An educator’s journey to teach *tanka* (短歌) at an American Pacific island university

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Introduction

Of all the countries of the world, only China has a longer continuous literary history than Japan. Japanese literature traces its beginnings to oral traditions which were first recorded in written form in the early 8th century after a writing system was introduced from China. *Kanji*, *hiragana*, and *katakana* are the three systems of written characters used in Japan, though Roman letters are also used occasionally. *Kanji* characters are ideograms brought in from China; characters of *hiragana* and *katakana* systems represent single syllables and each system has 46 characters.

In the 8th century, the ancient myths and history of Japan were gathered together in *The Kojiki* and *The Nihon Shoki*. The former is a record, written in Chinese characters adapted to the Japanese language, of ancient events as recited by a court official whose task was to memorize such matters; and the latter, *The Nihon Shoki*, is a historical record arranged chronologically and written in kanbun (in the style of classical Chinese) (NSC, 1982). In the same century, as stated by NSC, there also appeared what is now the oldest existing anthology of people, *The Manyoshu*, containing approximately 4500 poems (such as 長歌, 短歌, 旋頭歌). A female writer, Murasaki Shikibu, in the early 11th century wrote *Genji Monogatari* (or *Tale of Genji*) that has been appreciated as the supreme masterpiece of Japanese literature and first greatest novel in the literature of the world. It is a story of the man who spent his whole life in love; and the dreamlike character of Hikaru Genji, hero of *Genji Monogatari*, entranced the Japanese people.

*Tanka*, Japan’s oldest and most esteemed poetry genre, is not as well known in English as the short form—haiku—which evolved about 400 years ago; in its 1400 years of written history, tanka has undergone minor shifts, yet the premise of the genre and the sensibilities of the Japanese culture have allowed tanka to remain the most beloved genre (Kawamura & Reichhold, 1998).

With a focus on tanka (known today as ancient style of poetry that speaks to the modern soul), the present paper therefore discusses the following: 1) Japanese poetry (haiku and tanka); 2) teaching tanka in the western Pacific (as a pilot implementation); and 3) poetry as research.
Japanese poetry: haiku and tanka

Poems are powerful sources of data; one of the strengths of poetry lies in its ability to convey complex and strong emotions (Furman, 2004). Poetry is also a sensory and intellectual medium. In good poems, the "sounds" of words delight and signify; attuned to the aural sensations of artful language, people relish the varied ways in which rhythm and rhetoric can reinforce or reveal meaning (Cobbs, 2005). The sounds of words are thus the essence in haiku and tanka.

Haiku (俳句)

Haiku is a fixed verse form of 17 syllables arranged in a 5-7-5 pattern (three lines in English). It is known that general use of the name "haiku" for this form began with Masaoka Shiki in the Meiji Era (end of the 19th century). One of the distinct features of haiku is inclusion of a "season word" referring to an animal, a plant, and a custom of the season. For example of the season word "violets" will bring to mind the warmth of spring and violets in bloom along a mountain path (NSC, 1982). Haiku gives an objective, fleeting picture of its subject. As it is impossible to depict an actual scene in detail, it is necessary to abbreviate to the essentials, and the season word is one such abbreviation. Dean and Grierson (2005) describe the uniqueness of haiku as follows: "Spare style and snapshot-like images of nature stimulate the sense and challenge the reader to make connections between the natural world and the nature of man" (p. 465).

As previously noted, compared with tanka, haiku is well known as a form of Japanese poetry in the world. In the United States, for instance, there are many haiku clubs, haiku newsletters and journals, national haiku contests, and even electronic haiku chat rooms (Ross, 2002):

... and if an American haiku poet desires, he or she can even be part of a worldwide haiku community. Haiku is now being written on every continent except Antarctica. In southeastern Europe, haiku appears to be the most widely written form of poetry.... After all, a haiku is what is happening in a certain place and culture. Although there are universal aspects to nature and humanity, the subjects of haiku, haiku is poetry of the particular. (p. 8)

Tanka (短歌)

Tanka is one form of waka or 和歌 (literally means “Japanese poetry”), consisting of 31 syllables arranged in a 5-7-5-7-7 pattern (five lines in English). Although waka originally encompassed a variety of forms (such as choka, tanka, and sedoka), tanka gradually became the predominant form until, from the Heian Era (late 8th century), the term waka came to be considered synonymous with tanka (NSC, 1982). Tanka stresses the beauty of nature and life, and especially a feeling of "yearning" is an important element of tanka. What is sought within its simple form is to express the essence of this yearning with a depth in which all the emotions are intermingled. The vivid expression of that which has touched the heart has the power to evoke a wealth of associations. This allusive feeling contained in the 31 syllables is referred to as 爲作 (余情).

When Japanese history was first being committed to writing—the middle of the 7th century—there already was a long oral history of the uta (song) in the waka (Reichhold, 1997). The waka then and the tanka today consisted of five phrases and, according to Reichhold (1997):

Then as now, the Japanese language composed phrases most naturally into either short ones—consisting of five onji (a sound syllable consisting usually of a consonant and a vowel)—or a longer unit consisting of seven onji. Instead of punctuation, the Japanese use small words consisting of one or two onji to indicate the
line breaks and give them a “tone” as in asking a question or indicating exclamation. Because of the familiarity of the natural syntax of the phrases—in Japanese poetry this was highly regulated so that only certain phrases expressed with time-honored wording—the reader knew exactly where these non-breaking line breaks occurred. Thus, their tanka poems were written in one or (mostly) two vertical lines. Lacking these natural indicators in English, tanka is written in translation in (usually) five lines to indicate the breaks and to allow the reader the same feeling for pause and change. (F 2)

Tanka is used in a manner that includes nature in the expression of thoughts or feelings, similar to haiku, but because of its extra length and tanka allows for deeper thought and expression of themes that would be too burdensome for haiku to carry (MacDonald, 1995). Table 1 is a summary of the main characteristics of tanka and haiku adapted from Reichhold (1995).

Tanka, metaphorically speaking, is a chrysanthemum (菊) in the garden of Japanese literature—that is, not gorgeous like a rose (薔薇) and not striking like a sunflower (向日葵), yet this flower is always remembered. As noted earlier, people are familiar with haiku as a form of the Japanese poetry, but tanka remains largely unknown outside Japan. In recent decades, however, Westerners have begun to realize that tanka does possess a natural format for the expression of thoughts and feelings. In 1996, a journal, *American Tanka*, was founded with the aim of making its readers more aware of the tanka tradition, emphasizing an English-language tanka as a new creation of an ancient style of Japanese poetry that speaks to the modern soul (*American Tanka*, 2006). *The Tanka Journal* by Nihon Kajin Club has been also contributing to the globalization of tanka, and thus, the number of tanka-literate people is increasing throughout the world.

**Teaching tanka in the western Pacific**

Today the island of Guam (geographically a part of Micronesia) is a modern and cosmopolitan community that reflects the cultures of its original Chamorro inhabitants influenced by European, American, Asian, and

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<th>Table 1. Characteristics of tanka and haiku</th>
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Micronesian populations. The University of Guam is the only four-year institution of higher education in the western Pacific. The history of the University dates back to 1952 when the island government established the Territorial College as a teacher training institution. Like the social fabric of Guam, the University is a culturally diverse. The language and literacy program of the School of Education (SOE) at the University focuses on the trend that the field of literacy has moved from viewing literacy as a process of skills acquisition to viewing literacy as a psycholinguistic process that is socially based and constructivist in nature.

**Presenting and publishing**

Since 1997 the author of the present paper (also a tanka poet) has been providing a presentation on Japanese literature and poetry at the Regional (Guam) Language Arts Annual Conference sponsored by the International Reading Association (IRA). The presentation style was a seminar type, emphasizing free discussion, exchange of ideas, demonstration of methods of practical application of skills and principles. The following are brief descriptions of recent presentations:

- **English Tanka** (2001): Pencil and paper, and perhaps a little imagination and creativity, are all that are needed to write tanka. This is an introduction to an English-language tanka.
- **Theory and Practice of Tanka** (2002): Providing background knowledge for understanding and writing tanka, this presentation describes both classic tanka and modern tanka.
- **Tanka Splendor** (2003): Tanka poetry has changed and evolved over the centuries, but the form of five syllabic units containing 31 syllables has remained the same. The focus is on how an English tanka can be written, using appropriate examples for tanka beginners.
- **Introduction to Japanese Literature** (2004): Introducing representative Japanese novels, the two traditional forms of Japanese poetry are particularly discussed thoroughly.

- **The World of Tanka** (2005): This presentation is an overview of the world of tanka, consisting of history of tanka, characteristics of tanka, and contemporary examples of tanka.

Poets were highly regarded in ancient China, and this was transferred to Japan (Shionozaki & Shiiki, 2005). It is generally considered that writing poetry such as tanka teaches individuals how to express feelings and thoughts effectively, and that writing tanka in English is even meaningful for preservation and globalization of tanka. An attempt was therefore made by the author of the present paper to publish a collection of English-language tanka poems, *Roses, You Must Be* (Inoue, 2002). The following is part of Mary Van Auken's (2002) review of the collection:

*Roses, You Must Be*, is as newly and boldly American as it is traditional in mood. It is *not* a collection of translated verse.... The poems in this collection are fully formed American literature. Tanka has a long and honorable history in Japanese literature, and it is emerging as a new English language literature in America. This newer form is American in outlook and word design. It remains traditional in the feelings it evokes, as does all poetry when the stars are aligned correctly and the mood is upon us. Such feelings and emotions are universal:

to live
is to struggle--
I take my time
with a cup of tea
when rising early (p. 58)

This is not stoicism, but a reflection
on a day that is like other days yet brings to mind the only slightly longer time that is one lifetime.

where should I have gone?
I gaze upon the rainbow of an island,
my destiny (p. 13)

Tanka in this collection relies on the rhythm and the cadence of the English language and on the attention to reflections of life in America and Guam as well as in Japan. The experience of reading tanka originally written in English by a tanka master is the same experience that one takes away from listening to a story well told.... The author speaks each poem in one language. The classic themes of love and death are printed as images, both singly and stranded together, often intertwined with a speech to a shadowy "lover" or "reflection," or perhaps the sudden realization that life is short and should be lived like the rose: quickly, deeply, and red.

yellow roses, you
must be yellow forever
and red roses,
you must be red, red, red
to the death (p. 24)

This collection is very readable and it conjures different images at different readings, because there is a second listener, not a second poet, but another person you must be for having read these poems. What you come to feel is yojo, the essence of the poetry when it touches you.

Teaching and training

Based on the belief that K-12 classroom teachers (Note: most of the SOE students are in-service and pre-service teachers) may find tanka a delightful addition to their literacy curriculum, a tanka course was developed (see Table 2 for the course outline) and offered as a

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<th>Table 2. Course outline of the Tanka course</th>
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<td>ED647: Special Topics in Literacy Education: Poetry Splendor</td>
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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course introduces students to the world of English-language tanka or American tanka, which is a new creation of an ancient style of Japanese poetry that speaks to the modern soul. Students will have opportunities to write tanka themselves and present their own poetry.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- to become knowledgeable about the historical background and concept of tanka
- to become familiar with two forms of Japanese poetry—haiku and tanka
- to enhance an understanding of the traditional tanka and the modern tanka
- to write and produce a collection of English-language tanka poems
- to give an individual presentation of the tanka collection in class

EVALUATION OF THE COURSE

Attendance and participation are the components of professional demeanor, which includes being prepared, engaging in class discussions or group activities, listening interactively to the instructor and classmates, and respecting viewpoints that may differ decidedly from their own. Grades will be assigned based on the following: reflection on the historical background and concept of tanka, final project (tanka collection), and oral presentation of the tanka collection.
pilot implementation in the language and literacy program of the SOE at the University of Guam.

Most of the students enrolled in the above course were in-service teachers of the Guam Public School System since this was a graduate course. The students, not only became knowledgeable about tanka, but also produced their own collection of tanka as a final project. Selected poems were compiled in a booklet, *Calliope*. Some of the poems published in the booklet were:

unforgivable is
my original sin that
my young parents can
never realize the potential
of their dreams (Student A)

looking beyond
the ocean into nowhere
waves roll and release
offering therapy at dusk
to lost weary souls (Student B)

thank you...
I have said it so many times
hope you know even if
you do not always hear it
I do send it in spirit (Student C)

where I was young
destiny was somewhere else
as I arrived there
destiny seems to have moved
I never packed for trip (Student D)

The following are some of the students' comments on the course:

- "I find that within the five lines, the author is able to relate an even greater message and create a larger picture, allowing the reader insight without saying too much."
- "Tanka is like any other attempt to bring to consciousness the unconscious things that are always in our hearts and our subconscious."
- "This class has fulfilled my expectation for helping me develop a real appreciation for poetry along with a knowledge base that gives me more confidence to teach poetry in general."
- "As a teacher of second graders, I found it a good idea to introduce it to them; and what a great opportunity to introduce a tanka writing activity to accentuate the school curriculum."
- "Tanka is very freeing; it allows us to express deepest thoughts in a very creative manner."
- "Writing tanka poetry gives me a chance to release feelings, although it is challenging to be precise in expressing myself in as few words as possible."

Comments such as these, and many others of a similar nature, indicate clearly that teacher education students would like to have this type of course made available more often.

**Poetry as research**

Assuming that readers' emotional responses can inform literacy analysis, Eva-Wood's (2004) study of poetry readers featured an instructional intervention that involved modeling both cognitive and affective reading processes through a think-and-feel-aloud pedagogy. Eleventh grade students in two detachments participated in a 4-week unit on reading poetry. Control group instruction focused on textual analysis and vocabulary building, whereas experimental group instruction focused on readers' personal responses which were mapped back to textual elements. Experimental group students reported more favorable orientations to poetry and wrote longer responses to poems than control group students did. Eva-Wood (2004) concludes as follows:

*Explicit attention to feelings and thoughts*
can lead to deeper, more meaningful responses to literature. Emotions and thoughts work interdependently to inform rich and complex poetic responses. However, because affection, even more than cognition, remains an often invisible and unconscious dimension of reading, the instructional interaction served to cue readers to become more aware of their affective responses as they read. Students in the experimental group learned to use their initial responses to poems as tools for further analysis. (p. 189)

Poetry as research is an intriguing undertaking, indeed. Sherry and Schouten (2002), for instance, emphasize the contribution poetry stands to make to consumer research, recognizing that the poetry becomes an agent of self-discovery (自己發現) and self-creation (自己創設) for the author and the reader. Sherry and Schouten further describe poetry writing in the following terms:

The writing of poetry as we approach it here is a literary variant of qualitative research. It involves gathering data, particularly observational data from both external and internal environments.... For example, for “Transplanting Season,” Schouten gathered data over a period two days that included driving through a rice-producing region during the transplanting season and taking a lengthy walk near dusk through a series of paddies. Specific observations included the complex configuration of dikes, the flooding of the paddies, the tranquility of the water and the reflection of the sky in its surface, the texture and color of young rice plants, the frequent presence of egrets in the shallow water; the length of the work day, and the shape of a footprint left behind by a worker departing a field. (p. 50)

Sherry and Schouten (2002) provide a discussion of the two ways that poetry can inform studies of consumer behavior—that is, 1) as reflexivity within research and a revelation of a researcher point of view, and 2) as stand-alone qualitative research in its own right. The art of poetry involves a sifting and analyzing a personal data, close observation of the external and internal worlds, and holistic narrative. Accordingly, the validity of the poem lies in its ability to resonate in the reader, and to communicate emotional truths in language that is fresh and engaging.

Similarly Cahnmann (2003) provides a discussion of the relationship between poetry and qualitative research, starting from the powerful statement: “Writing is a vital element of any research inquiry” (p. 29). Then Cahnmann admits, “Poetry is a risky business” (p. 30); and concludes the discussion with the following recommendation: “We might decide to read more poetry, take a creative writing class, and take more risks in our field notes and articles...to communicate findings in multidimensional, penetrating, and more accessible ways” (p. 35).

Based on the notion that reading and writing poetry offer valuable opportunities for language learning, NCTE/IRA (1996) standards provide ample room for the innovation and creativity essential in education of language and literacy, emphasizing that many literacy texts (not just fiction, but also essays, other prose works, plays, and poems) give students opportunities to engage in ethical and philosophical reflection on the values and beliefs of their own cultures, or discover the significance of inner experience, and social life as they find their place in the world.

The language arts are the means through which students are able to receive information: think logically and creatively; express ideas; understand and participate meaningfully in spoken, written, and nonverbal communications; formulate and answer questions; and search for, organize, evaluate,
and apply information (NJDE, 2006). The language and literacy program of the SOE at the University of Guam is designed to develop students' literacy in language arts and across the curriculum, with an emphasis on preschool, elementary, and secondary years. And literacy (読み書き : 1) is a way to acquire knowledge for thinking and communicating; 2) is more than the acquisition of a specific, predetermined set of skills in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing; and 3) is recognizing and understanding one's own purposes for thinking and communicating and being able to use one's own resources to achieve those purposes.

Conclusion

An educator's tanka journey (engaging in presentation, publication, and teaching) has become more and more the journey of many people, stimulating intellectual challenges in the language and literacy program at the University of Guam in the western Pacific. The tanka course reported in the present paper will be offered continuously as part of the curriculum at the University.

There are two contradictory schools of thought on the relationship between tanka and other languages including English: The first holds that it is impossible to write tanka in English, and the opposing school believes that it is possible to write tanka in English. Students in Guam demonstrated their ability to write tanka in English because human feelings (情緒) and emotions (感情) are universal as noted by Van Auken (2002).

It is hoped that the journey described in this paper has the potential to have a positive impact on the future research and practice of tanka, thereby promoting the potential for tanka to become familiar to the whole world, in a similar fashion to haiku that is already well known in the world. The journey must be continued.

References


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