

# The Elements of Tanka Prose

by Jeffrey Woodward

## ***Introduction: Basic Definition***

The marriage of prose and waka, the forerunner of modern tanka, occurred early in the history of Japanese literature, from the 8<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, with rudimentary beginnings in the *Man'yōshū* and later elaboration as an art in the *Tales of Ise* and *Tale of Genji*.

One aspect of the proliferation of prose with waka forms is that practice moved far in advance of theory. Japanese criticism to this day lacks consensus on a name for this hybrid genre. The student, instead, is met with a plethora of terms that aspire to be form-specific, e.g., preface or headnote (*kotobagaki*), poem tale (*uta monogatari*), literary diary (*nikki bungaku*), travel account (*kikō*), poetic collection (*kashū*), private poetry collection (*shikashū*) and many more [Konishi, II, 256-258; Miner, 14-16]

The first problem one must address, therefore, in any discussion of tanka plus prose is terminology. While Japanese waka practice and criticism afford no precedent, the analogy of tanka with prose to the latter development of haibun does. The term haibun, when applied to a species of literary composition, commonly signifies haiku plus prose written in the “haikai spirit.” It would not be mere license to replace haibun with haiku prose or haikai prose as proper nomenclature. Upon the same grounds, tanka prose becomes a reasonable term to apply to literary specimens that incorporate tanka plus prose – a circumstance which may lead one to inquire, not unreasonably, whether tanka prose also indicates prose composed in the “tanka spirit.”

## ***Fundamental Structure of Tanka Prose***

Tanka prose, like haibun, combines the two modes of writing: verse and prose. Verse is metered language, that is, language measured in some fashion, whether what is counted is stress, quantity (duration), syllables, metrical feet or some other feature [Preminger, 885-890; Turco, 5]. In Japanese literature, tanka and haiku established metrical norms based on syllabic count. Tanka and haiku commonly abandoned syllabic meter in 20<sup>th</sup> century Japan and the adoption of the two forms in the West has widely followed suit.

Tanka prose, then, is a hybrid of these two modes of writing and one can extrapolate from this circumstance a basic unit -- one paragraph, one tanka -- that fulfills, at a minimum, the expectation aroused by the name.

I observed, in an earlier paper on this subject, that the simplest forms that this basic unit of tanka prose might adopt are two. The first is the preface or headnote:

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 .... 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.

[Woodward, 2007a,180 -181]

The second type is the poem-tale (*uta monogatari*) or episode as Harris and McKinney make clear:

The actual formal structure of *Genji* is the episode, and this concept of form is first realized in *Tales of Ise*.... 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]

In *uta monogatari* and the Japanese poetic tradition in general the poem is always the center around which the narrative episode arises. Episodes may relate outward to each other, either temporally or thematically, but this larger structure is usually of only secondary importance.

[McKinney, 13-14]

I offered illustrations in the earlier article which were drawn from classical Japanese sources, such as *Tales of Ise* and the *Kokinshū*, from the poems of Narihara, Saigyō and Shōtetsu. I wish now, since my chief interest in this paper is English adaptation and practice of these techniques, to employ works in English for discussion.

A simple and clear example of the preface or headnote is this

-- in America these trees are called acacia, but I learned to know their yellow fluffy balls of bloom could color a whole Italian sky when a rainstorm came with the other troubles I had at the time –

sunset  
between April showers  
clouds  
of thunder and hail  
boughs of mimosa

[Reichhold, 1998a, 22]

Here Jane Reichhold, in her sequence “A Gift of Tanka,” sketches a pithy introduction to her tanka, giving the reader the basic scene as well as a broad hint concerning undefined difficulties of the past. If her “troubles” were even slightly elaborated, this text would shift away from the clearly expository and rapidly approach the poem-tale or episode.

A second example – this from Karma Tenzing Wangchuk – assumes a midway point between the simple preface and the nascent narrative of the poem-tale:

*Traveler's Moon*

Last night I left my room in central Tucson and began a residence at the Dakshang Kagyu dharma center on the east side of town.

In fall of next year, four members of our sangha are scheduled to enter a three-year meditation retreat in northern California. I moved to the dharma center in order to make preparations.

Leaving one  
temporary home  
for another,  
a waxing gibbous moon  
my companion and guide.

[Wangchuk, 2004]

Greater detail is afforded the reader by this poet who describes a relocation and a reason for it, yet no other real action is described and so the tanka prose leans back toward the basic prefatory style, despite traces and hints of narrative.

The elementary poem-tale or episode is amply demonstrated by the following work of Gary LeBel.

### *Rereading Tsurayuki*

It's almost midnight—tomorrow's Christmas. As I turn the pages of the *Tosa Diary* I smell the sea and feel my cold soles' impress on the shingle; I hear those ancient pines whose roots are 'splashed by waves'. The rowers pull hard as a woman intones verses for the dead amid the long, elegant robes...I peek in on my sleeping daughter, and then shut the door.

Like the long sloping lines  
in Hiroshige's woodcuts, the rain glistens  
under streetlights—  
what strange coasts  
our bows have touched.

[LeBel, 2008]

Though this episode falls short of one hundred words, the reader is introduced to a Christmas Eve setting where a vivid renewal of an acquaintance with the *Tosa Diary* and that work's closing lamentation for a dead child awakens in the poet a concern for his own "sleeping daughter." The actual theme is never explicitly addressed but is evoked indirectly in the allusions to the work of Ki no Tsurayuki.

### ***Quantity and Position: Tanka in Relation to Prose***

If tanka prose is a hybrid genre that joins two modes of writing (verse and prose), and if the basic unit is one paragraph of prose and one tanka (whether the form is that of exposition or narration), then it is reasonable to anticipate that variation in the number and placement of tanka in relation to the prose will have some bearing upon the specific flavor or character of the tanka prose in question.

One prose paragraph plus one tanka constitutes our basic unit as well as the order of the two modes most commonly found in contemporary tanka prose. What happens, however, if that order is inverted and the tanka precedes the prose, if the prose, that is, abandons its role of preface or headnote for one of afterword or footnote? Insofar as the literature is not particularly rich in illustrations of this variant form, I shall have to cite one of my own tanka prose pieces, with apologies to the reader:

#### *Glass Lake*

the water gin-clear  
and five fathoms deep  
light from a sunfish

scales its way back up  
the azure heights

Here, on the wooden dock that sags and lists to one side and a ripple, I watch the light now sailing back from below, now a spire or a spine, now a fan or a fin, now alight or adrift in the scintillating guise of a stickpin, of a damselfly.

[Woodward, 2008]

The three models of tanka prose basic units quoted earlier from the work of Reichhold, Wangchuk and LeBel proceed, despite their varying degree of fidelity to the rival poles of exposition or narration, in a similar manner. The prose introduces the verse and establishes a background for a closing tanka that either veers obliquely away from the paragraph or quietly reaffirms it. In an inversion of this common order, the tanka in “Glass Lake” shoulders some of the burden that is carried by the prose in the other tanka prose pieces and establishes a backdrop as well as a tenor for the prose that – now thrust into the foreground – echoes the lyricism of the opening verse.

Tanka prose, of course, is not limited to this basic unit of paragraph plus tanka but admits many compound variations of form as well. Here is a relatively straightforward example by Jane Reichhold of an expository opening which is followed by three tanka:

. . . Mr. Warabi was soon playing the grand piano and two young men were standing before the group singing. They were singing in English and I strained to make out the words. After a bit I recognized through the operatic runs that they were singing my tanka. I was so touched that my words could be combined with such beautiful music that tears started again. Tohru Warabi had truly created a miracle out of my small words.

your sleeping breath  
night rain revives the earth  
waves in sea air  
in bright yellow daffodils  
nod to the dark wind

getting older now  
the sun rises so much later  
in winter's approach  
yet this glorious day fills

with my thankfulness in it

almost young again  
in the year of my rebirth  
time passes so fast  
lost in childish wonderment  
snails, dandelions and sunshine

[Reichhold, 1998b]

The journal commemorates an invitation from the Emperor and Empress of Japan to attend the New Year's Poetry Party as an honored guest on January 14, 1998. The prose opening delineates the setting and cultural milieu that serve simultaneously as motive and background for the celebratory tanka that follow. The contrast between the formal, full-dress occasion in a rich interior that the prose describes and the colorful rustic simplicity of the tanka could not be more vivid. Similar examples of a prose preface to multiple tanka but with very different tonal affect can be found in the works "Perfect Fever" by Marc Thompson [Thompson, 23] and "Peach Blossom Spring" by this author [Woodward, 2007b,171-173].

If only to demonstrate the great flexibility of this genre, I offer, by way of contrast, a recent work from Patricia Prime with a more complex structure and one where the prefatory prose and tanka elements vie with each other to lead the way in rhythm and tropes:

*Wings Over Water*

at first glance

you are a butterfly in flight wings flap as you dance above the red-stained Japanese bridge ready to land on a blank page

at first glance

your head bobs from side to side like the cautious mallards on the river a thousand words and lines the tools of writing tucked into your backpack in the spring when cherry blossom petals flutter to the ground or in darkest winter when the sun disappears behind the Kamai Ranges

at first glance

you are a heron wings beat and legs tangle as you swoop along the riverbank your eyes on the light

a harrier hawk  
scrolls the valley  
its wings  
almost touch  
the azure ceiling

wildflowers  
in the meadow  
you scrawl  
words across the page  
illegibly

the cramp  
of your gnarled hand  
over the paper  
a part of yourself  
a part of the poem

[Prime, 2008]

The episodic tanka that close this strong elegiac composition can be read in the spirit of an envoi to the work proper or even as an extended coda. The prose achieves its heightened effect by various poetic devices: the use of a refrain (“at first glance”), compression from omission of punctuation and certain conjunctions and prepositions plus the close observation and sensory images used to depict the scene.

One common method of compounding the basic unit of prose plus tanka is by continued rotation of the two modes: verse, prose, verse. A light and witty example of this model can be seen in the following work by Bob Lucky:

*Strategies*

hoping  
to get the girl  
I study the sky  
and try to untangle  
the stars

Next morning the electric lines are strung with ice. No one is going out in this. I see what I have and formulate a plan for chilequiles of sorts: an unopened jar of salsa, half a bag of tortillas chips, a hunk of dried-out cheddar, two brown eggs.

wanting  
to get the joke  
I follow the chicken  
across the road  
to the other side

I test the eggs for freshness in a bowl of water. One floats to the top. I boil the other and make nachos with everything else. "Breakfast," she says, "for new lovers," toasting us with a darjeeling I was saving for a special occasion.

wishing  
to know the truth  
I lie awake  
exhausting  
the possibilities

[Lucky, 110]

Forms where verse and prose alternate or are interlaced show a tendency for close relation between the two modes. This can be clearly discerned above where the successive tanka and prose installments build upon the images immediately before them: sky, electric lines, brown eggs and the chicken "across the road."

Just as our basic unit of tanka prose can be inverted, as already discussed, compound forms admit inversion also, often with striking effect. The work of Patricia Prime, again, is exemplary in this respect:

*White & Red*

*The plum blossom  
that I thought I would show to my man  
cannot be distinguished now  
from the falling snow*

Yamabe Akahito  
(*Love Songs from the Man'yōshū*, Vol. 8, 1426)

early spring  
the snow falls softly  
on white blossoms  
this evening alone –  
how cold it is

a sprig of flowers  
I pick to place in  
an emerald vase  
bends under the weight of snow  
fallen in the night

a serene painting  
white on white  
not the red  
of plums that will ripen  
when we meet in autumn

I admire the flowers  
the faintest tick of snow  
against the window  
red roses sprinkled  
on a white duvet

Nightfall -- I approach the house. Through the lit window I see a man in a cashmere jumper, a woman in a white evening dress with a string of pearls around her neck. Her hair the black of a raven's wing, her lips painted scarlet. They sit side by side in front of the piano, playing Mozart with two hands – their free hands around each other's waists. Discarded outer clothes in a heap beside the fire. On a table, an open bottle of red wine and two glasses . . . I stand watching these two people immersed in each other. They're friends of mine, arrived early for dinner. I'd left the door open when I went to gather the blossoms for a table piece. They've let themselves in – two people playing solely for each other.

[Prime, 2007]

The sequence of four tanka that ushers in the narrative prose here achieves a very marked, abrupt leap from verse to prose element, one that is far more oblique and disjunctive than that common to the analogous genre of haibun. That vaulting effect is perhaps more remarkable insofar as the leitmotif of color is woven so thoroughly throughout the respective verse and prose sections.

Our survey of the basic unit of tanka prose and of the many compound forms it can assume is not exhaustive but does perhaps account for those forms most commonly found. What might be called an *envelope* is yet another frequent tanka prose form: here two tanka bracket the intervening prose section or two prose sections bracket one intervening tanka section. However, I have multiplied examples already and, in the interest of abbreviation, shall move on.

### ***Tanka Prose in Relation to Haibun Conventions: Historical Digression***

Sanford Goldstein may have authored the first example of tanka prose in English with his “Tanka Walk,” circa 1983, which intersperses tanka with excerpts from a diary of his exercise regimen as well as a general journal which offers the poet’s reflections on life in Japan, his daily walks, his meditations upon Takuboku Ishikawa’s tanka and more [Goldstein, 26-32]. Jane Reichhold’s *A Gift of Tanka*, a collection that is sprinkled with prefatory notes in the classical waka style, followed soon after Goldstein in 1990 [Reichhold, 1998a]. Larry Kimmel’s “Evening Walk,” circa 1996, adopts a method akin to Goldstein’s in interlacing prose, tanka, prose and tanka to document his walk [Kimmel, 1996]. Assays in tanka prose multiply after this, particularly in Jane and Werner Reichhold’s *Lynx* where tanka prose appears frequently in the period 1997-2003 with a gradual tapering off thereafter.

Much of this early work is executed with greater enthusiasm than finish and for understandable reasons. In 1983 or even in 1996, when Goldstein and Kimmel, for example, were attempting this hybrid, tanka was not yet widely practiced nor were there ready models in English for the would-be writer of tanka prose.

I closed my earlier article on this topic with a series of questions that were intended to identify key problem areas in the practice and theory of tanka prose. It is impractical to rehearse each of those points here, if only because definitive answers to these questions await discovery. I do wish to revisit one question of this set, however, as it has a direct bearing upon the early practice of tanka prose, viz., “To what degree, if any, must the quality of prose with tanka differ from that of prose with haiku (haibun)?” [Woodward, 2007, 187]

Examination of earlier tanka prose demonstrates the regularity with which poets of the time mixed haiku and tanka freely with the prose, often even referring to the works as haibun – a fact made clear by the editorial practice of *Lynx*, for example, where such hybrids were published under the heading “haibun,” there being no separate category for tanka prose. One early practitioner – and a skilled one – who consistently blends haiku and tanka with her prose is Linda Jeannette Ward:

#### *Island Sunrise*

Awakened by the staccato calls of boat-tailed grackles, I find them strutting along the deck of our cottage, beaks pointed skyward, ebony feathers iridescent in the rays of the rising sun: a great orange ball they seem to balance in turn until a wide swath of sunbeams sparkles to the ocean horizon with an arousing brightness...

on pointed beaks  
nudged higher and higher  
the morning sun

My mind pleasantly suspended in the sun's dazzling glare, the open *Tao Te Ching* lies forgotten on my lap, waiting for the restless time that is gone now ... there's only this beach, this sky and a scattering of gulls when I return my gaze to the words before me...

how delicately  
she brushes  
ancient calligraphy  
...yellow damselfly  
upon the *Tao Te Ching*

[Ward, 54]

Here, one recognizes our basic unit of tanka prose in compound form – doubled, as it were – but with haiku in lieu of tanka in the first unit. That the prose in “Island Sunrise” would be quite at home in many contemporary haibun – right down to the ready resort to ellipses in prose and verse – strikes me as a fair observation.

Is the ‘haibun-like’ aura of Ward’s work, however, due to the presence of a single haiku? Does it reflect some stylistic predilection on the poet’s part? Or is it simply the product of a skilled poet who, perhaps, is also well-read in haibun? I doubt that a confident answer to any of these questions can be advanced.

Perhaps one might cautiously generalize and state that the quality of the prose in tanka prose will tend to approximate that of haibun wherever the basic unit of one paragraph, one tanka is employed alone or wherever, as in Ward, haiku is joined to the prose along with tanka. One “might cautiously generalize,” and I have, but without any firm confidence in the opinion. I have done so only to indicate, by way of example, how uncertain definition is in this endeavor, even on a question as apparently straightforward and simple as the one currently under examination.

### ***Summary and Conclusion***

I offered, in the introduction above, some description of the terminological confusion that surrounds tanka plus prose, both in Japan and abroad, and proposed the simple descriptive term tanka prose as easy nomenclature for the genre.

The structure of tanka prose was defined, first, by observing that the genre weds the two modes of writing (verse and prose) and, second, that our subject in its

many specific forms is built upon one common basic unit of composition (one paragraph, one tanka). It was then remarked that classical Japanese practice knew two basic forms of tanka prose – preface (exposition) and poem tale (episodic narration) – and samples of these forms drawn from tanka prose in English were provided.

Discussion then followed, at some length, of the variation in the number and placement of tanka in relation to the prose and of what effect such variation has upon the specific flavor or character of the tanka prose in question. Illustrations of the basic unit and its inversion (tanka first, prose later) plus that of many compound forms were studied and compared.

A general and abbreviated historical overview of early hybrids that employ tanka and haiku with prose closed this argument and afforded the reader some insight into the difficulty of establishing any clear and strict demarcation between tanka prose and haibun.

The common critical dictum is that practice precedes theory, a rule that I see little profit in disputing. Essays like the current one, at best, can only summarize the existing literature and extrapolate, cautiously, upon observations made while doing so. My interest in the matter of tanka prose is not strictly scholarly, at all events, but owes greater sympathy to poets and poetry, to the wish to see tanka prose widely adopted and practiced and to realize, thereby, the enrichment of tanka today and tomorrow.

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