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

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Grades 9-12
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 14th century, it was considered a literary form truly unique to Korea, and it 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, 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-15th 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 themes 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 came 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 did not 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 scholars 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.
1. *Sijo* is 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
   - 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 it 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, both because it contrasts with the first two lines and also because it 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 Koreans were very attuned to nature, so often the “twist” in the last line of the poem involves a different kind of seasonal word from what is in lines I and II;
9. The conclusion isn’t witty or a firm “clincher,” but rather suggestive of the poet’s attitude or thought;
10. *Sijo* does not 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 16th 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 16th century) was a *kisaeng* (kee-sang), which was the Korean equivalent of a Japanese geisha. As Professor Sean Kim (Professor of History and Literature, University of Central Missouri) described them, a *kisaeng* was an “encultured prostitute, who would please men in whatever way they wanted, and 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
Rutt has a few suggestions in *The Bamboo Grove*—spring: wood, blue—which Asians did not 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, orchid.

- 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 of 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 Tang poetry
Famous letter exchanges in history
Examine sijo after a study of Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism
Compare and contrast with Chinese Tang poetry

VI. Citations


VII. Appendices

Appendix A: Sijo at a Glance
Appendix B: Sijo Translation Activity
Appendix A: *Sijo* at a Glance

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A Brief History:

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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. Eventually, the term *sijo* became 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 did not 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).

**Examples:**

*Which features of a sijo can you recognize in these poems?*

Anonymous   Yi Sun-Sin (1545-1599)  
Trans. by Richard Rutt Trans. by Richard Rutt

> If we could change in the next life,   > By moonlight I sit all alone
> and you become me and I be you,   > in the lookout on Hansan isle.
> and you begin to yearn for me,   > My sword is on my thigh,
> as I have always yearned for you,   > I am submerged in deep despair.
> then indeed, it would be your turn to suffer   > From somewhere the shrill note of a pipe…
> and know my pain. How about that?   > will it sever my heartstrings?

Hwang Chini (16th century)    Chong Ch’ol (1536-1593)  
Trans. by David McCann Trans. by David McCann

> Alas, what have I done?    > Rivers, lakes, buoyant
> didn’t I know how I would yearn?    > the gull is.
> Had I but bid him stay,    > Unexpectedly, spittle spat
> How could he have gone? But stubborn,    > falls on the gulls back.
> I sent him away,    > O gull, do not be angry.
> and now such longing learn!    > The ways of the world are filthy.

**Now it’s your turn.**

Try your hand at writing a *sijo* poem. Use the space below to work on a first draft.

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
Tips on how to get started:

1. Think of a season you would like to set your poem in, and then which season you want to associate with the “twist.”
2. Decide what you want the theme of your poem to be, and then think about what the opposite of that would be—that’s your anti-theme, or “twist.”
3. Have fun with it and be creative!

Sources:
Appendix B: Translation Activity

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.

--Hwang Chini (16th century) (Rutt, The Bamboo Grove, Love Song 77)

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.

--Hwang Chini (McCann, Early Korean Literature, #672, 56)

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.

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

--Hongnang (16th century) (Rutt, The Bamboo Grove, Love Song 76)

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.

--Hongnang (16th century) (McCann, Early Korean Literature, #774, 56)

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.