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Writing Haiku and Sijo: Showing the Differences in East Asian Cultures

Grade Level: Grades 9 to 12

Subject: Reading and Language Arts

Most students have written haiku in school. The 3 line 17 syllable Japanese poetic form is a staple of language arts curriculum from about 4th grade on. These short poems are a good writing exercise and an introduction to Japanese culture. However, there is another type of East Asian poetry called a sijo (pronounced SHEE-jo) that is longer, 3 lines but about 45 syllables, and can challenge more advanced students. The sijo can also be a good tool for introducing students to Korean culture and showing the distinction between Japan and Korea.

Japan has been the most familiar East Asian culture in America since World War II. We probably all have some knowledge about their society, their exports, their movies, and, of course, their poetry. However, for the past few decades, we have become stronger trading partners with Korea and more Korean immigrants and students have been coming to America, bringing their unique culture with them. Most Americans have a hard time distinguishing Japanese, Korean, and even Chinese people. Thus, teaching students how to write sijo and how it is different from haiku is a good first step in showing students the often subtle difference between East Asian peoples. Learning about this poetic form can also help Korean and Korean/American students connect with their own culture.

Haiku has become popular because it can be easy to write for beginning poets. Students do not have to worry about rhymes; they simply must compose a three line poem that describes a certain event or image and have 5 syllables in the first line, 7 in the second, and 5 in the third. However, there are some more subtle rules to composing haiku. They should be in the present tense, focus on nature and/or a season, and create a single image in the reader's mind. Thus, such poems remind us of important elements to Japanese culture such as nature, beauty, and impermanence.

A good example would be this classic poem from the haiku master Basho (please note that translations of haiku from Japanese into English often do not have perfect 5-7-5 form):

*Coolness of the melons
flecked with mud
in the morning dew.*

This poem creates a single image of nature in the mind of the reader, a good example of how to write haiku. This poem and others can be found on the *Poem Hunter* website:

<http://www.poemhunter.com/matsuo-basho/>

There are also many books and websites that have great classic and modern examples of haiku and instructions on how to write them.

The case is not the same for sijo. This poetic form has been around for at least 600 years, but not much is known about it in America. Sijo is often about nature, though it does not have to be. Like haiku, it has a 3 line structure, but its form is more complicated and thus the meaning more complex. The entire poem should have around 45 syllables (its syllable count is not as strict as haiku) and thus each line should have about 15 syllables. In addition, each line has a certain function. The first line introduces the theme, the second line develops or expands on the theme, and the third line begins with an ironic twist or surprise then the last part of the line concludes the poem. This irony or surprise at the end of the poem is really what separates the sijo from the haiku.

Here is an example of a 20th century sijo from the Korean poet Yi Ho-u:

Rain
I hear the rain beating, breathlessly on the banana leaves.
All plants begin to sprout, craving nature's grace.
Worried about his farmwork, an old man opens his door and listens.

This poem clearly has a nature based theme like a haiku, but with more syllables and the inclusion of irony it adds more depth to the original image. Also, most classic sijo have a pause in the middle of each line, this adds to the musical quality in the original Korean since the poems were first written to be sung. The Sejong Cultural Society has a great website that explains the sijo in more depth and gives many classic and modern examples of the poems:

http://www.sejongculturalsociety.org/writing/current/resources/sijo_guide.php

Activity: To show the difference between these two poetic forms, have students write a haiku about an image or an incident. Then, have them write a sijo about the same. They will have to add more detail and complexity to the second poem.

For example, have students write a haiku about an outdoor activity they enjoy. Require them to use a season to help create a moment in time. (Note that using a title can give meaning and focus to the image they create):

Spring Mountain Biking

Pedaling through trees (5 syllables)

Odor of honeysuckle (7 syllables)

Flash of wildflowers (5 syllables)

Then, using the same title have students turn the same situation into a sijo, making sure they include an ironic turn at the end. Ask students to include more images and details to expand the syllable count to about 15 per line. Other lessons on sijo focus on the syllable break down in each line. However, when writing their first sjo, I tell students just to make sure they 14-16 syllables per line. The more complex use of syllables can wait for future lessons. :

Spring Mountain Biking

Pedaling through the forest, dappled sun on the handle bars (15)

The sweet smell of honeysuckle and the flash of wildflowers (15)

Almost makes one forget your straining lungs, your burning muscles (15)

[Note that the final line of this sijo is a new invention. It is a comment on the basic imagery of the haiku. This is a good technique to add the twist/irony at the end of the sijo.]

This should lead to a discussion on how the poetic forms differ and what that says about the differences between each culture. Both forms can speak about nature, but in a different way. Korea and Japanese cultures are similar, but the two countries see a distinct difference between themselves. American students should begin to understand this difference since there are Korean and Japanese students in American schools.

Lesson Extensions: Students could also be given examples of classical Chinese poetry by Li Bai and Du Fu to see if they notice any differences in their subject matter and attitude when compared to Japanese and Korean poetry.

Sources:

Higginson, William and Penny Harter. *The Haiku Handbook: How to Write, Share, and Teach Haiku*. Kodansha International: Tokyo, 1985.

Modern Korean Verse in Sijo Form. Trans. Jaihiun Kim. Ronsdale Press: Vancouver, BC, 1997.