

The Sijo, A Window into Korean Culture

By David McCann

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.¹

*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.

The sixteenth century *kisaeng*² woman poet Hwang Chini is credited with a number of the best known *sijo* poems, several displaying her witty ability to stand up to the Confucian mores of Chosŏn Korea. One of my favorites is her “Alas, what have I done?” Most notable, though invisible in translation, is the language of the poem, which has only one word borrowed from the Chinese language, *chŏng* (longing). The Korean language, like Japanese, has a large number of vocabulary items from Chinese. Even more resonant, the *sijo* form never uses a run-on line, but in Hwang's poem the second runs impulsively over into the third, an extraordinary enactment through poetic form of the compulsive behavior described.

*Alas, what have I done?
didn't I know how I would yearn?
Had I but bid him stay,
how could he have gone? But stubborn,
I sent him away,
and now such longing learn!*
(*Early Korean Literature*, 55)

Richard Rutt's *The Bamboo Grove, An Introduction to Sijo* gives a clear and straightforward introduction to the form and its history.³ His translations are a pleasure to read, ranging across such topics as Historical Songs, Political Songs, Songs of Loyalty, and so on. His collection includes twenty modern—earlier twentieth century—*sijo* poems. The following sadly ironic *sijo* is by the Korean patriot Shin Ch'ae-ho, 1880–1936, who left Korea during the Japanese colonial occupation (1910–1945).

*Do not praise the Diamond Mountains,
their glory is but crimson maples.
Red foliage can boast nothing
but colors dying, leaf by leaf.
Go instead and look for happiness
in the great winds of the Mongol Desert.*
(*The Bamboo Grove*, # 254)

My own collection, *Early Korean Literature, Selections and Introductions*, provides a selection of *sijo* poems as well as other examples of Korean poetry, and a background essay on the form.⁴ *Azalea: Journal of Korean Literature and Culture* contains an essay in its 2008 Volume 2 on “Korean Literature and Performance” focusing on the *sijo*; it includes translations of *sijo* poems by two contemporary Korea poets, and three by Kim Dae Jung, the late president of the Republic of Korea. One by Kim Dae Jung:⁵

*Long autumn night,
lying alone in the cell,
thinking of our country's work,
I toss and turn, sleepless.
The bright moon fills all the heaven and earth
while my heart, my thoughts, are dark.*
(*Azalea*, 2 (2008): 374)

While the reading and study of the Korean *sijo* form can provide an entrée to other features of Korean culture and history, in workshops at the Bancroft School, at Clark University for a group of high school teachers, and in my Writing Asian Poetry class, I have also found that people take to the actual writing of *sijo*. It is in some ways easy to describe: three lines, each line in four parts. The first line introduces the subject of the poem, and the second line develops the image or idea. The third line begins with a characteristic “twist,” a change in direction or focus, and then moves to conclude the poem. I have been tempted to say at times that the *sijo* is like a martini, “three lines with a twist.” There is a general pattern of syllable counting in the line groups: 3-4-3 (or 4) -4 for the four groups in lines one and two, and then as the twist happens in line three, a count of 3-5-4-3: three syllables for the twist, five to bring the poem back, and four, then three syllables to end it.

The Sejong Cultural Society in Chicago has sponsored a *sijo* contest for the last two years for middle and high school students.⁶ Their Web site provides general information about the form and the contest. The prizewinners are published in *Azalea*.

For workshops, I would suggest using Rutt's book for its account of the form, the history, and good examples of translations. Rutt also fol-

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lows the frequently shifting syllable counts of the originals, so students can be alerted to the possibilities for formal variation. (There is also variation in the syllable count for the haiku, though that fact is obscured by the handiness of the seventeen-syllable label. One of Bashō's wittiest poems, for example, goes "Hata uchi no mane wo shite aruku karasu kana"—"Doing an imitation/ of dry-field farming/ the crow walks along." The syllable count is 5-5-8 for this example—quite a distance from the 5-7-5 we tend to expect.)

One key point to present in a workshop is that historically, the sijo was written in the Korean language, as opposed to the Chinese language forms that Korean Confucian gentlemen—*yangban*—were experts at producing for formal occasions such as New Year's, birthdays, Autumn Moon Festival, and the like. All "serious" literature and state civil service examinations used Chinese language texts as source and reference. Even so, the Korean vernacular language sijo form continued to be a remarkably expressive and agile counterpart. Read some examples of sijo, perhaps asking the students to look for the personal feelings of the poet, the expression of a sense of justice (social or political), or humor. Have the students take note of the three lines; in Rutt's book, they are laid out on the page in lines that break at the halfway point. Then give the students fifteen minutes or so to try writing some sijo, and have them go around the room to read them.

Ask the participants to look for the twist in the third line and to make comments about how well it works, or if it seems perhaps too much like a refrigerator falling into the poem from the sky. There is a deliberate shape to the poem, as it starts out in one direction, proceeds in the second line, and then turns away before coming back to conclude. It's a bit like line dancing, with that spin, and if students can get a sense of the movement in the sijo form, then they are also close to sensing one of the characteristic features of Korean culture—the historical as well as the contemporary—its lively, performance dimensions. From this observation, it is a short bridge to reach what is known as the Korean Wave, the contemporary Korean cultural presentations that comprise the subject of these special series of *Education About Asia*. Along with the countless Web sites and other Google-able sources on that subject, the annual

publication *The Korean Wave: As Viewed Through the Pages of The New York Times*, prepared by the Korean Cultural Service in New York, contains a very well produced selection of relevant stories.⁷

For a collection of sijo poems originally written in English, see my *Urban Temple: Sijo Twisted and Straight* (Bo Leaf Books, 2010). The very first I ever wrote in English:

All through lunch, from my table
I keep an eye on your disputes,
green lobsters in the bubbling
tank by the restaurant door.
Sights, fights, bites—Whatever the cause,
make peace and flee, escape with me! ■

NOTES

1. The final chapter of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* presents a similarly poignant account of that flute's yearning tone. (See my *Early Korean Literature, Selections and Introductions*, 147–149 for discussion.)
2. Kisaeng were female entertainers, similar to the Japanese geisha.
3. Richard Rutt, *The Bamboo Grove. An Introduction to Sijo* (Ann Arbor Paperbacks, 1998).
4. David R. McCann, *Early Korean Literature, Selections and Introductions* (Columbia University Press, 2000).
5. David R. McCann, "Korean Literature and Performance?: Sijo!," *Azalea Journal of Korean Literature and Culture* (Korea Institute, Harvard University), 2 (2008): 359–376.
6. The Sejong Cultural Society Web site, <http://www.sejongculturalsociety.org> (accessed January 2010).
7. Korean Cultural Service, Korean Consulate General of New York, *The Korean Wave: As Viewed Through the Pages of the New York Times*, 2009, <http://www.koreanculture.org/bbs/view.php?id=news&no=13> (access date).

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