

Chong Ch'ol

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Introduction

The poet Chong Ch'ol (1536-1593 CE) was born in Korea. He became an administrator whose career was affected by his unwavering sense of what was right combined with a proclivity to become involved in political disputes. This combination frequently led to removal (sometimes announced as retirement) from public office, usually coupled with banishment to exile in the countryside.

Chong Ch'ol mastered of two classical forms of Korean poetry—the kasa and the sijo. Examples of the latter are given here. The kasa is the longer for the two forms and often deals with philosophical concerns. The sijo, a short popular song, appeared early in the Korean Joseon Dynasty, and was often used for brief lyrical*

expression. It appeared at about the time of the invention of the Korean alphabet, Hangul, in 1444, which gave Korean writers the means of recording their work in their own language rather than in Chinese. In its structure, the sijo can be regarded either as a poem of six short lines or as one of three long lines that each have a pause in the middle. It is usually longer than the Japanese haiku.

The extracts from the songs of Chong Ch'ol given here reflect his career, in that they can be divided into two categories. The first seven are songs of politics and loyalty, which relate to his experience as an administrator. The remainder deal with the countryside, the good life, retirement, and mortality. All rely heavily on allusion rather than direct expression. The reference to the pine tree in the first sijo is a metaphor for someone in a prominent political position (as a similar reference to a tree is in the Iroquois Constitution of [Dekanawidah](#)). The second alludes to politicians who have fallen from favor. In the third, the metaphor changes to a boat (as in 'all boats rise with the tide'—except the leaky ones, of course). The fourth sijo is probably an allegory for the government confusion and preoccupation with petty matters when threatened with invasion by Japan. The three songs of loyalty that follow might also, perhaps, be read as love songs. Poets do tend to be rather ambiguous.

Chong Ch'ol died shortly after the Japanese invasion occurred.

** Also referred to as the Choson Dynasty*

1 To One in Power

Pine-tree rising beside the road,
 what is it makes you stand there?
 Relax for a little while
 and stand down into the ditch:
 Every rope-girded peasant that carries an axe
 will want to cut you down.

2 To One out of Power

The tree is diseased:
 no one rests in its pavilion.
 When it stood tall and verdant
 no one passed it by.
 But the leaves have fallen, the boughs are broken,
 not even birds perch there now

3 Warning to Politicians

Did I hear those boats have gone
 that late were bobbing in the waves?
 As soon as the clouds gathered
 were they forced to disappear?
 All of you whose boats are leaky
 heed the warning and take care.

4 Confusion in Government

What happens if you pull down
 beams and supports?
 A host of opinions greet
 the leaning skeleton house.
 Carpenters with ruler and ink
 keep milling around.

5 I'll Shine My Light upon My Love

I'll cut my heart
 to form a moon
 and hang it brightly
 in a far corner of the sky.
 Then I'll go to my love
 and shine my light upon him.

6 Thoughts of Him Keep Me Awake

Paulownia leaves are falling,
 so I know that autumn has come.
 Fine rain on the clear stream
 makes the night air fresh and cool.
 But my lord is a thousand leagues away
 and thoughts of him keep me awake.

7 What Matter if the Snow Flowers Melt?

Snow has fallen on the pine-woods,
 and every bough has blossomed.
 I should like to pluck a branch
 and send it to where my lord is.
 After he has looked at it,
 what matter if the snow-flowers melt?

8 Aftermath

The boys have gone to dig bracken,
 the bamboo grove is empty now.
 Who will tidy up
 the scattered chessmen and board?
 Drunken I lie on a pine tree root,
 and don't know whether day has dawned.

9 Inconstancy

Ten years have passed since I last saw
 the white jade cup in the Office of Books.
 Its pale, clear color
 stays exactly as it was before.
 How is it that a man's heart
 changes from morning to night?

10 Endurance

Let's strain off raw rice wine
 and drink till our lips are shrunk;
 Let's simmer our bitter herbs
 and chew them till they taste sweet,
 Walk on till our thick studded clogs
 are worn to their wooden soles.

11 Parting

Two stone buddhas by the roadside
 face each other, naked and unfed.
 In wind, rain, snow and frosts
 they sit there unprotected.
 Yet they know nothing of mankind's partings:
 and just for that I envy them.

12 Music Inspires

The Great String of the Black Lute quavers
 and my heart is softly melted.
 With martial pizzicato
 the Sage String inspires a strong will.
 Here, there is no hint of sadness,
 so how can I think of parting?

13 Natural Music

The Great String of the Black Lute sounds
 as I move the goosefoot along,
 Like water that was icebound
 bursting booming into the stream.
 Now I hear raindrops falling on lotus leaves:
 are they trying to match this music?

Goosefoot: A movable bridge.

14 To Be Born a Woman

If you weep for your dead husband
 your tears will roll down both your breasts,
 Your milk will be salty and then
 your baby will be fractious.
 You poor thing! Why should anybody
 have to be born a woman?

15 Raindrops

Forty thousand bushels of bright beads
 have fallen on the lotus leaves.
 The full leaves seem to measure them,
 but what will they do with them—
 Spattering bouncing raindrops,
 exhilarating and joyous?

16 Clouds

A shadow is reflected in the water;
 a monk is crossing the bridge.
 Monk, stay a moment;
 let me ask where you're going?
 Pointing with his stick at the clouds,
 the monk passes without a backward glance

17 Rustic Clothes

Milky rain-mist on the green hills,
 surely you won't deceive me?
 Rain-cape of sedge and horsehair hat,
 surely you too won't deceive me?
 Two days ago I put off my silken clothes.
 Now I've nothing that can be stained.

18 Cooperation

Day has broken once again.
 Let's take our hoes and get out to the fields.
 If I get my fields all done,
 then I'll go and help with yours.
 Coming home we can gather mulberry leaves
 for the silkworms.

19 Seize the Day

Let's drink a cup of wine! And then drink another!
Let's pluck flowers and lay them out
to count off our endless cups!

Once your body is dead
it will be bound in a straw mat
and carried away on a jiggy,
or sway in a brilliant bier followed
by thousands of mourners,
but still it will go to the reeds and the rushes,
the oaks and the willows,
where the sun shines yellow
and the moon shines white,
where fine rain falls
and snowflakes whirl in the wind:
and then who will say, "Let's drink a cup!"?

Some monkey will come and chatter on your grave,
and what use will regrets be then?

Jiggy: carrying frame for the back.

Sources

1, 3, 6-15, 17-19 *The Bamboo Grove, An Introduction to Sijo*, edited and translated by Richard Rutt.
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issued by The University of California Press, Berkeley, 1971.)

2, 4, 5, 16 Translated by Kevin O'Rourke, Professor of English, University of Seoul. [Korean Insights](#) Web
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