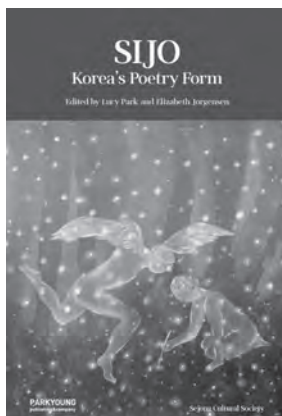


Sijo Korea's Poetry Form

EDITED BY LUCY PARK AND ELIZABETH JORGENSEN
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Reviewed by Hannah Lim



S*jijo: Korea's Poetry Form* provides a comprehensive overview of sijo—a three-line Korean vernacular poetry form that was originally sung—and how to teach this style of poetry writing. Sijo poems follow a simple form of the first line introducing the theme, the second line developing that theme, and the third line opening with a “twist, a change in perspective, direction, or thought” that concludes the poem (3). With contributions from leading scholars and practitioners of Korean literature, the book is divided into three

parts: Part 1 introduces sijo as a quintessentially Korean poetry form, an overview of its history from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries to the present, including tracing how sijo today are written and its promulgation in other languages. One chapter considers sijo alongside the five-line Japanese haiku and the quatrain Chinese jueju. Part 2 offers a range of lesson plans with strategies, worksheets, and links to online resources to teach students from as young as elementary school how to write their own sijo poems. Part 3 consists of winning entries to an annual Sijo Writing Competition (which has separate divisions for pre-college students and adults) supported by the Sejong Cultural Society, a Chicago-based non-profit organization dedicated to promoting Korean culture in the United States. This ambitious project offers accessible ways for non-specialists to teach K-12 students about Korea's history and cultural heritage through poetry.

One of the more impressive features of this book is the extent its content can be used in literature, history, language, and music classes.

In addition to the shared goal of increasing awareness and appreciation of the Korean sijo verse form, the chapters also work together to act as a “single unified set for teachers and writers” to explore how to learn about, teach, and write their own sijo poems from a range of entry points. For those familiar with haiku and jueju, one of the chapters by Mark Peterson contextualizes the development of sijo with helpful comparisons and contrasts, such as how “[b]ecause the sijo is longer than the haiku, it has more options” for topics and compared to Korean language sijo, “we are seeing an even greater diversity of topics covered by the sijo” in English (16). Linda Sue Park, a *New York Times* bestselling author and Newberry Medal winner, contributes a transcript from a keynote speech delivered at the 2016 Sejong Benefit Dinner. She traces how she discovered sijo as an adult and developed the book of sijo poems *Tap Dancing on the Roof* to combine a “Korean tradition with contemporary American subject matter” (104). One of Lucy Park's chapters introduces sijo written in German,

Tagalog, Russian, and Spanish. Park includes English language translations alongside the language poems were originally written, and demonstrates the impressive way this simple verse form adapts across a range of cultures and languages. This malleability is reflected throughout the poems and contemporary performances. The Elephant Rebellion—a Chicago-based artist, writer, and activist collective—collaborated with the Sejong Cultural Society in 2016 to develop a particularly striking hip hop performance of a sijo written by Roberto Santos in 2013 titled “Still American” that samples traditional Korean drums (30). The chapters collectively showcase the diverse ways sijo can empower learners to shape their own stories and better express themselves as writers.

One of the more impressive features of this book is the extent its content can be used in literature, history, language, and music classes. There are six chapters dedicated to lesson plans in Part 2, but teachers may also easily incorporate segments of Part 1 and Part 3 in their lessons as well. The lesson ideas and instructional strategies in Part 2 are laid out for teachers across disciplines to develop lessons on the topic directly, or to incorporate sijo within a pre-existing unit plan. The suggested teaching methods are interactive and student-centered, with the teacher acting as a guide for student learners to develop their writing skills and broaden their cultural awareness. Vocabulary is accessible to non-specialists. Chapters are clearly labeled for teachers and learners based on student age and grade-level. The lesson plans are thoughtfully designed to capture and maintain student engagement, including suggestions for teaching virtually. For non-specialists, the editors include worksheets and charts that demonstrate how to teach the poetry form and guide students through writing their own sijo. Elizabeth Jorgensen's chapters for teaching in American (in-person or virtual) classrooms include examples of how she guides students through the entire writing process. The section tracing a high school student's poetry development across multiple drafts from the included rounds of Jorgensen's feedback is particularly illustrative. Deborah Holland's chapter outlines how to incorporate sijo in a history classroom to “engage in an interactive activity that will increase understanding of Korean culture, history, and literature” (148) while students also “construct a more perceptive understanding of their thoughts and words” (149). The chapters also offer many possibilities for lesson extensions. Particularly for K–12 teachers who may not have a strong background knowledge on Korea generally or Korean literature more specifically, these materials are accessible and effective. Works cited pages for chapters include clear QR codes that direct the reader to pertinent online recordings, including lectures and performances. Rather than insisting on one static or monolithic approach to teaching sijo, reading through the range of lesson plans can inspire ideas and innovations for teachers and learners alike across disciplines.

It is a challenge to access resources on Korea at the K–12 level. This book opens the door for teachers who want to introduce students to Korean history, culture, and poetry. The book also highlights ways for students to present their work beyond the classroom through entering a sijo writing competition through the Sejong Cultural Society. There is a strong need for this book and more material like this, because the vast majority of K–12 teaching resources on East Asia are focused on China and Japan. ♦

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From *Sijo: Korea's Poetry Form*

The sijo universe is indeed broad as evidenced from these excerpts from *Sijo: Korea's Poetry Form*.

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.*

By Michael Chung, third place
2008 Sejong Cultural Society annual sijo competition

Belated Breakfast

*One cup of coffee ready to pour.
Two pieces of wheat toast to eat.
Three spreads of grape jelly.
Four minutes to get ready.
Cat steals my toast, then spills my coffee.
Now, I'm five minutes late.*

By Toni Smith, honorable mention
2018 Sejong Cultural Society annual sijo competition

Back in New Orleans

*In the South, Grandpa was born. Paper shack house had a dirt floor.
As a kid he drank coffee. Milk for them was too expensive.
They were rich with gospel spirit! In church they sang, and filled their hearts.*

By Dante Kirkman, honorable mention
2016 Sejong Cultural Society annual sijo competition

In Memory of Sun

*Just by looking at your big eyes,
I used to start giggling.
Every time, when you spoke,
I doubled up and rolled over laughing.
Since you left, I've not laughed.
Are you making spirits laugh in heaven?*

By Lucy Park, Executive Director of the Sejong Cultural Society, Editor of *Sijo: Korea's Poetry Form*

Season That Never Comes

*I lace up stiff metal cleats,
Jog yellow foul pole to foul pole,
Strap on rugged batting gloves,
And take ground balls off the infield turf.
But it's still minus four outside—
Forty-two days till first pitch.*

By Bryce Toussaint, honorable mention
2018 Sejong Cultural Society annual sijo competition

Nature Walk

*We watch the fox, the dog and I, loping along the wooded path.
We pause our stroll, she stops as well, sitting down to regard us.
Then, bored with local wildlife, she turns around and heads for home.*

By Jeffrey Bolognese, honorable mention
2020 Sejong Cultural Society annual sijo competition
(adult division)



A Joseon period painting. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/bdfrej3r>.

Introduction to Sijo

The following is an introductory excerpt from David McCann's *EAA* article "The Sijo: A Window into Korean Culture" (Vol. 15, No. 1, Spring 2010, <https://tinyurl.com/5n6sz7r8>). Readers who are curious about sijo or especially interested in sijo are encouraged to read the entire *EAA* essay online in our archives that provides rich context for the review of this well-edited and pedagogically-useful volume.

Many fourth graders in the United States have a Haiku Day. As I discovered from discussions with the students in my Writing Asian Poetry class, it is a great way to begin to learn about Japanese culture—the aesthetics of understatement, the appreciation for the natural world, the glimpses of humor in everyday life. Trying to write a seventeen-syllable poem about nature also seems a very doable project for almost any grade-level.

The Korean counterpart is the *sijo*, a three-line vernacular verse form that dates back to the fourteenth century. Some are serious political statements, some offer rather dour Confucian teachings about the proper ways of behaving in a family or a kingdom, while others can be quite humorous or poignant comments about life. A number of them are remarkably expressive works and can be read not only for a sense of the general flavors, sights, and sounds of Korea's historical past, but also for the individual voices of those who composed them. The legendary Admiral Yi Sun-sin is said to have composed a sijo on the evening before the great naval battle with the invading Japanese fleet in 1599. What I find especially poignant about the poem is the reference to the Mongol flute, which was thought to have a particularly lonely tone.

*Moon-bright night on Hansan Isle,
and I sit alone atop the lookout.
I hold my great sword by my side,
and as my worries deepen,
from somewhere comes the single note of the Mongol flute,
piercing to the very bowels.*

(Early Korean Literature, 147)

There is irony, too, in that the Mongols invaded Korea from the Asian mainland in the thirteenth century, among other things demanding that the Koreans, with their superior maritime skills, build a fleet to attack Japan. The divine wind, or kamikaze, destroyed that fleet.