced into conformity with Wilson’s edict regarding S-L-S-L-L. The arbitrary shape is an artifact of formatting and does not conform to units of prosody and meaning.

Wilson prepended the SH edition of “Traditional tanka” with an introduction that was even longer than the article. He offered his own definition of tanka:

A 5 lined poem that makes use of breaks (cutting words: i.e., punctuation or ellipsis, whenever necessary), utilizes a meter similar to that found in Japanese tanka, makes use of Japanese aesthetics, follows as much as possible the S-L-S-L-L schemata, makes use of juxtaposition as needed, and is not a haiku or senryu masquerading as a tanka such as a five lined poem using one or two words per line. (53)

Wilson's definition contradicts the paper he co-authored. In particular, if the paper's ideal for short lines is only three syllables, they must, of necessity, be composed of one, two, or three words. Prohibiting lines of one or two words imposes an unreasonable restriction to the form, and indeed, Wilson cannot mean that because the two examples he offers each have lines composed of one or two words. Maybe what Wilson meant is that a line should not be composed of one or two syllables, but that's not what he wrote.

Wilson admires a poem by Carole MacRury,

sleep-walking  
through my childhood . . .  
until I wake  
to forgive and kiss  
my dying father goodbye

Carole MacRury (54)

"Sleep-walking" is a line composed of a single word that demonstrates why counting anything—words, syllables, or stresses—is a problematic way to compose tanka in English.

The core of Wilson's definition is the S-L-S-L-L format because the rest of the items are optional. A five lined poem that uses breaks "as needed" contradicts the recommended full stops in the "traditional" article. Likewise terms such as "a meter similar to that found in Japanese" and "makes use of juxtaposition as needed" provide a lot of wiggle room. His definition boils down to poem written in S-L-S-L-L with Japanese aesthetics.

Wilson's own *Simply Haiku* is the only venue that implements his view of tanka. Of course that is his editorial prerogative, but as long as his own publications are the only ones to embody it, it represents a personal point of view, not a definition. (*Cattails* also espouses S-L-S-L-L, but has not yet published its first issue as of this writing.) *Gusts* shares some of the concepts (Amelia Fielden served on the editorial committee at the time) (55), but *Gusts* has its own distinctive editorial voice. Editor Kozue Uzawa's

preference for shorter tanka results in a lighter, suppler tanka.

As soon as the "traditional" definition appeared, it was roundly challenged. Numerous poets and editors, including this author, disagreed with it, and disagreed even with the notion that the form of tanka described qualifies as "traditional." There is no "traditional tanka" in English. A wide variety of adaptations have been made over the decades and they are all valid approaches. None enjoys consensus. Harking back to Hartmann and Fujita, we can see that they are both "traditional" in the sense that their approaches have persisted over time and been followed by a variety of poets and editors. Neither of them conforms to the definition given in Wilson, Fielden, and Garrison. Both are far older and have the virtue not only of longevity, but of being created by poets who were native speakers of Japanese and well-educated in both Japanese and Western literature. In other words, S-L-S-L-L is just one of many legitimate adaptations.

Translating tanka from Japanese to English is no easy thing. An entire book is devoted to the subject, Nakagawa Atsuo's *Tanka in English : In Pursuit of World Tanka* (1987, 1990). It gives extensive attention to problems of structure and adaptation, which in turn provides a number of linguistically valid methods of translation. It logically follows that the same diverse methods are also legitimate methods for composing tanka in English.

#### 4.3 The Kyoka Challenge

Beginning in 2006, kyoka was offered as an alternative outside the tasteful parameters of the New Wave. Articles and poetry published in MET stimulated interest. In 2006, a poem labeled "kyoka" appeared in *Moonset*, Volume 2:1, Spring, 2006. Prior to that, two poems labeled "kyoka-style" were published in *The Tanka Anthology* (2003). The Kyoka Mad Poems email list was founded as a workshop in 2006 and continues to this day.

In 2009, Robin Gill published *Mad in Translation*, a massive compendium of kyoka translated from the Japanese, the first and only of

its sort. It was followed by the *Mad in Translation Reader*, featuring a selection from the original. Prior to that, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Viking Press translated and published two kyoka books illustrated by Utamaro, the famous woodblock print artist, *A Chorus of Birds* (1981) and *Songs of the Garden* (1984). They circulated principally among art lovers, not tanka poets. Kyoka was also mentioned in some of the scholarly anthologies, such as those by Donald Keene.

The kyoka below from *Mad in Translation* is an example of how kyoka could parody the classical waka.

Though this body, I know,  
is a thing of no substance,  
must it fade, alas,  
so swiftly,  
like a soundless fart? (56)

Alexis Rotella, well known for writing both tanka and senryu, embraced kyoka. In 2008 she published a collection of her own poetry, *Looking for a Prince : A Collection of Senryu and Kyoka*. She also founded *Prune Juice : A Journal of Senryu and Kyoka* (PRUJ) with its first issue appearing early in 2009. It later spun off from MET Press and came under the editorship of Liam Wilkinson, then Terri French.

Rotella is the best and most consistent poet writing kyoka in English. Her poem below shares a sensibility with the kyoka above, but it is a thoroughly modern poem.

Old man—  
first he asks  
to die,  
then for  
a ham sandwich.

Alexis Rotella (57)

Also founded in 2008, *Atlas Poetica : A Journal of Poetry of Place in Contemporary Tanka* (ATPO) (originally *Atlas Poetica : A Journal of Poetry of Place in Modern English Tanka*) expressly included kyoka in its submission guidelines. Thus two journals

came into existence in 2008 that saw kyoka as part of their editorial vision. In 2010, Richard Stevenson published *Windfall Apples : Tanka and Kyoka*. In 2011, *Atlas Poetica* published “25 Tanka for Children,” a special feature online. In spite of the name, a number of the poems were kyoka and exhibited a playfulness of language not often found in tanka. In 2012, *Pieces of Her Mind : Women Find Their Voices in Centuries Old Forms*, edited by Alvin Thomas Ethington, appeared. It featured haiga, senryu, and kyoka by women.

Japanese American poets had been writing tanka on humorous or even vulgar subject matter for years.

秋晴の野路行きはて放ちたる屁の音乾けり  
明日も晴ならん

I cross a field the fine autumn day and cut a fart  
it sounds dry—tomorrow should be a fine day too

Konoshima Kisaburo (58) translated by David Callner

Anglophone advocates of kyoka saw it as an avenue to escape the mannerism of New Wave tanka, but although kyoka continues to appear, it remains a minority interest. It did not revolutionize the tanka world. Nonetheless, because tanka and kyoka have exactly the same form in Japanese but are different genres, it explicates why form alone is not a sufficient definition for tanka. The existence of kyoka also points out that the content and style of Anglophone tanka are not yet as broad as advocates claim, although great strides have been made in recent years.

#### 4.4 The Gogyohka and Gogyoshi Alternatives

In the early 1990s in Japan, Kusakabe Enta invented gogyohka, a five line poem derived from tanka. It scrapped the sanjuichi form and defined itself by writing short poems on five lines; “gogyohka” simply means “five line poem.” (59) Gogyohka consciously rejected tanka, but tanka aesthetics permeate the work published so far in English. On the other hand, gogyohka

encourages sincerity of expression, so works that would be considered naive or undeveloped by English tanka readers are considered fresh and direct when published as gogyohka. Starting in 1994, Enta established a Gogyohka Society in Japan and began publishing the *Gogyohka Journal*. (60) In 2006, his book *Gogyohka* was published in English. He held the first Gogyohka Conference in 2008. In 2006, he started holding workshops in the United States. This was followed by the formation of a Gogyohka Society for North America (61), and the establishment of the Gogyohka Junction forum online. A handful of publications in English followed.

Starting in about 2010, gogyohka caught the attention of tanka poets on Twitter. It became a fad with many experimenting with the form. The #gogyohka hashtag rapidly came to outnumber the #tanka hashtag. (62) Many poets tried gogyohka and declared that it offered greater freedom than tanka. Although significant changes and expansions had occurred in the type of tanka being published in English, the fascination that gogyohka held for tanka poets illustrates an ongoing disaffection, even after those limits had largely fallen away.

Disputes among poets erupted with a constant discussion about how to differentiate gogyohka from tanka in English. Enta had not been aware of the indigenous English-language tanka movement before he began his workshops, and it was difficult to distinguish gogyohka that didn't count sound units from contemporary English-language tanka that didn't count syllables. Some advocates made the "breath" the basis of the line for gogyohka, but it is not clear whether such arguments required the lines to be end-stopped. If so, this is a difference from tanka, but if not, there is no discernible difference. The two have come to an equivalent place via different routes.

Debate erupted between Taro Aizu, a former student of gogyohka, and Enta. Aizu advocated an even freer implementation of gogyohka. Enta trademarked the word "gogyohka" in Japan. When word of Enta's trademark reached English speakers, ATPO switched to using the public domain term "gogyoshi" in order to avoid

infringing on Enta's trademark. A flurry erupted among Anglophone poets, but the term "gogyoshi" did not catch on with them. Gogyohka continues to be a popular hashtag on Twitter, but interest in gogyohka and gogyoshi has waned among tanka poets.

In 2011, Taro Aizu published his "Declaration of Gogyoshi" (63) in the pages of ATPO. Aizu embraced a broad view of the world's five line forms of poetry, including Western and Eastern forms. He sought some sort of unification among them, although what he envisioned was not exactly clear. He also republished his earlier book, *The Lovely Earth*, in English translation.

The following poem appears in *The Lovely Earth* and embodies the lack of adornment prized in gogyohka and gogyoshi. It resembles the approach of poets in *Sounds from the Unknown*, where *kokoro* ("heart," i.e., sincerity) is valued,

Is my cat  
really dead?  
I caress  
her throat  
very softly

Aizu Taro (64)

Gogyohka and gogyoshi failed to establish any English-language journals, and aside from the acceptance of the forms in ATPO, didn't make any inroads among existing journals or websites. Gogyohka and gogyoshi attracted the attention of far more poets than *kyōka* did, but it had even less impact on tanka.

#### 4.5 Small Issues

This article has explored major developments but omitted several smaller ones, such as the *tankeme* (2-3-2-3-3 beats), word tanka (one word on each line for five lines), shaped tanka (a tanka arranged to form a shape, such as a cross or circle), and other tanka adaptations. Experimentation continues. For example, Professor Stephen Carter, the well-known translator, has tried exploding tanka translations on up to ten lines. (65) Others, such as Marlene

Mountain, have tried writing tanka in English on two lines. Matsukaze has been experimenting with three line and one line tanka. Edward Seidensticker advocated a two line tanka in iambic pentameter. (66) Most recently, Chase Fire has founded the online journal *Skyline, a Journal of Modern and Experimental Tanka* to provide a venue for tanka experimentation. (*Skyline* has not yet published an issue as of this writing.) Some have advocated the use of rhyme, quatrain, or other methods. None of these smaller efforts has garnered widespread interest or spawned any journals aside from *Skyline*.

#### 4.6 Tanka As It Is

The most comprehensive attempt to survey tanka as it is found was the *Take Five* anthology series. Each year for four years, the editorial team read all tanka published in English to select approximately three hundred poems for inclusion in an annual volume, along with several pieces of tanka prose and tanka sequences. In the final year, the team read in excess of eighteen thousand poems in more than a hundred and eighty venues. (67) Media ranged from print journals to poet blogs to symphonic music to chapbooks to videos and more. The four volumes, covering material published 2008–2011, gives a valuable snapshot of tanka of the modern era. What emerges is a portrait of a highly diverse field of skilled poets working with a variety of techniques to create poetry that is supple, muscular, and insightful. No single approach dominates.

### 5. Definition

The problem of tanka is how to define it. Any definition must be broad enough to encompass tanka as it is written in English, narrow enough to exclude its relatives, consistent enough to show its Japanese roots, and flexible enough to permit innovation. All of the ideas described above have merits and demerits, but none has been universally adopted.

Closeness to the Japanese original cannot be the basis of authority in English-language tanka. On the other hand, distance from the Japanese is

not the basis of authority, either. This apparently contradictory position can only be resolved if we step back and realize that tanka is no longer a Japanese literature. This may strike some as a profoundly radical position. Clearly, tanka originated in Japan and has been going strong there for fourteen hundred years, but just as clearly, it is now written in scores of languages around the world.

Defining tanka requires a “unified field theory” that takes in all the various methods of adaptation, tradition, and innovation. The definition must account for all of tanka’s manifestations from ancient times to the present in whatever language it appears. It cannot depend on tautology or solipsism, but must be an objective standard that any reader can apply.

The pragmatic definition that has arisen from the work of many poets, editors, publishers, and readers is this:

Tanka is a short lyric poem originally from Japan composed of five poetic phrases conventionally written on five lines in English.

Additions and restrictions are proposed by various parties to expand or contract the definition, but the statement above is generally accepted as being part of tanka’s definition, even when it is not accepted as the whole.

The reason why definition has been so fraught is the fear that if a definition is accepted, it will result in the gatekeepers refusing to publish things that “aren’t really tanka.” This is a legitimate fear: editors have the right—and duty—to publish poetry that embodies their editorial vision. That means they have the right to turn down poems that don’t adhere to their guidelines. Fortunately, publication venues have multiplied to the point that there are dozens available. Further, print-on-demand and ebook technologies, online venues, and social media provide outlets where anyone can publish anything. We live in an era of almost perfect liberty for anyone who is willing to learn some new technology. The reign of the gatekeepers is over.

## 6. Conclusion

If anyone can publish anything they wish, why do we even need a definition? Because definitions allow us to understand what we're talking about. Although it is fashionable to say we don't want to label our poetry, in truth, terms are handles that help us to pick up ideas and carry them around. Although writing poetry is generally conducted as an intuitive practice, it is actually a skill that can be studied, learned, and enhanced, but only if we have an effective vocabulary. In short, understanding tanka better makes for better poets, editors, and readers.

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