



# AN INTRODUCTION TO SIJO AND ITS DEVELOPMENT IN NORTH AMERICA

(revised April 2001)

by Elizabeth St Jacques

The spring breeze melted snow on the hills then quickly disappeared.  
I wish I could borrow it briefly to blow over my hair  
And melt away the aging frost forming now about my ears.

- U T'ak (1262-1342), author of this oldest surviving sijo.  
Adaptation by Dr. Larry E. Gross, PhD.

It wasn't so long ago that when one asked a Western poet if she or he wrote sijo, the response was, *Sijo? What's that?* No longer. Today poets around the world warmly embrace this charming three-line poetry form that has a long and distinguished history in Korea.

Sijo derives from the old Hyangga songs of the Silla empire (668-936) and the prose songs of the Koryo kingdom (918-1392). However, it wasn't until the conclusion of the latter era that sijo came into its own.

Actually, there are three sijo forms - Chungsisjo, Changsisjo and Pyongsijo. As the first two forms have greater syllable counts and irregular line lengths, the shorter, more melodic Pyongsijo has been the preferred choice among Koreans. The Pyongsijo then - now identified simply as sijo - is the form to which North American poets are most acquainted.

I was introduced to sijo in 1992, when guidelines for a couple of American competitions arrived with an information sheet about the sijo; it provided a brief history, explanation and two translations of classical Korean sijo by Kim Unsong who is a sijo authority now living in California. Immediately, captivated by the form, I boldly entered both sijo contests. To my amazement, my attempts earned 2nd and 3rd places, and I was firmly hooked. But how to learn more about sijo? No one I knew was familiar with - much less writing - the form. I turned to Kim Unsong who generously helped broaden my knowledge about classical Korean sijo, thereby increasing my interest. As a result, the number of my original sijo were growing, some being published in poetry publications, so I began recording them in my handwritten journal.

Unbeknown to me, Kim Unsong felt my sijo were different. Then, in a May 2, 1994 letter to me, he made the following announcement: *Classical Korean Sijo, their elegance notwithstanding, need modernizing in imagery and delicacy, using (a) keener and finer sense which you (apparently) command.*

This statement made me take a long, close look at the sijo by North American poets. It became clear to me that North America sijo in general differed from classical Korean sijo - in style, subject matter, expression, line lengths. Indeed, sijo in North America was definitely being revolutionized. However, I was concerned: many poems didn't seem to be sijo at all.

To help introduce sijo and provide more understanding about the form, my articles began to appear in North America publications. But it wasn't until Dr. Larry Gross, PhD, of Florida, editor of HWUP! and TOP Poetry Newsletters, accepted a sijo article from me, that I learned he too was deeply interested in the form. In fact, he had introduced sijo to his readers in

HWUP!, May 1992, as well as in his book, *How To Write And Publish Poetry*. Also, his 'adaptations' of English translated Korean sijo impressed me, as did his own sijo. Finally! - a North American poet whose devotion to sijo equaled Kim Unsong's and my own.

It should be mentioned that as of 1971, articles and/or books by In-Sob Zong, Richard Rutt, Peter H. Lee, Jahiun Joyce Kim, Kim Unsong and other authors strove to introduce North Americans to classical Korean sijo. But as with other foreign poetry forms - such as Japanese haiku - it has taken time to spark North American interest.

Therefore, because Larry Gross and I knew of no other North American poets consistently writing original sijo, and because most poems we had read seemed to have missed the important elements of the form, we felt a need to establish guidelines. Working through our own differences of opinion then, the following guidelines (somewhat different from those of Korea's sijo, but which maintain primary characteristics) were established:

The sijo is a 3-line poem consisting of between 44 to 46 syllables. Each line has 14 to 15 syllables. Line 1 presents a problem or theme, line 2 develops or 'turns' the thought, and line 3 resolves the problem or concludes the theme. The first half of the final line employs a 'twist' by means of a surprise in meaning, sound, tone or other device. To end with originality of wit, a profound observation or a strong emotional finale is a must

The sijo has a pleasing musical quality woven intricately throughout that is most important because even today, favorite sijo are sometimes sung or chanted. While imagery (metaphor, simile, pun, etc.) is employed in many sijo, it is not mandatory.

In the West, the sijo often appears as a six-line poem – that is, each of the three lines is broken in half, with each couplet separated by a blank line to emphasize distinctiveness. Presenting it this way facilitates printing. However, some poets believe that by splitting lines, the uniqueness of the form is weakened. Also, there are those of the opinion that a 6-line sijo presented with a blank line between each couplet (as Kim Unsong does) disturbs the flow. I don't agree. The pause between lines often enhances variations transpiring in the poem. Because I find the 6-line style visually appealing, many of my early sijo were presented this way. More recently, I find myself favoring the 3-line format. Clearly though, the 6-line format is a Western development.

## SNOW FLOWERS

Snow is falling on pine woods  
Blossoming white and exquisite

I'll send a branch to my lord  
To share its beauty, in good spirit

After he sees the snow flowers  
Who cares if they start to split

by Chung Chul (1536-1593)  
Translation by Kim Unsong

You will notice that Kim Unsong uses end rhymes; he does so in all his translations as well as in his collection of original sijo, *Modern Sijo*. End rhyme is an experimental technique aimed at pleasing Western readers. However, as this tends to pour the Sijo into the same mold as North

American and European poetry, I feel end rhymes infringe on the uniqueness of the form. That is not to say I'm against end rhyme in sijo. On occasion I use it in my own work, finding that a poem sometimes demands end rhyme. But two rhyming lines per poem seem quite

enough. To my ear, more than that becomes tiresome. Internal rhyme, on the other hand, seems perfectly natural for sijo. But it too should be used sparingly.

While Korean sijo do not often have titles, Unsong consistently uses them. Most of my earlier work has them as well while much of my most recent sijo do not. Larry Gross prefers no titles, feeling a title diminish(es) the essential surprise & thus defeats the purpose of the final line. In my opinion, a title sometimes enhances the poem's mystery, arouses curiosity, and draws the reader into the poem. But this can only be achieved when a title does not repeat from the poem or give away the finale's surprise. Sometimes a title can even set the stage, providing information when space does not permit in so brief a poem. Inasmuch as I believed the use of titles were a Western experiment, it was surprising to find titles with all sijo in *Modern Korean Verse In Sijo Form* (1997), an anthology selected and translated by the well-known and highly respected Korean sijo authority, Jaihiun Kim. It's obvious then that views concerning the form are undergoing changes via Korea's modern poets.

While poets are free to make choices, they should not lose sight of three characteristics that make sijo unique: basic structure, musical/rhythmic elements, and the 'twist'. As more poets become involved with sijo, these guidelines will surely undergo further modifications. In the meantime, may I also respectfully point out that because North American landscapes, lifestyles, peoples, customs and values differ from that of Korea, it shouldn't be too surprising if our sijo prove to be different. Hopefully, our Korean friends will not regard this as an insult, but will agree that we can no more become

Korean to write sijo than we can become Japanese to write haiku.

No matter how the North American vision might alter sijo in English, it is hoped we honor its place of origin and basic concept, and consider it an instrument of international communication and good will. As an important historical contribution to the world of poetry, sijo has the power to become deeply rooted in North American literature.

Fortunately, interest in the form is quickly growing. Several print publications publish sijo, including Larry Gross' *SIJO WEST* (the first North American publication devoted entirely to English-language sijo), *LYNX*, and others. A sijo category is now included in the annual poetry competitions of the

**ARIZONA STATE POETRY SOCIETY, FLORIDA STATE POETS ASSOCIATION, and NORTH CAROLINA HAIKU SOCIETY, among others.**

The Internet has opened even more doors to sijo. In 1997 my website, *SIJO BLOSSOMS*, came into being, followed by Larry Gross' *SIJO WEST* online. Later, both sites moved to their present locations, changed their home page titles (respectively) to *POETRY IN THE LIGHT* and *THE WORDSHOP*, and now house a variety of Asian poetry forms. Later still, Larry Gross hosted an online sijo forum through the World Haiku Club that continues to attract considerable interest.

(To join, email him for instructions at <tishang@aol.com>) Today, several websites, such as Jane Reichhold's *AHA POETRY*, Debra Woolard Bender's *PAPER LANTERNS*, Neca Stoller's *HAIKU CUPBOARD*, an'ya's *DARK MOON POETRY*, and Ray Rasmussen's *HAIKU DREAMS* include sijo. Several of these sites also feature beautifully presented haiga sijo

While it has taken time for Western poets to become truly interested in and enthused about sijo, the quality work that today's poets are producing has made the wait well worth it. Continued success to all!

so many changes have I seen in all the passing years  
 wrinkles on my face and hands, strands of white run through my hair  
 ah but braids cut off at age of ten still honey bright and soft

## NOTE TO THE UNIVERSE

Eternal is the mystery  
within your multitude of lights

Into your soul our silver darts  
Seed noble hopes and dreams

Fear not old friend We cannot stay  
our roots are tied to trees

both sijo by Elizabeth St Jacques

A slightly different version of this article appeared in POEMATA, Vol. 13:2, 1997. Sections of this article first appeared in HWUP Poetry Newsletter, issue #21, 1993 under the title, CLASSICAL KOREAN SIJO. Other sections in this article are taken from my book, Around The Tree Of Light. Additional points and updated information were added to this article April 2001. (For an indepth study of sijo characteristics, see [INTRODUCTION TO SIJO](#))

### RESOURCES:

Kim Unsong's Korean sijo translation and quote from his letter to me (May 24, 1994) as well as Dr. Larry Gross' adaptation of U'Tak's sijo are included with permission.

### Books Mentioned:

Modern Sijo by Kim Unsong, \$14.00 ppd in US funds; PO Box 1131, San Bruno, CA, USA 94066.

Around The Tree Of Light by Elizabeth St Jacques. Revised edition, 1997. \$14.00 ppd; maplebud press, 406 Elizabeth Street, Sault Ste. Marie, ON Canada P6B 3H4

Modern Korean Verse In Sijo Form, (1997) an anthology selected and translated by Jaihiun Kim, edited by Ronald B. Hatch. \$16.95; Ronsdale Press, 3350 West 21st Avenue, Vancouver, BC, Canada V6S 1G7

How To Write & Publish Poetry by Dr. Larry Gross, PhD. \$22. in US funds; POB 13743, Tallahassee, FL, USA 32317-3743.

### Websites Mentioned:

[theWORDshop](#) edited by Larry Gross

[AHA POETRY](#) edited by Jane Reichhold

[HAIKU DREAMS](#) edited by Ray Rasmussen

[PAPER LANTERNS](#) edited by Debra Woolard Bender

[HAIKU CUPBOARD](#) Neca Stoller's page

[DARK MOON POETRY](#) an'ya's age

### Sijo Forums:

[SIJO FORUM](#) Webmaster, Larry Gross

[FLORIDA STATE POETRY ASSOCIATION](#) Webmaster, Larry Gross