

[Book Review]

*Tanka in English: In Pursuit of  
World Tanka*, Second Edition  
by Atsuo Nakagawa

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Fr. Neal Henry Lawrence, O.S.B.  
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The need for a Second Edition of *Tanka in English — In Pursuit of World Tanka*, first published in 1987, is evident from the growing international interest in this form of poetry. Tanka has held center stage in Japan for more than 1,500 years. The Imperial Court called it “waka” and still does, but gradually people in general call these poems “tanka”, the most popular form even today for writing poetry. Amazingly short, 31 syllables in five segments, 5-7-5-7-7 syllables, every Japanese has likely written tanka (waka) at some time in their lives. Now that Japan is becoming international and interest in things Japanese has swept the world, everyone can be challenged to write in his own language using this form. The contents of tanka are as varied as life itself and more and more universally appealing.

The honor was mine of writing the *Foreword* to the First Edition of Professor Atsuo Nakagawa’s pioneer book and from the book itself learned more about the history and theory of the form I had been using since 1975 when I started writing original tanka in English. I had come to know tanka through Dr. Shigeru Nambara, the first president of the University of Tokyo after World War II, who told me about writing tanka when he traveled or was deeply moved by some scene or event. The new edition of *Tanka in English* is to be recommended to anyone who has an interest in Japanese literature in general, especially poetry including tanka.

Professor Nakagawa wrote an authoritative book on haiku, *Studies on English Haiku*, published by Hokuseido Press in 1976. Haiku have caught the

fancy of English-speaking foreigners, especially in the United States and Canada. Haiku are shorter than tanka, 5-7-5 syllables, actually derived from the first three segments of a tanka. Dr. Marie Philomène has written tanka and much about it. In the March 1981 *Poetry Nippon*, she wrote an article "Distinguishing Waka (Tanka) from Haiku." *Poetry Nippon* is an international periodical of English poetry founded by Professor Nakagawa.

Haiku are exotic and attractive, but as Professor Edward Seidensticker says: "Waka (tanka) might answer more fundamental poetic needs." Professor Koji Suzuki of Seikei University, a tanka poet, shares this; he thinks tanka (waka) has "exerted the most prolonged and essential influence on Japanese culture." He has encouraged the writing of tanka in English as a "spur toward the international recognition of the form of tanka."

Professor Nakagawa has made poetry in English well-known in Japan through *Poetry Nippon*, the official organ of the Poetry Society of Japan which he also founded. He is always studying, writing his own poetry in English and editing the work of many poets and foreigners who write in English. In this Second Edition, he has been able to make his theory concerning tanka clearer. One has only to examine the examples he quotes of original tanka and translations, including his own, to understand that he does not insist on any particular form. Some readers apparently got the impression that he advocated English tanka should be in the strict quatrain verse of tetrameter and dimeter lines. I have the impression that he rather prefers quatrain verse of tetrameter lines. I myself am convinced that English tanka should be in strict 5-7-5-7-7 syllables, if it is to be called a tanka.

One of the most attractive additions to the Second Edition consists of tanka from three more writers: Harold Wright, an American professor of Antioch College, Yellow Springs, Ohio; Michael Bullock, a Canadian, Professor Emeritus of the University of British Columbia; and Tawara Machi, a young Japanese writer of tanka now extensively translated into English. Wright and Tawara mostly use the strict 5-7-5-7-7 form of 31 syllables.

Harold Wright is one of the contemporary poets closely related to tanka. Tanka of 31 syllables is the form used for centuries by the Imperial Court at their poetry parties, so it was a delight to read translations of Wright of tanka of Emperor Meiji and Empress Shoken in the strict form, published on

the 70th anniversary of the Emperor's death by Meiji Jingu Office. Professor Nakagawa regards two of Wright's tanka in *Tanka in English* as perfect as poems, but the other one he says, "leaves some improvement as a poem." I am not so critical as the professor for I think as poems they are excellent.

I criticize the poems of Bulloch for not using the strict form of tanka. As poems they are lovely and the contents tanka-like. Tawara Machi is a fresh breeze in the tanka world. As a young high school teacher, she became enamoured of tanka and wrote prolifically. Her first book *Sarada Kinenbi* (Day of Salad Remembrance) has had an astonishing success since 1987, selling over 3,000,000 copies, and launching her on a new phase of writing and popularizing tanka. She writes in strict 5-7-5-7-7 syllables on an amazing variety of subjects using the spoken language of young people (*shin jinru*), but appealing to all ages. Now her tanka have been translated into English by two well-known translators, Jack Stamm and Juliet Winters Carpenter. The former uses the strict tanka form so I find more satisfying. Mrs. Carpenter says, "I tried to adhere to the spirit of the tanka, by not adding words to make it fit the syllables." Her English versions are not tanka in my opinion, so are just accurate translations.

I have translated a few of Tawara's tanka, of which Professor Nakagawa has used one in his Second Edition. I do not find it hard to use the strict form and though sometimes words are added they fit the contents. No two languages are duplicates of one another. I remember the experience in translating some of the tanka in Dr. Marie Philomène's book she edited, *The New Year's Poetry Party at the Imperial Court — Two Decades of Postwar Years: 1960-79* (Tokyo, Hokuseido Press 1983). Of the translations in this book Donald Keene, Columbia University wrote: "Obviously the translations have been done with both care and affection. I think that the decision to render the poems into a form as close as possible to the original tanka form was the right one." The book received "The Publication of the Year Award" and welcome by the Imperial Family. The former Crown Princess Michiko, now Empress Michiko, has encouraged the writing of English tanka.

For anyone reading *Tanka in English* for the first time, fascinating sections can be found, such as the very beginnings of tanka, in Part Two, Chapter Five, "Why Does the Japanese Tanka Have a Five-Line Form." The primordial tanka is Prince Susanoo-no-Mikoto's song in the Kojiki on page 44.

Part Three, A Journey into the Tanka Worlds, Ancient and Modern, goes to Ancient Greece, Ancient China, Indians' America (Oral Songs), Okinawa and Modern America. The *Notes* and *Selected Bibliography* are valuable sources for pursuing the study of tanka further.

The reviews of the First Edition of *Tanka in English* have been favorable. David Burleigh, literary critic of the *Mainichi Daily News*, writes: "Atsuo Nakagawa has written an invaluable guide to the history of tanka and its possibilities in English. His informative and interesting book has detailed notes and a full bibliography." The *Notes* add much to the understanding of the chapters, underlining that the book is not only for those seeking information about tanka for the first time, but for those who know tanka intimately. The critic on the *Asahi Evening News* says on reading Nakagawa's translation of a poem of Li Ch'ing Chao born 1151 "one begins to understand what Prof. Nakagawa means when he states that the 'essence of tanka is rhythmical spasm' (*inritsuteki keiren*), or 'spasmodic continuance of emotion which burns instantly' (*shunkanteki ni nenshōsuru jōnetsu no keirenteki jizoku*)."

In *The Rising Generation*, Rikutarō Fukuda says Nakagawa, well-versed in western culture, makes tanka which is deeply rooted in Japan's cultural traditions easy for foreigners to understand. The book on tanka discusses five ways of translating Japanese tanka into English with examples of excellent translations. Tanka-like poetry from Greece, China, Okinawa and of an American Indian as well as contemporary American poetry indicates the extensive and enthusiastic search of Nakagawa. The book is a highly intelligible and informative foreigner's guide to the profound world of tanka, made possible by the author's long experience in writing English Tanka himself. (Translation by Jiro Ohbu).

Professor Nakagawa's book has attracted considerable attention not only among professional poets and professors of literature, but among the general public. I met Mrs. Sumiko Koganei and Mrs. Toyoko Aizawa at a Japan Pen Club Meeting and found both wrote English tanka. Mrs. Aizawa is an earnest advocate of English tanka and has published her own tanka and those of others. Mrs. Koganei included some translations of her own tanka in a book of Japanese tanka, having started translating them for many foreign friends. She was impressed by Professor Nakagawa's book, especially his statement,

“Tanka could be one of the future mental sports to fill leisure hours in the age of long life.” She received encouragement from Professor Kunio Tsukamoto, a leading person in the tanka world. Some of her tanka were published in *Poetry Nippon* for March 1989. She now writes in the strict 5-7-5-7-7 syllable form and will have a book of English tanka published this autumn. She is a keen observer of nature, both in Japan and abroad, especially Switzerland, and a lover of her family and friends, bringing out not only the serious side of life, but the lighter and humorous sides.

The Second edition is to be recommended even more highly than the First Edition because it has been enriched by additional information and examples. A beginner interested in Japanese literature will find his eyes and ears opened to the most basic form of Japanese poetry which is as alive today as during the days of the Man'yō-Shu, being “the song of songs of Japan.” The person already versed in Japanese literature will find new insights concerning tanka (waka). And the writer of tanka in English or other foreign languages will gain a deeper understanding of the form being used. Again Professor Nakagawa's Second Edition deserves wide readership and also use in high schools and universities. May it add impetus to his vision of world tanka resulting in enjoyment and pleasure in the Heisei Era (Attainment of Peace) just begun.