

Reading and Writing the Sijo

By Tracy Kaminer, World Literature Teacher
Marist School, Atlanta, GA

Part 1:

Introduction: What follows is a suggested guideline for teaching sijo in a language arts classroom. The approach is created for students in grades 9-12 but can be modified for 7th and 8th grade students as well. The material is intended to provide three days of teaching about sijo in a 55-minute class. The background material can be a day in itself if you take the time to discuss the Korean Wave and spend more time on the Korean history timeline. Day 2 could be the introduction to sijo itself concluding with the 10-minute sijo. Day 3 could be the sharing of the sijo created for homework. The teaching objectives are to introduce Korean culture through a form of poetry particular to Korea, to read and understand some important sijo in their cultural context, and to understand and practice writing the sijo. Materials used for this lesson plan come from *Early Korean Literature* by David McCann, Columbia UP, 2000; *The Bamboo Grove: An introduction to Sijo* by Richard Rutt (U of Michigan P, 1998) and "The Sijo, a Re-Versible Door into Korean Culture," from *Education About Asia* (Spring 2010) published by the Association for Asian Studies.

Creating Interest: Before introducing students to a 15th century form of poetry written in Korea, introduce them to an aspect of Korean popular culture. If you have the means to do it, show them the "Dynamite" music video by Korean boy band BTS. You can find the video on youtube.com. Another popular K-pop group is BlackPink. Their videos are also on youtube.com. Why is this relevant? Students may be interested in knowing about the Korean Wave, which refers to the successful exporting of Korean culture since the 1990s. The impact of Korean culture, particularly in Asia, stems in part from the exporting of Korean soap operas and films. See the following articles for more information:

<http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=86640>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korean_wave

Quick Look at Korean History: Hand out a chronology of Korean history. It is important for students to recognize the deep history that Korea has. While students may be familiar with a few of the dates in modern history, such as those pertaining to the Korean War or Japanese occupation, they may know nothing about the famous Silla (Shilla) Dynasty, known for artistic and cultural development, or the Choson Dynasty under King Sejong. Point out that King Sejong was known as an inventor and among his achievements was the creation of the Korean alphabet, called Hangul. For more information on King Sejong, see the following article: <http://www.asiasociety.org/countries-history/traditions/king-sejong-great>. The development of the Korean alphabet and language were important for Koreans whose formal communication and written history had been conducted in Chinese. According to David McCann, even though Chinese continued to be the dominant form of written communication in Korea until the 19th century, "an opposing Korean character and spirit kept trying to assert itself," because of the development of Hangul. Important to the development of poetry in Korea was the state examination

system. As in China, all educated men were trained in literature and composition as they prepared for the examinations that could qualify them for public service positions. From the 15th century on, the poems written by the scholars were either kasa, poems composed of an indefinite number of verses, or sijo. See the following for more information: <http://www.stockton.edu/~gilmorew/consorti/1deasia.htm>

Part 2:

Teaching the Sijo:

A sijo is a three line poem particular to Korea, developed in the 15th century. The poem introduces a theme in the first line, develops it in the second, has a twist or countertheme at the beginning of the third line and concludes with a return to the original theme. The form of the poem relies on set phrasing and syllable count, which will be explained later. Sijo were originally composed to be sung to a fixed melody. Now they are literary works instead of musical ones.

Example 1:

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.

Chong Chol (1536-1593)

Suggested Questions:

1. What is happening in the poem? (Literally, a monk is walking on a bridge, casting a shadow in the water. A person asks him where he is going. He points to the clouds and walks ahead.)
2. Which words feel particularly important in the poem? (Some students may answer shadow; bridge; stay; go; points; clouds; keeps. Ask them what feels important about those words.)
3. What do you think the theme of the poem is? (Some may talk about life as a journey; the difference between earth—shadow --and the Heavens—white cloud; the commitment of the monk and his focus on his goal)
4. What is the importance of the phrase that starts the third line, “He just points”? (Despite a speaker’s attempt to get him to stay, the monk is focused on his journey; he doesn’t even take the time to speak—he just points; his answer causes us to examine the difference in earth and sky, in the now and the hereafter.)
5. Try to explain the poem in terms of theme, countertheme, and a return to the theme, the pattern of a sijo. (On a monk’s life journey, he is asked to pause, to turn away from his goals; he points ahead, never turning away from his life’s journey.)

Example 2:

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.

Hwang Chin-i (16th century)

Suggested Questions:

1. Ask the same five questions. Students may respond that the theme is a kind of “seize the day” one about enjoying the moment. They may see it as a poem about nature and the inevitable flow of time.
2. Ask the students: imagine that one character’s name is Jade Green Stream and one character’s name is Bright Moon. How would they then explain the story of the poem?
3. Explain that this poem in the original language is divided into Chinese and Korean halves. The Chinese half of each line includes the words “Jade Green Stream in the blue hills; arriving at the broad sea; the Bright Moon filling the empty hills.” The Korean second half of the poem includes the words “Don’t boast; it is hard to return; pause and go.” What do you notice about what the Korean language includes as opposed to what the Chinese language includes? What do you think is the point that the author is making? (According to David McCann, the Chinese half names and situates elements of the natural world; the Korean half un-names and dis-locates.)
4. Share the story of the poem: 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. According to David McCann, “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.”
5. On the sijopoetry.com website, you can listen to David McCann discuss this poem and perform part of it in Korean.
6. Challenge: write a bilingual three line poem. Write half of each line in English and half in a second language you know. Or write half of the line in standard English and half in another English dialect. Try to create a push and pull or tension in the use of the two languages. Share your experiments.

Structure of a sijo:

Sijo poems are based on phrases of a certain number of syllables. David McCann explains that the lines of a sijo should feel as if they are unfolding, phrase by phrase. The first two lines are often similar or even

identical in their phrasing and syllable counts. The third line has the all- important twist, which is always at the beginning of the third line and is always three syllables.

Basic Standard Syllable Count:

First line:	phrase one (3)	phrase two (4)	phrase three (4 or 3)	phrase four (4)
Second line:	same	same	same	same
Third line:	phrase one (3)	phrase two (5)	phrase three (4)	phrase four (3)

Variants:

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

Important note on last line: in many classic sijo, the first three syllables are often an exclamation or a word of strong emotional value. The phrase following that three syllable twist is normally the longest in the poem and gives a sense that the poem is about to conclude. By the end of the third line, the poem has come to an unsurprising ending. In sung sijo, the last phrase is often omitted altogether.

Sijo written in English:

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.

Creasy Clauser (12th grade, Crawfordsville, IN)

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?

Taylor Edward (10th grade, Euless, TX)

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.

Jacob Diamond (11th grade, Weston, FL)

Discussion Question: Read the following Sejong Cultural Society contest winners' poems. Identify the qualities of a sijo that make each poem a winner. Stress theme, countertheme, and return to theme.

Activity 1: Write a 10-minute sijo/Share it

With the syllable and phrasing chart handy, write a quick sijo. It can be about anything—for instance, something that happened that day at school or at home. Work for the unfolding quality—phrase upon phrase with a three syllable twist in line three. The twist can be an exclamation or a question.

Activity 2: Make a list of unlikely sijo topics

Create a student generated list on the board of topics that you would not expect to be ones associated with sijo. They may include subjects such as neckties, pollen, bran muffins, and freezers. The list is intended to get them away from only focusing on broad topics such as summer and graduation.

Assignment:

Ask students to write three sijo for homework. They should be proofed, edited, and typed. In class, they should choose one of the three to read to the class.

Activity 3: Peer edit and advise

Ask students to trade sijo, concentrating on the ones read in class.

1. Students should mark the phrases and count the syllables in each phrase in each other's sijo. They should then discuss their findings with the writer. They should discuss whether the poem follows the sijo pattern. If there are variations from the pattern, the writer should explain why. The student should also discuss which phrases in the poem seem particularly effective and why.

They should also mention any difficulties in understanding they have and any suggestions for improvement.

Assignment:

Students should revise their sijo for homework and turn them in edited and typed for a grade.

Extension Assignment:

Have the students teach sijo writing to someone else—a family member, a friend, a faculty member, or someone in the community. Ask the students to write a 1-2 page process essay in which they discuss the steps they took to teach the sijo, making mention of the difficulties and successes they had along the way. They should write about what they learned in the process. They should then include a sijo from their “student.”