

Korean Sijo  
Poetry by Chong Mong-Ju, Hwang Chini, Yi Sun-Sin, and Other Sijo Poets

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9-12 Grade  
English  
Length of Unit: Up to 2 weeks (10 40-minute class periods)

## I. Summary

This lesson plan will explore the Korean verse form of *sijo*: its history, form, cultural implications, examples, and famous *sijo* practitioners. After analyzing and exploring the unique features of *sijo*, the students will then investigate the translation aspect of *sijo*. Because it is a poetic form native to Korea, the majority of *sijo* is written in Korean, so must be translated for non-Korean speaking audiences. By examining different translations of the same poem, students will gain a better understanding of the complexities of translating and a deeper appreciation for the subtlety of language—both its denotations and connotations. In addition, through this activity, the students will gain hands-on experience of the *sijo* form through writing their own, as well as trying their hand at translating and writing Korean.

## II. Historical and Literary Context

When the verse form of *sijo* (she-jo) appeared at the end of the Koryo period in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, it was considered a literary form truly unique to Korea, and has remained popular to this day. One of the reasons for its wide appeal is due to the fact that it was actually written in Korean. Chinese was the language used in all formal writing, while Korean was the language used in speaking. So then why did it all of a sudden become acceptable for a new, completely original literary form to be written in Korean? Because *sijo* was originally intended to be sung, and therefore the writers thought their audience would be more of a listening audience, rather than a reading one. In fact, the Korean alphabet wasn't even invented until the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, so there was a period of about 50 years where *sijo* was mainly a performing art.

The word “*sijo*” wasn't universally used to describe this poetic form until the 1920's, when it was used as the title of an anthology of the poems. In Chinese, (remember that was the written language used in Korea for much of its history) there are two characters that are used to write *sijo*: one meaning “time” or “period” and the other meaning “song” (Rutt 9). The name *sijo* has been used alternately as a description of seasonal theme of the poems or the music they are set to. Before the 1920's, the word *tan'ga* (“short lyric”) was used to describe the actual poem and *sijo* was used for the music (Rutt 9). Eventually, the term *sijo* has come to mean both the poem itself and the music. Though *sijo* was originally intended to be sung, the music part of it was never a requirement for people to enjoy the poetry. *Sijo* singing was considered a classy art, reserved for the upper echelons of society, but that didn't mean that everyone else couldn't be familiar with the actual words (think opera—with music, for the upper classes; just spoken, without the music, for the average people) (Rutt 2-3).

So what is *sijo*? What are its conventions? This is a user-friendly list I've compiled and synthesized from Richard Rutt's enlightening and engaging book *The Bamboo Grove: An Introduction to Sijo* and David McCann's well-organized *Early Korean Literature: Selections and Introductions*. Both of these men are trailblazers for Korean *sijo* in English. David McCann is currently a professor at Harvard and the Harvard poetry website (<http://poetry.harvard.edu>) then click on “Korean” in the toolbar

on the left) has many additional resources, including titles of anthologies and videos with Professor McCann conducting workshops.

Sijo is:

1. composed of only three lines, with four parts to each line: one major pause in the middle of each line, then a secondary pause in the middle of each half-line
2. the first line introduces the subject or theme of the poem, often as a question
3. the second line develops that subject or theme, often as the answer to the question posed in the first line
4. the third line starts with a twist or “anti-theme”, which is a change in direction or focus of the poem, then ends the poem
5. traditionally, there is a syllable count to each line, and those syllables are grouped into phrases:
  - Line I: 3—4—3(or 4)—4 (those are the syllable counts for the **phrases**)
  - Line II: 3—4—3(or 4)—4
  - Line III: 3—5—4—3 (3 for the twist, 5 to bring the poem back (connect to Lines I and II), 4, then 3 to end it)
6. lines I and II are usually exactly alike in syllable count
7. line III is different not only in syllable count, but also in content: the first phrase is ALWAYS 3 syllables and the first phrase is usually an exclamation or a strong emotional word that is vital to the structure of the whole poem; the second phrase is usually the longest, so therefore syllable-heavy, because it contrasts the first two lines but also gives a sense of the coming conclusion; the last phrase is the conclusion to the sijo, both in sense and sound, so it ends by expressing a strong emotional reaction by the poet
8. as with other Asian cultures, the early Korean sijo poets were very attuned to nature, so often the “twist” in the last line of the poem would involve a different kind of seasonal word from what was in lines I and II
9. the conclusion isn’t witty or a firm “clincher”, but suggestive of the poet’s attitude or thought
10. doesn’t have a strong beat, or meter, like in English poetry—more emphasis is placed on the phrases

There are many popular and famous sijo poets, particularly from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. A few notables that I include in this lesson plan are Hwang Chini, Chong Mong-Ju, Yi Sun-Sin, though poetry will be used from others.

Hwang Chini (early 16<sup>th</sup> Century) was a *kisaeng* (kee-sang), which was the Korean equivalent of a Japanese geisha. As Professor Sean Kim described them, a *kisaeng* was an “encultured prostitute, who would please men in whatever way they wanted, and not necessarily with sex” (from an Indiana University lecture given July 16, 2010). There were several *kisaeng* who were prevalent and prolific sijo writers at their time; Hwang Chini is probably the most famous.

Chong Mong-Ju (1337-1392) was a Koryo statesmen and loyalist whose faithfulness to the Koryo eventually cost him his life.

Yi Sun-Sin (1545-1599) was an admiral who saved Korea from the Japanese by inventing and using armor-clad “turtle-ships.” Many sijo were written by political figures expressing some political sentiment.

### III. Discussion Questions and Answers

What is sijo?

How did sijo come about?

What does sijo poetry tell us about Korean culture?

Because sijo is a uniquely Korean art form, how has it been made accessible to Western cultures?

Can a poem have the same meaning even though the words are slightly different?

### IV. Activities

In this lesson, the students will learn about the history and features of sijo, analyze sijo poems, think about what a reader of a sijo poem could discover about the Korean culture, compare and contrast different translations of the same poem, attempt their own translation of a few Korean words, and write their own sijo.

Number of class sessions required: 10, 40 minute class periods

Materials Required: Overhead and transparencies

Handout: Sijo At a Glance

Handout: Sijo Translation Activity

Korean/English dictionaries (at least one)

Book of Korean alphabet (optional)

Activities and Procedures:

- Activity 1: What is sijo and where did it come from?
  - Step 1: Teacher passes out handout (Appendix A) called “And It Goes Like This—Sijo At a Glance” to students.
  - Step 2: The first part that the teacher goes over is the history of the sijo—skip over the actual rules of sijo until after the students have a general understanding of what sijo actually is. Otherwise, going over the rules of sijo is just overwhelming and may turn students off to the poetry before they’ve even started reading it.

- Step 3: The teacher chooses one of the 4 poems on the handout to display on the overhead. This poem will be the one that the teacher will use to point out the features of the sijo poem.
- Step 4: The teacher models the features of the poem for the students. Students may want to participate by guessing where a particular feature is, etc. After the actual features have been worked out, the teacher and students should discuss what could be learned about the Korean culture from reading the poem. What particular words or phrases inform the inferences made? (It would also be helpful to have a list of the seasonal words, though I had a hard time finding a reliable one...that's something I will have to keep searching for. Rutt has a few suggestions in *The Bamboo Grove*—spring: wood, blue—which Asians didn't distinguish from green, just like the Greeks—eastern point on the compass, dragon, plum blossom; summer: fire, red, the south, phoenix—mythical peacock or pheasant—the peony, orchids.)
- Step 5: The teacher chooses one of the 3 remaining poems to focus on next and puts it on the overhead. Either with a partner, small group, or individually (teacher choice), have the students take a look at the poem in question and see if they can identify all of the sijo features on their own. Then come back together as a class and label on the poem transparency.
- Step 6: The teacher can repeat this procedure with the remaining two poems, assign the remaining poems as homework, or skip them completely if the class seems ready to move on.
- Step 7: The students write the first draft of their own sijo on the lines provided. This could be done as an in-class activity or as homework, depending on how much time the teacher has allotted for this unit.
- Step 8: Work through the writing process to create a finished product—a beautifully crafted sijo poem.
- Activity 2: Translation Activity (which can either be done separately or in conjunction with Activity 1)
  - Step 1: A class discussion of the meanings of the words “denotation” and “connotation” if the students don't have prior knowledge of these terms.
  - Step 2: To illustrate the complexities of translations, pass out (or have on the overhead) a copy of **one** of the poems from either of the groups provided on the handout “Translation Activity” (Appendix B).
  - Step 3: While the students read the poem given them (or on the overhead), the teacher says “While you read the poem silently to yourself, I'll read it aloud” and then the teacher should read **the other translation of the poem provided**. The students will realize immediately that the two are not the same. This will naturally lead to a discussion of “just because the words are different, is the

meaning the same?” which ties into the previous discussion of denotation and connotation.

- Step 4: The teacher will have to point out that when translation is done from other languages to English, there aren't always the same words or words that have the exact meaning, so the translator has to choose a word that has the closest meaning to the original word. Also, the translator's personal preferences and understanding of the poem plays a role in how the poem is translated. The question, “How can we know if that is what the poem actually says?” could be addressed here.
  - Step 5: The students (either as a class, in small groups, or individually) should choose one particular word or phrase that they notice is different between the two poems and come up with all the connotations of that word or phrase. (It would be helpful to have the original Korean word and its exact meaning in order to compare to the translations, but that may not be possible. I had a hard time finding a reliable resource for that.)
  - Step 6: The students can discuss which translation of the word or the phrase they would choose and why, again either as a class, in small groups, or individually.
  - Step 7: The students can discuss the merits of each translation, taking into consideration not only the connotation and denotation of the words, but also the conventions of the sijo form, particularly the syllable count.
  - Step 8: The teacher could give the students a sijo in the original Korean, with a literal translation that the students could then work on organizing into a readable translation of the poem. Again, it may be hard to find these. I would recommend using the one Richard Rutt has as an example in his book *The Bamboo Grove*. The teacher could give the Korean and literal translation part to the students to work with, and then when they are done, the teacher could pass out the actual translations (Rutt provides 2 different ones) to see how they compare.
- Activity 3: Learn the Korean alphabet and write the title of own sijo in Korean (an optional activity)

## V. Connection to Other Literary Works

Shakespeare's ballads, which were originally sung

Compare/contrast form of sijo with Shakespearean sonnets

Japanese haiku

Chinese T'ang poetry

Famous letter exchanges in history

Examine sijo after a study of Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism

Compare and contrast with Chinese T'ang poetry

## VI. Citations

- Koller, John M. *Asian Philosophies*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2002.
- McCann, David R. *Early Korean Literature: Selections and Introductions*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.
- McCann, David R. "The Sijo, A Window into Korean Culture." *Education About Asia*. 15 (2010): 53-54.
- Rutt, Richard. *The Bamboo Grove: An Introduction to Sijo*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1971.

## VII. Appendices

- Appendix A: Sijo At a Glance
- Appendix B: Sijo Translation Activity
- Appendix C: Sijo Poems
- Appendix D: Sijo Form and Content T-Chart

## Appendix A And It Goes Like This: Sijo at a Glance

### Sijo is:

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8. as with other Asian cultures, the Koreans were very attuned to nature, so often the “twist” in the last line of the poem would involve a different kind of seasonal word from what was in lines I and II
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10. doesn’t have a strong beat, or meter, like in English poetry—more emphasis is placed on the phrases

### A Brief History:

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## Appendix B: Translation Activity

<p>I will break in two the long strong back            of this long midwinter night,          Roll it up and put it away            under the springtime coverlet.          And the night that my loved one comes back again            I will unroll it to lengthen the time.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">--Hwang Chini (16<sup>th</sup> Century)          (Rutt, <i>The Bamboo Grove</i>, Love Song 77)</p>	<p>I will break the back            of this long, midwinter night,          folding it double,            cold beneath my spring quilt,          that I may draw out            the night, should my love return.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">--Hwang Chini          (McCann, <i>Early Korean Literature</i>,          #672, 56)</p>
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Translator Notes: According to Rutt, Hwang Chini was “a clever girl of legendary beauty” who reportedly lived in Kaesong. Also said to be a *kisaeng* (kee-sang), there are many stories about how Chini attracted, and could seduce, just about any man, even the most serious of scholars.

The Korean word used for “roll up” in the Rutt translation is a pun on “frosty cold,” and the word used for the loved one is a pun on “frozen,” suggesting that he had turned emotionally cold (Rutt). Springtime is the season of love (like in Bambi☺), as well as when the days are longer and the nights are shorter (Rutt). According to translator Richard Rutt, this is one of the most famous sijo, and is the most often quoted.

<p>I chose a wild willow branch            and plucked it to send it to you.          I want you to plant it            by the window where you sleep.          When new leaves open in the night rains,            think it is I that have come to you.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">--Hongnang (16<sup>th</sup> Century)          (Rutt, <i>The Bamboo Grove</i>, Love Song 76)</p>	<p>I will take one branch of the willow            and send it, my love, to you.          Plant it beneath your window            and imagine when new leaves come          in the night rain            it is I.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">--Hongnang (16<sup>th</sup> Century)          (McCann, <i>Early Korean Literature</i>, #774,          56)</p>
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Translator Notes: Hongnang was a *kisaeng* from Kyongsong, which is in the far northeast of Korea. According to Rutt, she fell for a man named Ch’oe Kyongch’ang, whom she met when he was in Kyongsong on government business. Hongnang followed him part of the way back to Seoul and when they parted, she supposedly attached this sijo to a wild willow branch, which she then gave to Ch’oe as a farewell gift. (In China, it was traditional to give a willow branch to someone about to go on a journey—remember, many of China’s customs and traditions were absorbed into Korean culture through all of

the invasions and the sheer proximity of the countries.) Eventually, Rutt tells us, Hongnang did join Ch'oe in Seoul, and their affair caused him to be publicly disgraced.

### Appendix C: Sijo Poems

Rivers, lakes, buoyant  
the gull is.  
Unexpectedly, spittle spat  
falls on the gull's back.  
O gull, do not be angry.  
The ways of the world are filthy.

--Sijo song #93, Chong Ch'ol (McCann, *Early Korean Literature*, 53)

Once this body is dead and gone  
you ask, what will it be?  
On the highest peak of Pongnae Mountain  
a towering, spreading pine.  
When sky and earth are filled with white snow,  
alone and green, green, shall I be.

--Song Sam-mun (McCann, *Early Korean Literature*, 7)

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!

--Sijo song #1427, Hwang Chin-i (McCann, *Early Korean Literature*, 55)

I will break the back  
of this long, midwinter night,  
folding it double,  
cold beneath my spring quilt,  
that I may draw out  
the night, should my love return.

--Sijo song #672, Hwang Chin-i (McCann, *Early Korean Literature*, 56)

Since my mind turned foolish  
    all I do is foolish.  
Into these mountains wrapped in heavy clouds  
    what love would ever come to find me?  
Yet when the winds stir the falling leaves,  
    I wonder who... Might it be...?

--Sijo song #713, So Kyong-dok (McCann, *Early Korean Literature*, 48)  
    Perhaps written in memory of his student, the *kisaeng* Hwang Chin-i.

I thought about that fan  
    and why you sent it to me...  
You must have meant me  
    to puff out the flame in my heart.  
But my tears cannot quench it,  
    so what use will a fan be?

--Anonymous (Rutt, *The Bamboo Grove*, #65)

### Appendix D: Sijo at a Glance: Feature Analysis Chart

Form	Content
What do you notice or observe about the form of the sijo poems?	What do you notice or observe about the content of the sijo poems? How the content is organized?