

Structure and Samples

SIJO: KOREAN POETRY FORM

Sijo (시조)

- pronounced SHEE-jo
- The sijo is a traditional three-line Korean poetic form
- Typically exploring cosmological, metaphysical, or pastoral themes.
- Organized both technically and thematically by line and syllable count.

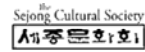


The origins of the sijo remain obscure. Sijo is a vernacular Korean-language form, but the Korean alphabet (Hangeul) was developed in the fifteenth century by King Sejong (r. 1418-1450). This means that for sijo predating the alphabet's promulgation, such as famous examples by U T'ak (1263-1343) or Chŏng Mongju (1337-1392), ascription is not certain because no contemporary written accounts can confirm it. As a song form, sijo were not collected and printed until the eighteenth century, which makes the trail of authorship difficult to pursue back.

(from Korean literature and Performance? Sijo!" by David McCann. Azalea 2:359, 2009)

Three Lines, 45 syllables

- First line
 - Introduces or states theme
- Second line
 - Expands or develops theme in equal length and power
- Third line
 - Twist or surprise at the beginning of the last line acts as a counter-theme before the rest of the line completes the poem



The three long lines provide plenty of room to express thoughts, feelings, contradictory impulses; more than the very brief Japanese haiku which by its restricted size forces or enables the poet merely to suggest a meaning.

The statement of the counter-theme in the third line can be achieved by making the 'twist' phrase a single exclamatory word, or by introducing a word, image or idea that is in sharp contrast to the tone or images of the first two lines.

Three lines, 45 syllables

- The basic standard:
 - First line 3 4 4 (or 3) 4
 - Second line 3 4 4 (or 3) 4
 - Third line **3** 5 4 3
- Variants which occur:
 - First line 2-5 3-6 2-5 4-6
 - Second line 1-5 3-6 2-5 4-6
 - Third line **3** 5-9 4-5 3-4

From "Bamboo Grove" by Richard Rutt



Each of the sijo's three lines can be a complete sentence, with the four parts of each line closely linked as grammatical units.

The rhythm of the poem is established by the proportions of the twelve short sections, rather than by tonic accent or by syllable count. In sijo the phrases are important. The relative weight of each of the twelve phrases is distributed throughout the poem in such a way as to give the whole poem a proportioned and dynamic shape. In most cases the first and middle lines are completely or very nearly alike in shape and in syllable count. The four phrases of each line may even be all of equal length, but most commonly the first is shorter than the second and the third may be shorter than the fourth. This gives a significant upbeat to the rhythm of these two lines.

The last line has a quite different pattern. The length of the first phrase is invariably fixed at three syllables. In many of the classic poems this is an exclamation or a word of strong emotional value and serves as a pivot-point in the movement of the poem toward its conclusion. The second phrase of the last line is normally the longest in the poem, and in any case must be very syllable heavy. It draws a sense of impending conclusion. The remaining two phrases of the last line are of medium length, but the last phrase of all is merely a rhetorical conclusion, both in sense and sound. Since it is frequently cast in a form expressing strong emotional involvement or reaction by the poet, this phrase often intensifies the subjective quality of the poem; but when a sijo is sung it is left out altogether, because it is scarcely necessary for the understanding of the poem and may even detract from its impact on the hearer.

See "The Bamboo Grove" by Richard Rutt.

Song of a Loyal Heart by Chông Mongju

Though this body die and die,
it may die a hundred times,
my white bones become but dust,
what's called soul exist or not:
for my lord, no part of this red heart
would ever change. How could it?

이 몸이 죽고 죽어 일 백 번 고쳐 죽어
백골이 진토되어 뉘이라도 있고 없고
임 향한 일편단심이야 가실 줄이 있으랴

I momi chuk-go chugô ilpaekbôn kochyô chugô 3 4 3 4

Paekgori chint'o toeyô nôksirado ittgo ôpko 3 4 4 4

Im hyanghan ilp'yôn tanshim iya kashil churi issûrya 3 6 4 3




Sijo are written in three lines, each averaging 14-16 syllables for a total of 44-46 syllables. Each line is written in four groups of syllables that should be clearly differentiated from one-another, yet still flow together as a single line. The third line starts with a 3-syllable group, then usually goes to a 5 (in this example, 6), then 4, then 3 to end. When written in English, sijo may be written in six lines, with each line containing two syllable groupings instead of four. Additionally liberties may be taken (within reason) with the number of syllables per group. The sijo is a flexible form.

Master Sijo Works: Themes

- Cosmological or metaphysical themes
- Description of nature
- Love songs
- Humor
- Political statements
- Instructional

Sijo Chang : singing sijo

- The traditional Korean sijo are lyrical, as they were originally sung. 20th century and later sijo poets deliberately composed them to be printed on a page and read as modern poems.
- Listen to an example of sijo performed by Park Jongsun 

“Twelve Songs of Tosan” by Yi T’oegye

The green hills - how can it be
that they are green eternally?
Flowing streams - how can it be;
night and day do they never stand still?
We also, we can never stop,
we shall grow green eternally.

청산은 어찌하여 만고에 푸르르며
유수는 어찌하여 주야에 지지 아니는고
우리도 그치지 말고 만고상청하리라

Sejong Cultural Society


Singer is accompanied by Dae-gum (bamboo flute) and Chang-gu (hour-glass shaped drum). The singer uses wide vibrato in addition to pitch change. All sijo *chang* (means *song*) are sung in a very deliberate pace, and the singer must be trained to extend the notes of the song for effect.

This sijo was written by Yi Hwang (T’oegye 퇴계) in 1565 as a part of 12 sijo songs (“Twelve Songs of Tosan 도산별곡). He is Korea’s greatest and most original philosopher. He held office at court, but several times retired voluntarily to the countryside where he both studied and taught.

Tosan is a beautiful valley in southeast Korea, where his house still stands. T’oegye is unquestionably the greatest of Korean philosophers, one of the few whose theories reached beyond his own country, and these poems are a lyrical condensation of his mature doctrine.

From The Bamboo Grove by Richard Rutt (University of California press 1971)

Jong-Soon Park established the Korean Sijo Chang Institute. She is active in performing and teaching sijo chang.

CHŎNG CHŎL (1536-1593)

A shadow strikes the water below:
a monk passes by on the bridge,
“Stay awhile, reverend sir,
let me ask you where you go.”
He just points his staff at the white clouds
and keeps on his way without turning.

물 아래 그림자 지니 다리위에 중이 간다
저 중아 개 있거라 너 가는 데 물어보자
막대로 흰 구름 가리키며 돌아 아니 보고 가노메라.



The poem reflects on the monk's life's journey. The theme can be found in the shadow - the earth - and the white clouds - Heaven - as the commitment of the monk and his focus on his goal. He is asked to pause, to turn away from his goal, but he is focused on his journey - he doesn't even take the time to respond to the speaker and merely points, causing us to examine the difference in earth and sky, in the now and hereafter.

-from Teaching Plan by Tracy Kaminer, Marist School, Atlanta, GA

HWANG CHIN-I (1506-1544)

Jade Green Stream, Don't boast so proud
of your easy passing through these blue hills.
Once you have reached the broad sea,
to return again will be hard.
While the Bright Moon fills these empty hills,
why not pause? Then go on, if you will.



청산리 벽계수야 수이감을 자랑마라
일도 창해하면 다시오기 어려오니
명월이 만강산하니 쉬여간들 엇더리



Hwang Chin-i, the assumed author of the poem, was a *kisaeng*, a female entertainer, rather like a geisha in Japan. It was said that no man could resist her. She went by the name Bright Moon. A Confucian scholar-official, whose title was a homophone for Jade Green Stream, bragged that he could resist her and could pass through her region without stopping. She made up the song and when he heard it, he supposedly fell off his mule. The story frame makes the natural scenery a pun for the two humans, the man and woman, the official and the *kisaeng*, the two opposite poles of traditional Korean society. As happens over and over again in Korean folk literature, the cleverness of the vernacular makes the official, stuffy male seem a fool and topples him from his lofty yet precarious perch.

-from "Early Korean Literature" by David McCann (Columbia University Press, 2000)

(Click the link at the bottom of the slide to hear this sijo sung by Wol-ha Kim.)

CHÖNG MONGJU (1337-1392)

Though this body die and die,
it may die a hundred times,
my white bones become but dust,
what's called soul exist or not:
for my lord, no part of this red heart
would ever change. How could it?



이 몸이 죽고 죽어 일 백 번 고쳐 죽어
백골이 진토되어 넋이라도 있고 없고
임 향한 일편단심이야 가실 줄이 있으랴

Sejong Cultural Society
한글문화원

As General Yi Songgye, founder of Chosôn dynasty, worked at ending the Koryô dynasty and setting up a new dynasty of his own, he and his followers kept encountering the stubbornly loyal, highly regarded scholar and Koryô state minister of Goryeo Chông Mongju. Therefore general Yi's son, Yi Bang-won, who (later became the third king of Chosôn, arranged a banquet, in the course of which he offered a sijo song to Chông urging him to relax his vigilant loyalty, and just live on and on, like the vines on Mansu Mountain. Chông replied with this sijo. Chông was murdered by the Yi followers on his way home from the banquet. It presents a performance, on the stage of Korean history, and adds a Shakespearian denouement, in the midnight murder. The poem itself performs a sort of spiritual dissection, down through the corporeal to the loyal spirit at the center of the individual's existential frame.

This sijo has become a classic example of Korean fidelity- especially in one phrase of the last line meaning, "one-piece red heart".

-from *"The Bamboo Grove: An introduction to Sijo"* by Richard Rutt (University of Michigan Press, 1998)

YI SUNSHIN (1545-1599)



By moonlight I sit all alone
in the lookout on Hansan isle.
My sword is on my thigh,
I am submerged in deep despair.
From somewhere the shrill note of a pipe...
will it sever my heartstrings?

한산섬 달 밝은 밤에 수루에 홀로 앉아
큰 칼 어루만지며 깊은 시름 하는 때에
어디서 일성호가가는 남의 애를 끊나니

Sejong Cultural Society
세종문화회

Supposedly written by the great admiral who saved Korea from the Japanese by his invention and management of the famous armor-clad “turtle-ships (Kôbuk-sôn)”. It has been suggested that this poem is an elegy for his friend who died in the battle of Pusan, but Korean commentators usually interpret it as expressing the concerns of the commander-in-chief on the eve of battle.

The first line sets the scene where the poet is sitting along in a tower on an island in the moonlight. The martial strength and determination symbolized by the great sword, and the bitterness of the commander’s worries and sorrows are represented in the second line. The last line begins with twist phrase, “from somewhere”, a change of sense managed by directing the attention away from the tower and the poet. The next phrase “a shrill note of a pipe (in Korean “one note of the Mongol flute”) invites further attention. The Mongol flute was thought to make a particularly sad tone. The final line suggests both the deep melancholy of the warrior and Korea’s national anxieties about facing foreign invaders.
-from “The Bamboo Grove: An introduction to Sijo” by Richard Rutt (University of Michigan Press, 1998)

YANG SAŌN (1517-1584)



T'aesan is mighty high, they say,
but it still is a hill beneath the sky.
Climbing it and climbing,
there's no reason you can't climb all the way.
It's people who won't try to climb
who say, "That hill's too high, it's too high."

태산이 높다 하되 하늘 아래 뵈이로다
오르고 또오르면 못오를리 업건마는
사람이 제 아니 오르고 뵈흘 높다 하더라

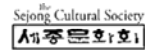
Sejong Cultural Society
세종문화회

One of the best known of moralizing sijo is the mountain-climbing allegory of Yang Saon. The last line makes the poem's 'twist' by turning from generalized comments to the "people (sarami)" who are the ones who decide whether to climb or just make the same old excuses.

ANONYMOUS

My horse neighs to leave here now,
but you plead with me to stay;
the sun is dipping behind the hill,
and I have far to go.
Dear One, instead of stopping me,
why not hold back the setting sun

말은 가자울고 님은 잡고 놓지않네
석양은 재를 넘고 갈길은 천리로다.
저님아 가는 날 잡지말고 지는해를 잡아라.



A wonderfully inventive poem about the impossibility of staying longer: *I can't be held here any more than the sun can be stopped in its course through the sky.*

CHO OHYŎN (1932-) 조오현 스님

THE SOUND OF MY WEeping

Half the day from deep in the woods
I listen to the bird's singing
and for half the morning by the sea,
listen to the sound of the sea's music,
And just when will it happen to be
the sound of my weeping that I hear?



Cho Ohyon is a Buddhist monk, director of the temple group centered around Paektam temple in the northeastern part of Korea, and an accomplished poet. Cho received numerous literary awards in Korea. His favorite themes for his sijo include meaning of life, Buddhist teaching, nature, and the life of the monks at a temple deep in the mountains.

DAVID McCANN *(from Urban Temple, 2010)*

FIRST SIJO: A NIGHT IN ANDONG

One night in Andong
after a tour of back-alley wine shops,
head spinning, I staggered down
the narrow, paddy-field paths,
when the two pigs grunted
“So, you! Home at last?”

하룻밤 안동 시내 골목술집 구경하고
머리가 뱅뱅돌때 밭둑길을 거닐다가
도야지 꿀꿀 소리야 이제 왔노 하노라



David McCann (Professor & Director of Korea Institute at Harvard University) used to live at a house in Andong, Korea where his room was right next to the pig pen. Some years later, he wrote this sijo poem, the first he ever wrote in the Korean language, remembering the grunting of the pigs as something like a *Welcome home*.

DAVID McCANN *(from Urban Temple, 2010)*

WHAT I WANT

Avarice, envy denied,
frustrated, sublimated
What I want I need and deserve;
I need to have what you possess,
Your calm skill as you swim the lake
to the float where I lie gasping.



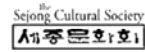
Professor David McCann is an award-winning poet, scholar, and translator. He is the director of Korea Institute at Harvard University. This sijo is about his wife who is a good swimmer. It begins with reflections on ideas about proper behavior, all of which can be swept away by the demanding pace of life, or a swim in the lake.

LARRY GROSS *(from Sijo Forum)*

Untitled

Rising early each morning,
 I let her into the warm barn;
I pour oats, clean her stall,
 then fork more hay into the trough;
When she kicks my hand away,
 why do I think of my wife?

From "sijo forum at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/sijoforum/>"



The twist at the last line is a double surprise.

Visit "sijo forum <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/sijoforum/>"

Elizabeth St. Jacques

(Around the Tree of Light, 1995)

EVEN NOW

Just us two in the photograph
his arm around my thin shoulder
That strong limb I then leaned against
would break so many falls
We stood like this but only once
but his strength holds me still



Elizabeth St. Jacques is a Canadian poet and sijo writer. She wrote numerous articles about sijo in poetry journals and made her own website about sijo: *AN INTRODUCTION TO SIJO AND ITS DEVELOPMENT IN NORTH AMERICA* (<http://startag.tripod.com/IntroSijo.html>)

CREASY CLAUSER (12th gr. Crawfordsville, IN)

2009 Sejong Writing Competition, first place

Untitled

A single sole was lost today, deep in the river Yalu,

Thrashing, twisting, torn to shreds with color quickly fading.

On the bridge a small boy laughs, holding out his empty shoe.



The twist in the third line might remind a reader of the one in Chông Ch'ól's poem about the shadow and the bridge and the monk.

Read about Creasy Clauser at

<http://www.sejongculturalsociety.org/writing/past/2009/winnerssijo.html#1>

TAYLOR EDWARD (10th gr. Euless, TX)
2009 Sejong Writing Competition, second place

Secret Song

You ask me what I'm humming; I tell you I'm humming about nothing.

This is untrue because I'm humming about you, all day long.

Who am I to tell you you're "nothing" when you are my song?



Read about Taylor Edwards at
<http://www.sejongculturalsociety.org/writing/past/2009/winnerssijo.html#2>

The twist is an effective reversal, from "you" to "I," and in three syllables.

JACOB DIAMOND (11th gr. Weston, FL)
2008 Sejong Writing Competition, first place

Cuisine?

I look through the window of the Korean barbeque place.

Ducks, chickens, creatures big and small, hang from the gallows of the cook.

Step inside and join the culture, leave your wishes at the door.



Read about Jacob Diamond at

<http://www.sejongculturalsociety.org/writing/past/2008/winnerssijo.html#1>

“Step inside” is curiously mixed in its effect, both cheery and inviting, but also slightly ominous, something like what the witch might have said to Hansel and Gretel.

MICHAEL CHUNG (5th gr. Los Angeles, CA)

2008 Sejong Writing Competition, third place

Dreams on a Lake

I'm floating on the dark lake, dreaming I'm floating on a cloud

The surface of my tanned skin tingling as water dries on it

A man yells, "Hello, good neighbor!" breaking my dreams to pieces.



Third line twist, a man yelling "Hello, good neighbor!", is a good strong one. And "A man yells" is the three syllables we look for.

Read about Michael Chung at

<http://www.sejongculturalsociety.org/writing/past/2008/winnerssijo.html#3.1>

Bibliography and Useful Links

- *Early Korean Literature* by David McCann, Columbia UP, 2000;
- *The Bamboo Grove: An introduction to Sijo* by Richard Rutt (U of Michigan P, 1998)
- *The Book of Korean Shijo* by Kevin O'Rourke (Harvard East Asia Series)
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- <http://www.sijopoetry.com/>
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