

Part I. Classical Korean Poetry

In Search of the Essence of *Sijo*

Suppose a Korean writer is participating in an international literary conference. And suppose there is a foreign writer who happens to ask him or her about the traditional literary genre of Korea. Most likely, *sijo* will come into his or her mind, for it is the extant poetic form that is still enjoyed in Korea ever since it emerged about 700 years ago. On mentioning *sijo*, the Korean writer will probably be asked what kind of literary genre *sijo* is. More often than not, he or she may not find a satisfactory answer, other than that it is a short three-line poetic form. Or he or she may quote one or two *sijo* works and add this or that interpretation.

If you are the Korean writer mentioned above, which work of *sijo* would you quote? Probably, most Koreans would be intimate with Jeong Mongju's work beginning, "Though I were to die and die again," or Hwang Jini's work, "Blue stream amid the green hills"; and not a few Koreans would be familiar with Yi Saek's, "In the valley of melted snow" or Yi Jeongbo's "A pear blossom fallen by the raging wind" All of these works are poignant and meaningful in their own way; however, what are the common characteristics applicable to all these and, hopefully, other *sijo* works? An attempt to infer the common characteristics of *sijo* on the basis of a few works might be comparable to an attempt to see the forest in just a few trees. And yet, if you don't figure out the overall view, how can you find your way through the forest?

One of the obvious facts is that *sijo* is a short three-line poetic form, as mentioned above. To be more specific, *sijo* is composed of approximately forty-five syllables (morae) arranged into three lines. If there is any comparable short poetic form in the world, it would be the Japanese haiku consisting of seventeen syllables in three lines. And yet, *sijo* is quite a different poetic form from haiku.

What makes *sijo* unique is its sense structure. Unlike haiku, whose sense structure is characterized by its attempts at the superimposition of one image or idea upon another, *sijo* mobilizes a different mode of presenting poetic ideas or images: a fourfold sense structure of introduction, development, turn, and conclusion. A theme is introduced in the first line; it is developed in the second; a twist or anti-theme is proposed in the first half of the third; and a certain conclusion is provided in the second half of the third. In this way, *sijo* evokes the dramatic unfolding of a poetic theme.

One might argue that such a description would be too sweeping to be of any practical value to the readers of the actual works of *sijo*. Sure enough, the above-mentioned works vary in theme and mood. First of all, Jeong's (1) *sijo* dramatizes the resolution of a man confronted with a political dilemma: Should one remain loyal to one's lord, or side with the newly emerged political power about to overthrow him? According to a popular legend, shortly after Jeong recited this *sijo* in front of a key political opponent, he was killed by assassins on his way home.

Though I were to die and die again,
still die a hundred times,
And so my bones all turn to dust,
my soul remains or not,
My single-minded heart toward my love
shall never perish.*

Hwang Jini's (2) work is a sort of love poem, and its major theme would be summarized as *carpe diem*. "Blue stream" is a pun on the name of a noble, Byeokgyesu, who took pride in his being impervious to any female charm, and "Bright Moon" was a pseudonym of Hwang, who was a *gisaeng* (a professional entertainer) at the time. The legend says that, while Byeokgyesu passed by, Hwang recited this provocatively suggestive *sijo*. Attracted to her beauty and poetic ingenuity, Byeokgyesu was said to have fallen in love with her. One might also read in this *sijo* a satirical tone of a commoner mocking the ostentatiousness of the nobility.

Blue Stream amid the green hills,
better not boast of your speed.
Once you have reached the ocean
there's slim chance you will return.
When Bright Moon shines over the hills,
why not stay awhile and enjoy it?*

On the other hand, Yi Saek's (3) *sijo* conveys nostalgia for the peace and harmony of bygone days. Yi was a surviving retainer of the Goryeo dynasty who refused to take office after its fall. Here in this work, he implicitly discloses his yearning to meet someone with political fidelity who could share his sense of loss. In the Korean literary tradition, the plum blossom is a symbol of loyalty or fidelity.

In the valley of melted snow,
the clouds are gathering deep;
The heart-gladdening plum flower-
where is it blooming now?
I stand alone at sunset,
not knowing where to go.*

At a cursory glance, Yi Jeongbo's (4) work might be read as a song of nature. A closer look at this work, however, will reveal that this is not so. Above all, note that the pear blossom and the spider are not natural objects in the literal sense of meaning: how can the pear blossom have the will to fly back to the branch, and the spider to think? By personifying them, the poet leads us to read them as the metaphor of human beings who are at once the ones displaced and the ones eager to feed on the displaced. In this sense, Yi's *sijo* can be interpreted as a biting, satiric criticism of human reality.

A pear blossom fallen by the raging wind
tosses about here and there;
Soon, failing to fly back to its branch,
it gets stuck in a spider's web.
Look: that spider will pounce on it,
thinking it has caught a butterfly.*

If there was anything the above-discussed *sijo* had in common, what would it be? Obviously, all these works are about human affairs. But is there a literary work that hasn't anything to do with human affairs? In a sense, we should say yes. And yet, if compared with haiku, what we are arguing about *sijo* will become self apparent: while haiku pursues the momentary or the intuitive knowledge of the phenomenal world, *sijo* aims at an understanding of human reality. In other words, whereas haiku is a poetic form oriented to symbolically reveal the state of mind that transcends time and reality, *sijo* can be understood as a poetic form oriented to allegorically describe human reality. Indeed, the essence of *sijo* lies in the sense of reality that the poet perceives within human time and along with human time.

It goes without saying that there are *sijo* in praise of the beauty or mysteries of nature. Even in such cases, however, the aim of *sijo* poets is the ironic and/or critical comment on human reality, as evidenced by Yi's *sijo* about the pear blossom and the spider. Or, whether explicit or implicit, the poet's conscious sense of reality plays an important role in *sijo* writing. In a nutshell, there is no *sijo* work that can be categorized as a song purely intended to say something about nature.

One more thing to point out is that the utilization of vivid images is a must for *sijo*. To borrow from the American poet Ezra Pound, "certain qualities of vivid presentation" of things to the mind's eye could be considered as the common characteristic observable in the traditional poetry of all East Asian countries: Korea, Japan, and China. And yet, if we are allowed to add a few more words as to the essence of *sijo*, we may say that it lies in the dramatic presentation of vivid poetic images or ideas in the sequence of introduction, development, turn, and conclusion.

(1) Jeong Mongju (1338–1392): One of the most venerated sages of Korea, who tried in vain to protect the waning Goryeo dynasty against the newly emerged political power.

(2) Hwang Jini (1506?–1567?): The most illustrious and accomplished of all women poets of the Joseon dynasty, whose love poems, in particular, are highly esteemed for their poetic ingenuity.

(3) Yi Saek (1328–1396): One of the most distinguished scholar-officials of the Goryeo dynasty, who, though he was on good terms with Yi Seonggye (founder of the Joseon dynasty), refused to work for him and retired to the country.

(4) Yi Jeongbo (1693–1766): A renowned scholar-official who is regarded as one of the most prolific sijo poets of the Joseon dynasty.

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