

Tanka Poetics in the Twentieth Century: Problems and Prospects

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The history of tanka in the period of great social reforms known as the Meiji-Taishō era can be traced through numerous poetic anthologies and voluminous collections of critical works. These reveal that the process of evolution undergone by this traditional genre was highly complex, following its dramatic encounter with the westernized reality and highly modernized aesthetic values. The discourse on the fate of tanka (and also haiku) in the twentieth century is particularly instructive due to the fact that some 120 years ago there were in Japan rather many literati who insisted on the complete abolition of traditional genres and forms in the arts and literature. Such genres and forms were “doomed to extinction,” they thought, and had to give way to the Western muses. These “enlighteners” were quite serious in their demands for the transformation of traditional Japanese poetics and the unconditional acceptance of European verse.

For about a decade after 1882 (a year marked by the publication of the famous *Shintaishishō* 新體詩抄 anthology with a foreword rejecting traditionalist verse), the extremist “Westerners” carried on an argument with the leaders of the Keien tanka school, but the dispute produced no satisfactory resolution for either side. The most militant adherents of the Japanese way opposed westernization by faithfully maintaining canonic rules and regulations, a tactic which resulted in quick decay of the traditional poetry. Still, in both camps, the most progressive-minded intellectuals realized that the only possible way of reforming poetry and art would lead to amalgamations of the old and new, indigenous and imported elements. The major problem was in finding the relevant means for this convergence—and these means were eventually found in the forms that came to be known as *shintaiishi* 新体〔體〕詩 and *kindaishi* 近代詩, in which poets striving for new effects could use the treasures of ancient poetics in their experiments, while more traditionally-oriented tanka and haiku authors could borrow spirit of innovation from the modern culture. This search took over forty years and resulted in fierce discussions on the pages of the leading literary magazines. The discourse was abundant in original theories and bold assumptions, and these provide rich material for comparative analyses.

Romantic Challenge

It was the influential critic and theoretician of the conservative romanticist trend Takayama Chogyū who first tried to propagate *Yamato damashii* 大和魂 ideology

and to proselytize young poets and novelists for an imperialist “*nipponshugi*” 日本主義 doctrine. Rejecting the liberal ideas of Kitamura Tōkoku, the head of the democratic Bungakukai group, Chogyū in 1895 wrote an important article entitled “On the Ethical Ideal” (“Dōtoku risō o ronzu” 道徳理想を論ず) in which he praised individual abilities and spiritual freedom. He treated morals as the only regulating element in the society. His metaphysical theory presumed that the Japanese empire, led by a heavenly sovereign, was the omnipotent bearer of the highest morals; in accord with this fundamental principle, the personal interests of an artist were to be completely subordinated to national, imperial objectives. Chogyū’s views spread widely among young intellectuals. In the world of poetry, they were supported and promoted primarily by Yosano Hiroshi (Tekkan) 与謝野寛 (鉄幹).

In 1894, at only twenty years of age, Tekkan published a challenging essay, “The Sounds that Drew the Country to Disaster” (“Bōkoku no on” 亡国の音). Subtitled “Criticizing the Miserable Tanka Poetry of Our Time,” it is mostly a critical appraisal of what Tekkan saw as epigonic verse by degraded contemporary authors. His essay is particularly significant as a manifesto of the new tanka movement and also as a literary document of *nipponshugi* ideas that had yet to be formulated in ultranationalist terms.

Analyzing the social value of literature by examining various historic examples and reflecting on its crucial role in the construction of global ideology, Tekkan resolutely denied landscape lyrical poetry of the past and called for the new “civilian” verse. Poetry in his opinion was inseparable from common morals:

There is a close connection between the prosperity or decay of the state and its literature; I am sure that it also can be related to the tanka poetry. There are some shameless persons who say very silly things, for instance, “morals and literature have nothing in common.” From this number will come those people who are able to draw this country to peril (*Gendai bungakuron taikei* 1955, 168).

Mocking the profane poets who kept on blindly following medieval patterns, Tekkan expanded his concept in a very impressive comparison:

Alcohol and debauchery ruin the human body, its harm is obvious to anyone; indecent morals and customs spoil human spirit while the harm they bring is not always easy to see. Meanwhile the former destroys only flesh whereas the latter puts in jeopardy the whole state. . . . Is there anybody who doesn’t enjoy wine and love pleasures? But should one ruin his body for the sake of drunkenness and lust? I love waka poetry with all my heart, but I will never let anybody destroy my country through waka! (*Gendai bungakuron taikei* 1955, 168)

According to Tekkan, a real bard should study the masterpieces of the past and create a poetry of his own, seeking inspiration in nature and feeling the entity of the universe. This is the only way to compose novel, virile, and up-to-date tanka.

However people who don't realize this truth happened to be our modern poets. They are just imitating the old masters, arguing on the merits of the copies and are ready to spend all their lives in copying. . . . They know only their old masters while the rhythm of nature and Universe is inaccessible to their ears. . . . Each of them found something fit for his poor abilities in the old stuff and comprehended in the works of the past only the weak points. (*Gendai bungakuron taikei* 1955, 169)

Tekkan severely criticized tanka poets for their making a fetish of the *Man'yōshū* anthology, for their idolizing the refined and sophisticated manner of Kagawa Kage-ki, a once-popular tanka poet of the late Edo period, for their chronic errors in defining the categories of elegance and vulgarity, and for their usage of primitive vocabulary—which meant altogether a terrible profanation of the genre:

If you ask about the scope of this poetry—it is really meager; if you talk about its spirit—the spirit is weak; the quality of verse is low and primitive; the rhythm is loose. A hundred days would be not enough for me to enumerate its defects (*Gendai bungakuron taikei* 1955, 173).

Tekkan's tendentious declarations were reinforced by his own tanka in a militant "*masuraoburi*" vein which responded to the nationalist agitation in the days of the triumphant Sino-Japanese war. This explicit propaganda of the nationalist *nipponshugi* ideology and bushidō samurai values differed greatly in its essence from the reticent allegoric style the warriors of the past would use for their poetic remarks on bushidō morals. Although Tekkan's experiments were taken seriously by the critics and his fellow-poets, for at least another ten years, until the Russo-Japanese war broke out, he had no direct disciples who could transform this trend into a popular vogue. By that time, however, he had already switched almost completely to the love lyricism evoked by a passionate romance with a talented young poet, his future wife Yosano Akiko 与謝野晶子.

Nevertheless, his legacy survived in numerous waka written by both famous masters and dilettantes during the Russo-Japanese War, World War I, and especially World War II. The ultra-patriotic style became quite common among the poets united in the Association for the Assistance to the Throne in the "period of darkness" that lasted from the early thirties until the end of the war. After Japan's defeat, nearly all authors preferred to omit their propagandist nationalist tanka from the newly published collections. Revisiting their literary archives, half hidden under the dust of time, one cannot ignore the fact that Yosano Tekkan was the real founder of the extinct genre.

For Tekkan and his followers from the Shinshisha 新詩社 (New Poetry Society) group, as well as for the poets of the renowned poetic journal *Myōjō* 明星, the new tanka (and also *kindaishi*) poetics was just another effective means to raise consciousness of cultural identity among Japanese in the new world. It was distinctly declared in *Myōjō* in September 1901:

We are trying to stimulate Ego in each other by our poetry. Our poems do not imitate the works of the old masters—it is our poems and moreover, it is poems revealing and discovering the essence of everyone of us. . . . We call our poems “state poetry” (*kokushi* 国詩), but it is a new state poetry, state poetry of the Meiji era. It is a state poetry developing the traditions of such works as *Man'yōshū* and *Kokinshū* (Kimata 1964, 9).

Unlike Tekkan, other *Myōjō* poets, especially Yosano Akiko and Wakayama Bokusui, saw the new prospects for their poetry not in the “civilian lyricism” of *kokushi* but in the emancipation of the artist from the social restrictions and regulations, in the complete and unconditional liberation of the creative Ego. They treated medieval tanka poetry and particularly the conservative, old-fashioned (“*tsukinami*”) style of the early Meiji period with open contempt for the lack of individuality and sincere feelings. Erotic lyric poems by Akiko and nostalgic “bohemian” tanka by Bokusui both pursued the same goal—setting free the passions and emotions innate to human nature for the sake of spiritual ascent. It was for them also a unique way of self-identification in the new Japan, with its culture emerging from the fusion of Eastern and Western values. The majority of tanka poets, however, would continue to employ more conventional diction, even while recognizing the urgent need of reforms.

The *Shasei* Concept and Poetic Realism

The need to reform tanka as well as haiku poetry probably was obvious to every Japanese writer and critic in the second half of the Meiji period. Still, the bulk of the classical poetry was freighted with such an immense burden of conservatism, implied in its rhythm and lexical regulations, that it seemed easier to abolish the traditional in poetry as a whole than to seek ways of modernizing it. The first authors of *shintaiishi* new poetry openly declared that the existing corpus of tanka and haiku should be consigned to museum collections. It would not be an exaggeration to suppose that the fate of both genres could have been really deplorable if it were not for the titanic personal endeavors of Masaoka Shiki and his faithful disciples.

Unlike Yosano Tekkan, Shiki was not going to make a fetish of tanka by proclaiming it the sacred essence of Japanese spirit and the soul of Japanese literature. Shiki's approach to the theory and practice of tanka diction, derived from his explorations in haiku poetics, was rather rational, and his views were always marked by the broad-mindedness so typical of this brilliant man of letters. Far from worshipping tanka, he regarded it just as one important genre among the others. In his “Epistles to the Tanka Poets” (“*Utayomi ni atauru sho*” 歌詠みに与ふる書, 1898) he voiced an invidious comparison of tanka to haiku and kanshi (verse in Chinese):

In haiku there are merits characteristic of haiku only, in kanshi there are merits characteristic of kanshi only, and all these merits certainly cannot be found in tanka (*Gendai bungakuron taikai* 1955, 182).

Along with Tekkan he regretted the degradation of tanka in the Meiji period, blaming hidebound, *tsukinami* poets for this shameful decadence. In Shiki's perspective, it was their short-sighted guild-oriented conservatism that prevented any changes.

They don't want to know anything except tanka and indulge themselves in the thought that tanka is the top of perfection. They don't know anything even about haiku, which is the poetic form closest to tanka. They could care less whether it is senryū or haiku—let it only be seventeen syllables. That's how light-headed they are! And moreover, they don't study Chinese poetry, or have any idea of what Western poetry is or whether such a phenomenon really exists (*Gendai bungakuron taikei* 1955, 182).

In the end Shiki recommended to the tanka poets who felt unable to write in modern vein that they try other genres and forms, perhaps haiku or *shintaiishi*. A thorough comparison of various poetic systems provided the basis for his innovative poetic theory; of this there is no doubt. Nevertheless, despite his sharp criticism of routine versification, Shiki remained more an inventive traditionalist than a courageous innovator. He never called for the abolition of the old poetics for the sake of the new. He preferred instead to adjust traditional poetics to the needs of the moment introducing some new demands. This approach in a way correlates with the position of the Edo period *kokugakusha* 国学者 philologists who had contributed so much to the cause of restoration of early medieval masterpieces, constituting a strong opposition to the officially favored Confucian classics and overwhelming prestige of "Chinese learning." The novelty of Shiki's theory and poetic practice lays not in creating some novel revolutionary system (although that was perhaps his major objective), but in the bold revision of the medieval and early modern literary heritage and the reevaluation of the aesthetic conventions. And yet it was a challenge made in a very conventional way.

Shiki's daring criticism of the great *Kokinshū* 古今集 anthology (early tenth century)—a good-for-nothing collection, in his view—could be taken as a symbol of his revolutionary mind. But what did he propose in opposition to the "superficial play of words and images" that he excoriated? Not classical Western poetry, not the experiments of the modern *shintashi* authors. Rather, the ever-lasting grandeur and spiritual freedom of the *Man'yōshū*, another classic anthology of the eighth century. This opposition echoed the thinking and values embodied in the treatises of Edo *kokugakusha* scholars, who also sought the source of inspiration and renovation of tanka in the remote past. Shiki was following the path of Kamo no Mabuchi and Motoori Norinaga. He also elevated a centuries-old argument to a new stage, making the confrontation between the adherents of *Man'yōshū* and *Kokinshū* one of the crucial problems in the formation of a new tanka poetics for at least the next seventy years.

Probably it was this unrestrained adulation of Japan's most ancient extant anthology that Wakao Ransui had in mind when, in his article "Shiki's Death" ("Shiki

no shi” 子規の死, 1902), he called—quite undeservedly, in my view—even the best tanka composed by Shiki “a mere imitation of *Man'yōshū*” (5, 326). Actually Shiki put forth the idea of new poetics emerging from the old after a great fusion, but in praising *Man'yōshū* he remained far from relying exclusively on twelve-centuries-old poetic values. He was ready to use any material that he regarded as capable of being melted in the crucible of the new tanka (or haiku) poetry. He did not mind referring from time to time to Western aesthetics or to Chinese poetry or to the Japanese classics if it could contribute to the overall reformation of tanka (and even more, haiku).

Shiki promoted renovation of the conventional tanka lexicon, though in fact his recommendations and practical experiments went no further than the introduction of a few technical and social phenomena that he regarded as emblematic of modernity, things such as trains, railways, steamers, and baseball. The demand was strongly motivated in his Epistle 10 with special instructions concerning the implantation of such novel terms in the body of traditional tanka. However the application of these instructions both by Shiki and his followers more often than not looked (at least in the Meiji-Taishō period) quite out of place, creating (with some occasional exceptions) mostly the effect of oddity. Luckily, Shiki was not too persistent in using such innovative words—otherwise his tanka would look simply bizarre. Probably he could sense this, and this is why the proportion of deliberately “modernized” tanka in his writings is relatively small.

Following the lead of the *kokugaku* scholars, Shiki always would remain a patriot of Japanese culture and a champion of its indigenous poetic forms, while all his literary studies were enlisted in the cause of Poetic Resurrection. In his crusade aimed at the overthrowing of hackneyed and routinized poetic values, Shiki proved himself extremely resourceful at finding provocative objects for pungent criticism: Bashō and his school, *Kokinshū*, and the poetics of imperial anthologies in general. His critique, supported by persuasive examples, was deadly efficient, but ironically traditional values were never really shaken by it. This tends to make his invective look today more like a deliberate attempt to attract the attention of the reading public by creating a scandal than an effort to explicate his own concepts. But if it were not for that sharp criticism of the sacred masterpieces, Shiki probably would have never had an opportunity to promote his views nationwide.

Shiki's major concept *shasei* 写生 (“copying life” or “reflecting nature”) was traced to its origins by Japanese scholars long ago. In 1894, while reforming haiku, Shiki was influenced by the *yōga* artist Nakamura Fusetsu, who, in his turn, borrowed the concepts of the European realistic painting and the *shasei* principle of the Chinese Sung aesthetics. The concept of realism articulated by Tsubouchi Shōyō and applied to the new prose by Futabatei Shimei gave the final touch to Shiki's idea of rendering pictures of life as truly as possible.

Neither Japanese scholars nor American researchers such as Janine Beichman and Donald Keene have yet mentioned one more important factor which definitely affected Shiki's theory of *shasei*—the impressive achievements of photography and

cinema. Both were treated as the most promising new arts at the moment. Especially photo snapshots, in a way so close to the haiku sketches, could not leave Shiki indifferent. The proximity of these arts can be traced even in the choice of the terms—*shashin* 写真 for photo and *shasei* for Shiki's concept.

The *shasei* concept became the most successful one among Shiki's theoretical and practical innovations. In fact it was his major response to the demands of the new age, and he used it effectively for leverage in his argument with "*tsukinami*" conservatives. The leverage was all the more powerful because the notion of *shasei* could be interpreted in various ways, depending on the circumstances. No wonder that the dispute on the essence of *shasei* lasted over thirty years in the world of haiku and tanka, and involved the best poets in both genres.

In his "Talks on Literature" ("Bungaku mangon" 文学漫言) and several other essays, not to mention his numerous analytic works on haiku, Shiki treated *shasei* as a universal method of art. He gave a classical definition of the term in his article "On the Epic" ("Jojibun" 叙事文): "To reflect and copy things as they are" (*jissai no ari no mama o utsusu* 実際のありのままを写す). As a poet and also a painter, Shiki regarded *shasei* first and foremost as a mental state, a kind of specific vision that should suggest to the artist a choice of appropriate imagery and wording. Probably he himself, however, fell short when it came to developing this method and filling it with humanist pathos, vital energy and bold vigor, qualities that Meiji poetry badly needed. Rich and diverse as his literary interests might be, Shiki was not totally liberated from the conventions of the traditional aesthetics he challenged.

Itō Sachio, Nakamura Kenkichi, Koizumi Chikashi, Nagatsuka Takashi, and other disciples of Shiki who formed the core of the Negishi-ha group remained faithful to the legacy of their Master after his death in 1902. In the pages of their poetic journal *Ashibi* they continued to promote *shasei*. Still their interpretation of the concept varied greatly, as reflected in the discussion in *Ashibi* between Itō Sachio (Shiki's official successor) and Nagatsuka Takashi. The latter would stick to Shiki's rigid principles of photographic objective sketches, while Sachio claimed that Shiki's approach was out of date and a new *shasei* should expose also the deep sentiment and "vibrant emotions" of the author.

Nakamura Kenkichi developed this concept further, and Ōta Mizuho in his "Discourse on Tanka" ("Tanka ritsugen" 短歌立言, 1915) brought it to its climax, proclaiming "the realism of sentiment" to be the essence of tanka poetics.

Shasei theory in tanka diction was enriched and expanded by the leaders of another influential poetic group, known as Araragi, in the Taisho period. Shimagi Akahiko, who inherited the *shasei* concept from Shiki and Itō Sachio, modified its meaning by introducing distinct sensibility and colorful imagery. For him *shasei* was supposed to be used as a brush and the palette, not as a snap-shot camera. He stated his position in the essay "My Opinion on the Art of Tanka" ("Kadō shōken" 歌道小見):

For me the concept of *shasei* presumes not conveying some objective images, which are not related directly to my personality, but a way to express my inner life. *Shasei* is aroused both by the image of the thing (*jizō*) and by some external factors (Moriya 1990, 40).

Shimagi wrote voluminously about the individual element in tanka, giving special attention to the lexical nuances that are able to render the subtlest shades of the emotions. However, while the ultimate objective of his search was novelty, Shimagi turned again to the ancient masters of the *Man'yōshū*, poets such as Hitomaro and Akahito. Shimagi shared with many other poets of the “Shiki line” the infatuation of his great predecessor.

Saitō Mokichi, who is sometimes called the best tanka poet of the twentieth century, insisted that it was an insightful vision of nature that makes it possible to show “the soul of the things” in waka. For him, *shasei* meant the way of self-identification with the concealed soul of the depicted phenomena. This approach was probably a result of his research into Theodor Lipps’ theory of *Einfühlung* (empathy). On the other hand, his waka bear a visible imprint of traditional Zen aesthetics, which gives them suggestive psychological depth.

Saitō Mokichi declared his credo in the year 1913 in a series of essays that included “My Position in Composing Tanka” (“Sakka no taido” 作歌の態度) or “Words of the Songs” (“Uta no kotoba” 歌の言葉). It included at least four constant elements that, for poets, have never been subject to change: spontaneous and impulsive nature of composition; simplicity of expression; in-depth vision of things; passion. This expressed, in fact, Saitō’s novel understanding of *shasei*. If all those four elements were present in a poem, he never concerned himself too much about fidelity to the canonic rules.

I write tanka when I want to. It comes out of some strange mood, out of the wish to pour out my soul (Saitō 1984, 10).

In his article “Tanka and *Shasei*: One Author’s Opinion” (“Tanka to shasei: ikkagen” 短歌と写生・一家言, 1920), Saitō Mokichi spoke on behalf of numerous Araragi poets who shaped the *shasei* movement in the first half of the twentieth century. He proposed an expansive interpretation of the term that presumed reflecting and conveying reality with special emphasis on the individual creative imagination.

To watch the surrounding reality in order to reflect the universal essence of nature of one’s own ego—that is what *shasei* means in tanka poetry. This reality may be called “nothing but the facts,” to borrow a Western phrase. Meanwhile the notion of nature should imply the meaning that Rodin had given to it, tending to minimize the value of human life: “Art is just a reflection of nature in a human being” (5, 249).

The peculiarity of Saitō Mokichi’s approach to the problem of *shasei*, so typical also of the other literati in the first half of the twentieth century, lies in his reference to the authority of the European masters in search of support for the pure traditionalist indigenous concepts. He quotes the famous French sculptor to ground his understand-

ing of *shasei*, thereupon providing a bridge between the novel tanka of the Araragi group and the spirit of modern Western art (*esprit nouveau*), which constituted the major topic of artistic dispute at that time. Much later, in his essay “Gibberish of a Toy Horse” (“Jiba mango” 児馬漫語, 1948), and in polemics with his literary adversaries, Saitō again refers to the authority of the Western artist to explain his method:

Van Gogh would draw his pictures stroke by stroke. In Goethe’s lyrical poetry words are also painstakingly chosen. In this sense the construction of my tanka is similar. . . . Van Gogh’s paintings are full of intense inner life. In the same way I can define my own works in tanka poetry (*Gendai bungakuron taikei* 1955, 210).

To give due credit to the spiritual endeavor of many masters of the Meiji-Taishō-early Shōwa period who followed the path of Masaoka Shiki in developing and promoting the *shasei* concept, we should emphasize the fact that *shasei* poets adhered to the centuries-old tradition of seasonal poetry suffused with sensitivity to nature, while basically neglecting the social and political problems of the time. Their efforts to modernize tanka (and haiku too) were focused mostly on formal elements such as expanding the scope of the poetic topics, introducing “modern” words and—in some cases—using modern grammar forms instead of classic *bungo*.

However, the social indifference of the *shasei* poets, who constituted the mainstream of tanka diction in the Shōwa period, eventually turned out to be a condition leading to their all ending up in the ultranationalist camp. Saitō Mokichi openly admired Hitler, and contributed much to the cause of the Empire of Great Japan in the war years. Many renowned *shasei* poets, beginning with Tsuchiya Bunmei, Shaku Chōkū 釈超空 (Origuchi Shinobu 折口信夫), and Aizu Yaichi, eagerly collaborated with the nationalist government, writing faux-classical patriotic tanka and remaining to the end of the war the most faithful adherents of the “Imperial Way.” This fatal contradiction between the everlasting values of traditionalist poetry and its vulnerability to ultranationalist propaganda resulted in the further reevaluation of the *shasei* concept in the postwar period, with following overall democratization and drastic modernization of the tanka movement.

Other Trends

Kitahara Hakushū, an outstanding poet of the Symbolist movement who gained popularity in both *kindaishi* and tanka, treated the later as a kind of “auxiliary” minor art. In the preface to his tanka collection *Kiri no hana* 桐の花 (Paulownia Blossom), he compared tanka to “an antique tiny emerald that should be kept in a crystal treasury box behind the bottles of the European hard liquor and phials of hashish. The antique one-string lute should stand in the purple shade near the French piano so that one can enjoy the sight of it in calm and peace” (1, 198).

Later, though, in the period of distress caused by an unlucky love affair that had brought him to prison confinement and then to self-imposed exile, Hakushū was

ready to accept tanka as a major poetic genre. He cherished his own idea of *shasei* based on psychological realism. In the preface to his third tanka collection *Suzume no tamago* 雀の卵 (The Sparrow Eggs), Hakushū wrote:

The absolute nature of the genuine art based on such *shasei* is higher, deeper and more refined in symbolic meaning than any other kind of art—it awakens the divine in our souls and puts to movement all the strings of the spirit (Kindai shika ronshū 1973, 231).

Other tanka authors who would join neither the Araragi group nor the Aestheticism trend led by Hakushū were trying to challenge the new standards. Thus Onoe Saishū 尾上柴舟 in his article “My Contemplation on the Extinction of Tanka” (“Tanka metsubō shiron” 短歌滅亡私論, 1910) stated that contemporary tanka composition had completely degenerated. It had become impossible to evaluate the personality of the author and his talent from a single poem, as had been done in ancient times. To get even a general idea of a poet, one should read his works in volume—five or ten songs in a row, the more the better. The imagery in such tanka is determined by stereotypes, in Saishū’s judgment, and authors are unable either to put free thought into the frame of the classic meter or to compose tanka in colloquial language. All this confirms the fact that tanka have degenerated. “The era of poetry looks now like a vision from the past” because life itself is getting more and more prosaic. Saishū comes to a discouraging conclusion—one that prevents him from composing or even teaching tanka:

The above-mentioned reasons make us, at least me personally, consider the further existence of tanka absolutely impossible. Still I would like to treat this period of decay and degeneration with respect as the age of the awakening of national identity (Kindai shika ronshū 1973, 199).

Saishū hailed “the destruction of tanka” because it was necessary, in his opinion, for the overall triumph of the new literature. Of course his was the extremist of an extremist stance, much like his predecessors in the world of *shintaiishi* who made similar pronouncements two decades earlier. It was more likely a provocation for a dispute than his real conviction. Meanwhile poets of more moderate views suggested that what was needed was alteration of the *shasei* concept, rather than annihilation of tanka. They insisted on transforming modern tanka from a genre defined predominantly by landscape poetry into a kind of naturalist poetic writing that could employ the *shasei* concept to achieve a novel worldly realism.

The discussion lasted another twenty years and never came to a final conclusion, but in its course it produced some instructive pieces of aesthetic discourse, revealing a new approach to *shasei*. Here we can quote an essay by Tanabe Hajime, “Reading ‘My Opinion on the Art of Tanka’” (“‘Kadō shōken’ o yomu” 「歌道小見」を読む), 1924), which was a convincing response to the manifesto of Shimagi Akahiko:

Why talking about *shasei* should we always interpret this notion as “a way to convey the essence of nature”? We can also attribute a different meaning

to it as the revelation of the divine whereas God proper will mean the real essence of nature. If we search for an example in the field of modern Western painting, one might say that in this sense the method of *shasei* is revealed at its best in Cezanne's art. However, if we put an accent on the events and affairs of the human life, if we intend to disclose the most concealed mysteries of the soul hidden in the depth of personal experience, how can we do it through the *shasei* method only, avoiding any element which doesn't fit into the realm of nature? . . . If the creative activity is manifested as a natural product of the visual experience, then *shasei* will become a way of disclosing the sacred mysteries of the world of visual colors and forms. The experience of watching nature and comprehending its essence should be inevitably developed into composing tanka. This too can be rightly called *shasei*.

Still if we talk about plunging into a concrete personal life experience, about perceiving the bottomless abyss of our soul and expressing all its boundless and incredible potent, should we comply with the way offered the traditional *shasei* concept? The expression of the self within the framework of the objective personal experience or, to be precise, the objectivized development of the self is real *shasei* while self-expression expanded to the subjective individual personal experience hardly can stay the old *shasei* treated as "copying life" or "reflecting nature" (*Gendai bungakuron taikai* 1955, 225).

The moderate wing of tanka poets saw their major goal in bringing tanka poetics closer to everyday life. They took great care not to sever the roots of the classic tradition and to avoid any kind of vulgarization or ideological extremism. This trend in the tanka movement prized very highly "the realism of feelings," and its proponents criticized both the champions of formalism and the adherents of mere intellectualism. Ōta Mizuho, in his "Discourse on Tanka" ("Tanka ritsugen" 短歌立言, 1915), is a representative voice:

There are many facts permanently appearing and disappearing in our surroundings. Some of these facts just pass before our eyes and fade not even drawing our attention, and some appeal to our hearts. Those requiring a rationalist critical approach later dissolve in the melting pot of our intellect but those that appeal to our sentiments don't refer to the intellect any more. One might say that feelings, emotions soar far above the realm of intellect, aspiring to the very foundations of life. The flowers of the genuine meaning of such facts bloom in tanka. The comprehension of tanka presume their role as a basic invocation of life proper.

Tanka that don't touch the essence of life are not genuine tanka. In other words, tanka that contain no sincere feeling is not real tanka (*Kindai shika ronshū* 1973, 208).

In his quest for the "realism of feeling" Ōta returns to the classics, referring

again and again to the great masters of the past who came directly from the realm of medieval canonic poetics into the world of modern poetry.

We must learn the quietude of aloofness from Saigyō and Bashō (*Kindai shika ronshū*. 1973, 210).

Speculating about the allegoric nature of Japanese lyricism, Ōta correctly accentuates the influence of Buddhist philosophy on tanka writing throughout the history of the genre.

Obviously one of the reasons for it should be traced to the strongest impact of Buddhism. Although maybe there is even more serious reason: just that a human being is essentially a sad creature. Buddhism just felt this melancholy immanent to human nature, all this eternal sorrow and gave it a form of doctrine. Probably humans on their path of enlightenment came to perceive that eternal sorrow trying to express this crucial element of human nature in poems, songs and other kinds of literature (*Kindai shika ronshū* 1973, 211).

In Ōta's perspective, eternal spiritual values can teach any poet real *shasei* in a natural way, filling tanka with novel thought, denying both metaphysical abstraction and vulgar simplification.

Kubota Utsubo, one of the leaders of the "naturalist" school, in his theoretical treatise "Ways of Expressing the Subjective Element in Tanka" ("Uta ni okeru shukan no arawashikata" 歌に於ける主観の表し方, 1918), insisted on the strengthening of the individual component in poetry. He introduced his own sophisticated and well grounded classification of modern tanka based on the specification of poetic style. Kubota divided contemporary tanka into four major categories. The first category included tanka where the subjective worldview of the author was revealed as "a plain reflection of nature." In such poems the subjective element (i.e., individuality) is expressed very vaguely, in a rather primitive form.

Tanka composed in this vein are nothing else but the pieces of prose; they just remind of tanka by the formal features, not by the spirit (*Kindai shika ronshū* 1973, 240).

The second category comprises tanka in which individuality seems to be found on the first reading but vanishes on the second reading. Kubota includes in this class tanka that he considers epigonic, poems that simply rehash themes from *Man'yōshū* or *Kokinshū* and formulaically represent classic aesthetic notions such as the "concealed sense" (*yūgen*) and "the sweet sorrow of the things" (*mono no aware*). Such poems were typical of the sentimentalist trend in tanka.

In Kubota's third category were the works of those poets who "kept to the speculative element making speculation a constant background for their tanka and just searching in life the appropriate stuff to apply it to their speculations" (5, 242).

Finally, the fourth and the most important category of tanka (or just poetry at large) comprised the poems “which glorified real feelings while taking its material from real life” (5, 243). Perfect samples of such verse can be found among the classic masterpieces by Hitomaro or Bashō. Only such poetry, in Kubota’s vision, could meet the requirements of the new times. However for the vast majority of the modern tanka poets it remained an inaccessible ideal.

As follows from these selected examples, which represent various standpoints in the long discourse on modern tanka poetics and *shasei*, almost any author would inevitably draw a direct line to the classic poetic heritage to ground his most innovative concepts. Despite their sincere intentions to bring new life to tanka (and haiku as well), the majority of the traditionalist poets and critics in the prewar period would never give up the sacred canon and abandon the most essential poetic regulations. In this respect, their perspective has to be regarded as “the renovation of the classics.”

The “Life School”

Meanwhile another trend emerged in tanka poetry, opposing the typical traditionalists with all their reflections on nature, on the subjective and objective elements of beauty, on the nuances and overtones of aesthetic emotion. This new trend started with the rise of the naturalist school that spread its influence from prose to the world of modern verse and tanka. Onoe Saishū, Maeda Yūgure 前田夕暮, Wakayama Bokusui 若山牧水, and other young poets who had emerged from the *Myōjō* Romanticist movement later formed the Hakujiitsusha 白日社 (Broad Daylight Society), espousing a concept of naturalism that insisted on simplicity and unsophisticated poetic techniques. Although for some members of this group, naturalism meant nothing more than opposition to their predecessors without any particular reason, other members took the demand of democratization seriously, perhaps too seriously.

The “Life School” (Seikatsu-ha 生活派), represented only by two outstanding poets who inherited some views from the naturalists, was the first to introduce leftist ideas and the theme of social struggle into tanka, paving the way for the legion of the poets who constituted the proletarian literature movement and the postwar Democratic Poetry movement. Both Ishikawa Takuboku, who died a young man in 1912, and Toki Zenmaro (Aika), who lived over sixty years, “approached quite closely to the novel doctrine of socialism” (6, 454) as early as the first decade of the twentieth century.

Takuboku and Aika both tried to write tanka that would be comprehensible not only to connoisseurs but also to the masses of working people—workers, farmers, and city clerks. This approach symbolized a considerable reformation of the genre. While earlier (in the poems by Yosano Tekkan) and later (in the military propagandist poetry of the thirties and forties) there were some distinctive attempts to utilize tanka for the nationalist cause, the Life School suggested incorporating leftist ideology in the context of everyday life. This concept was explained by Takuboku in his

manifesto “Poems to Eat” (“Kuraubeki shi” 食うべき詩, 1909).

I want to say that one should compose poems standing firmly with both feet on the ground. I mean the poems that one writes realizing indissoluble ties with the real life of the people. We must compose poems that are “indispensable” for us—those that have a smell of our everyday meals, not a scent of some exotic viand. Maybe this presumes that poetry will be driven to the position lower that it holds now but anyway, to my mind, such poetry, the presence or absence of which doesn’t change a thing in our life, should change to become a matter of prior necessity. That’s the only way to claim the right of this poetry to existence (Kimata 1964, 155).

Takuboku criticized tanka poets who were wasting time in vain disputes on details while not even thinking about the alteration of the essence of their verse. He also made the shocking demand that tanka and modern *kindaishi* be written in colloquial language, breaking the bonds of the millennium-long tradition.

I don’t think that poems should fit the classic standards though there were some opinions that our contemporary colloquial Japanese is too rough and not eloquent enough to be the language of poetry. The reasons are substantial enough but there is a principal error in these arguments because poems per se are regarded here as expensive jewelry and a poet is treated or tends to be treated as a creature dwelling high above the plain mortals or at least far aside from them. Meanwhile these reasons contain some elements of self-abasement—allegedly the feelings of the modern Japanese are too rough, imperfect and not refined enough to be transformed into poetry (Kimata 1964, 157).

One should not underestimate the fact that Takuboku was calling for switching tanka to colloquial Japanese at a time when any suggestion of the kind was treated as a sacrilege in the world of traditionalist poetics. Only naturalist *kindaishi* poems by Kawaji Ryūkō 川路柳虹 and Sōma Gyofū 相馬御風, published in 1908–1909, had dared to challenge the canon, and their colloquialism had provoked a hurricane of scornful criticism. However, Takuboku, with his independent poetic mind, could openly throw down the gauntlet to the conservatives. In his “Poems to Eat,” he wrote about the introduction of the colloquial language in poetry as a fact to be inevitably acknowledged by everybody:

The rise of the philosophy of naturalism was related to its application in various fields of life. So I regard the installment of contemporary language into poetry as a part of this introduction of philosophy, so precious for us (Kimata 1964, 158).

Talking about the role of the writer in the society, Takuboku would not resort to pathetic commonplaces so typical of the writings by his fellow poets of the time. For him, truth in reflecting the facts of life was the only criterion of aesthetic value.

Oh this useless self-realization “I am a man of letters!” It extends so much the distance between the literature of our days from the thing we really need!

A real poet should be a man of permanent self-perfection implementing his philosophy into life like a politician? Bringing into his life the only objective and pursuing it with a zeal worthy of a businessman, having distinct understanding of everything as a scholar would have (Kimata 1964, 159).

Blaming over and over again the adherents of traditionalist refined tanka lyrics, Takuboku proclaimed a different, functional role of poetry:

The veneration of poetry means making an idol. Poems should not be too pompous. Poetry must just record in detail the events of the changeable emotional life of a human remaining his diary (Kimata 1964, 160).

Although the demand to record the vicissitudes of emotional life was certainly not new to traditionalist poetry, Takuboku with his “real life” lyrics obviously gave it a very special meaning. For him tanka was not just a means to perceive the holy nature in an act of theurgy, but a way to talk about everyday joys and sorrows in a plain and unconventional manner that evoked the love and understanding of the masses. Such an approach presumed “another tanka,” something really different from the traditions of Hitomaro, Akahito, Tsurayuki, Teika, Ryōkan, or Shiki. Takuboku’s distinctive position was emphasized by contemporary critics who could not help wondering about its revolutionary effect. Here is an evaluation of Takuboku’s activities by a famous man of letters, Akita Ujaku:

During all his life Takuboku would direct his efforts in the field of culture first and foremost to the destruction of the formal basis of waka, which was for him nothing but a rotten heritage of the middle ages. It was an extremely difficult task—to crush the formal basis of waka that had survived through many centuries if not millennia—and to create a new form instead. A man who managed to do this is certainly worth calling an outstanding talent (Tsubouchi 1996, 264).

A few years later Toki Aika developed the ideas of Takuboku on the popular nature of poetry in his article “A Warning to the World of Tanka” (“Kadan keigo” 歌壇警語, 1915–16):

They call our poems “the life tanka”—and what’s the meaning of it, I would ask. Life—what exactly of life is condensed in tanka? And what is to be said of our other poems?

Inner life or external—human life cannot be reduced to such a simple dichotomy. To sing life as a whole—what else can one expect of the new tanka?! Being a man who lives in this epoch, I take as the only direction the necessity of singing my life with my own words. As we managed to

implement this demand into real life, we were generally recognized as a movement, and therefore tanka that used to be a requisite of one social class nowadays has gained a nature accessible to everybody and became the property of the masses (Kindai shika ronshū. 1973, 216).

In so saying, however, Aika warned his fellow-poets about the dangers of vulgarization, which could profane the art of tanka. He insisted on keeping a balance between politics and poetics while not ignoring the value of poetic imagery expressed in words.

Proletarian Tanka and a Drive to Further Democratization

Novel tanka by Takuboku and Aika, along with their essays, manifestoes, and critical articles, may be regarded as a peak of the popular democratic literature, especially poetry at the initial stage of its emergence. On the other hand the Life School became a prologue to the proletarian tanka poetry that formed a substantial component of the proletarian literature movement in the twenties and thirties. The movement that arose in Japan after the victory of the socialist revolution in Russia in October 1917 was characterized by social vulgarization and oversimplification of literary material—features also typical of the Soviet ultra-leftist poetics of the time. Although they never constituted the mainstream of tanka writing in the Shōwa period, the works by the Japanese proletarian tanka poets and critics are worth reading as a “cultural sign” of the time, reflecting the changes that traditionalist culture was undergoing.

Champions of proletarian tanka rejected all forms of modern verse that did not emphasize class struggle, and called for the revolutionary renovation of poetry. On this point, they joined the proletarian and anarchist *kindaishi* poets who demanded the transformation of the revolutionary arts into a social revolution. Works by Takuboku and Aika were accorded the status of classics by the radical leftist theoreticians. The proletarian critic Tsuchida Kyōson 土田杏村, in his article “On the Reformation of Tanka” (“Tanka kakushin ron” 短歌革新論, 1926), provided a distillation of the Life School manifestoes. First of all he demanded a modernizing of the language of tanka, which could be achieved only by a drastic simplification. The overall objective was to introduce actual social topics into tanka, using poetry in the interest of the masses, and consequently to bring about a change its elite status.

For a man living in the atmosphere of our days it would be appropriate to use the word “people” instead of the word “talent” (*Gendai bungakuron taikei* 1955, 223).

In other words, no poetic gift has a right to existence if it does not serve the interests of the people. And predominantly poor people. Analyzing contemporary schools and trends in the tanka world, Kyōson excoriated all of them for their lack of distinct social orientation. For instance, he blamed the Araragi group and its leader Saitō Mokichi for social indifference and the absence of a class platform. His contemptuous insinuations seem to have disturbed those refined lyrical poets very little,

however; instead they were received as just bizarre. On behalf of the proletarian tanka authors, Kyōson stated his views as follows:

My position is clear: first, to use in tanka modern colloquial language; second, to liberate the rhythm, adjusting it to the possibilities of modern language; third, to create proletarian literature. (*Gendai bungakuron taikei* 1955, 229).

However, neither Kyōson nor his comrades could suggest any really effective means for the improvement of tanka, always remaining the hostages of Marxist dogmas. Pointing out that no progress of the “revolutionary” tanka would be possible without the evolution of the whole of literature—all genres—in the same direction, Kyōson came to a paradoxical conclusion:

Now why should tanka inevitably become a part of proletarian literature? Well, just because their function is designated by the general proletarian literary theory, and this issue doesn’t need any more discussions. Actually, as all the kinds of arts should be based on the proletarian ideology, every other kind of art should be immediately banned if it is different (*Gendai bungakuron taikei* 1955, 229).

At the end of the article the author indulges himself in an exhortation that comes close to being pathetic while at the same time being typical of the proletarian literature movement:

Tanka poets! Stop following the miserable lead of the masters. On accomplishing revolution in our own lives, let’s bring revolution to tanka. Nowadays tanka is not ready yet to range alongside eith the other kinds of art. No doubt tanka don’t reflect the demands of the time. Doesn’t it make a revolution in tanka still more vital a necessity? From the orthodox rhythm and archaic lexicon of the old tanka to the free rhythms and modern vocabulary of the proletarian verse! (*Gendai bungakuron taikei* 1955, 230).

Another advocate of the proletarian tanka, Ishigure Shigeru, was quite confident that the future belonged to Marxism. In his review “The Achievements of the Tanka Revolution” (“Tanka kakumei no shinten” 短歌革命の進展, 1928), he severely criticized the Araragi group for its “too light-minded” concept of poetry. As models for Japanese writers, he held up Karl Liebknecht, with his hatred of the “burghers’ art,” and Georgi Plekhanov, who rejected any work of art without ideological content (*Gendai bungakuron taikei* 1955, 230-231). In an exchange of polemics with Saitō Mokichi, Ishigure charged that the alleged neutrality of the Araragi poets would inevitably lead them to the reactionary camp in ideology. His pessimistic prognosis came true several years later in “the period of darkness,” when the overwhelming majority of the “neutral” poets were engaged in the propagandist activities by the militarist authorities and became contributors to the dissemination of the nationalist

concepts. For his part Saitō Mokichi rightly accused Ishiguro and other proletarian tanka poets of leftist extremism and a primitive approach to the complex phenomena of ethics and aesthetics.

Proletarian poets and critics never succeeded in their quest for a tanka reformation. The overall impact of their efforts was nevertheless impressive. They managed to deprive tanka poetry writing of its sacred halo, paving the way to the postwar popular “democratic” mass tanka movement. Although the tradition of “pure” lyrical tanka survived through the war years and has been sustained by many prominent poets for decades after the war, the pillars of this ancient poetic edifice were shattered. Thousands and thousands of people who joined the tanka circles after the war did not care much about the sophisticated canon; they were more concerned with a struggle for peace and democracy. The perfectionist endeavors of the few selected professional lyricists were practically buried under mounds of amateur verse. Quantity overwhelmed quality, with the result that mass proliferation of the genre made strict adherence to its traditional poetic criteria almost inconceivable. As a result modern tanka finally lost the status of privileged poetic genre and was transformed into a craft accessible for any interested dilettante. That was the most substantial outcome of the fierce discussions on the essence of tanka that have taken about a century.

Drastic modernization of tanka—such as is exemplified by Tawara Machi and her followers since the 1980s and favored by millions of readers—has been just another step toward complete emancipation. In fact the “tanka” of Tawara Machi have nothing in common, with the exception of the number of syllables in the poem, with either the early *uta* by Hitomaro, Saigyō, and Teika or with the late classics like Masaoka Shiki, Yosano Akiko, or even Ishikawa Takuboku. It would be much more appropriate to rename this candid but cute form of versification. Yet critics and the public at large prefer to stick to the old term, and to call it “tanka.”

The further development of modern tanka leaves almost no doubt that continued emancipation from old rules and regulations can be expected. However, loosening and vulgarization of canonic forms in poetry, especially where such a delicate ancient form as tanka is concerned, although it might make a complex genre easier for comprehension, would almost inevitably lead to the irreversible alteration and eventual downgrading of tanka poetry. You cannot take a sonnet in the pattern perfected by Petrarch, drop the canonic rules and regulations, rhythm and rhyme, fill it with modern sentiments and eccentric ideas—leaving only the number of lines—and then call it a modern sonnet. It would be a completely different verse. Similarly, a modern “tanka” would be different from a classic tanka. Good or bad, it just should not be called tanka any more. Maybe the time has come to recognize this as a different genre, far removed from its ancient roots in order to meet the demands of modern Japanese, and give it a new name.

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