

## **KOREAN POETRY IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

**GRADES:** 11<sup>th</sup> grade

**AUTHOR:** Maeve Hitzenbuhler

**SUBJECT:** U.S. History/World Literature

**TIME REQUIRED:** 96 minutes

### **OBJECTIVES:**

1. To understand the poetic form specific to Korean poetry.
2. To reflect on Korean poetry as it relates to modern Korean history.
3. To apply poetic form to describe an aspect of Korean history.

### **STANDARDS:**

Core Curriculum

RI 1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences from the text

RI 4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text

RI 6 Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text

W9 Draw from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research

W10 Write routinely over extended time frames and shorter time frames for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences

RL 7 Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem

RL 10. Read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas and poems

RH 5 Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured

RH 6 Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event

### **MATERIALS REQUIRED:**

- Handout 1: the poetry of Ko Un, Buddhist meditation, life lived as a child under Japanese colonialism and the bitter outcome for Comfort Women.
- Handout 2: study of modern poets: Pak Chaesan's meditation on poverty; Yun Tongu's descriptions of an "alien country"; Pak Tujin poetry of national liberation and Kim Chiha's description of life under the Pak regime.
- Handout 3: Introduction to Sijo poetry, by Larry Gross.
- Handout 4: Examples of Sijo poetry.

**BACKGROUND:**

Modern Korean Poetry has been influenced by the historical context in which Koreans experience life including the annexation of Korea by the Japanese, colonialism, and the partition of Korea into the Republic of Korea and the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea resulting from the Korean War. The student revolution of 1960 that toppled the Syngman Rhee regime and the 1961 military coup that brought Park Chung Hee to power has all been the material of modern Korean poetry. The poets of Korea took on contemporary and political themes, and delved into political, social and economic contradictions. Korean poets are as varied as the giant vats containing the many subtle tastes of kimchee throughout Korea. From the poems of Pak Chaesam who writes of the hunger and poverty of a child post Korean War, to Ko Un, former Buddhist monk and political activist, one of South Korea's most prolific poets unpacks the fabric of Korean society today through his poetry about home, life as a child under occupation and a view of comfort women. In addition, Korean Sijo poetry is increasingly a popular poetic form studied by Western students of poetry. Sijo poetry is traced to Confucian monks of the eleventh century. Sijo is a song, a lyric pattern. Sijo were sung or chanted with musical accompaniment historically and still today. These poems are narrative or thematic, in which a situation or problem appears in line one, development of the theme takes place in line 2 and a strong conclusion beginning with a twist takes place in line 3. Each line of a sijo averages 14-16 syllables, for a total of 44-46 syllables in the poem.

**PROCEDURE:** This unit is designed to complement United States history courses during which students study modern Korean history. The inclusion of Korean poets in this unit is to propel students to glean a human face to the struggle and triumph that is Korea today.

1. Ask students to research Korea today, its economy, social trends, and student life. Assign student groups particular aspects of Korean society today which the groups will then compare to their own lives in presentation format.
2. After students have completed a study of Korean colonialism, include poetry from handout 1. For each of the poems, ask students to reply or to ask questions of the poet on index cards. Students groups then swap cards and respond to the statements or questions on the card. Full class discussion follows, wherein students discuss the poetic form, the language and the images of the poems.
3. As the Korean history unit is nearing an end, ask students to choose one aspect of their studies, and to choose one of the poems in handout 2. Students will describe the historical context of the poem and write the story of the history that provoked the poet to write.
4. Guide students through the reading of Larry Gross' Sijo form, handout 3. Students will utilize computers to access the Sejong Cultural Society at: [sejongculturalsociety.org](http://sejongculturalsociety.org). Ask students to open the Sijo poetry writing icon and to listen to high school students reading their own Sijo poetry. Students will then choose one Sijo poem they have heard (or one of the poems on handout 4) and describe how the poem successfully utilizes the "twist" aspect in Sijo poetry.
6. Students will choose an aspect of Korean history to write their own Sijo poem, using Sijo form. When poems are completed, ask students to prepare for a class wide Sijo

poetry slam.

**EVALUATION:**

Students will be evaluated on their analysis of one poem and poetry in historical context assignments. They will also be evaluated on their Sijo poetry and how that poetry correctly follows the form particular to Sijo and how relates to or reflect on Korean history. Students will also be assessed on their presentations to the full class.

**ENRICHMENT:**

Students will be encouraged to participate in the Sejong Cultural Society's Sijo writing competition. Encourage students to take the Sijo form and write a poem that is related to their own lives. Create a poetry slam time during study halls, after school or during lunch in which students are given the opportunity to read their work aloud prior to submission.

**RESOURCES:**

Gross, Larry, Sijo Forum Primer, <http://www.sijopoetry.com>

McCann, David R., *Enough to Say It's Far, Selected Poems of Pak Chaesam*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2006.

McCann, David R., *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Korean Poetry*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2004.

McCann, David R., "The Structure of The Korean Sijo", *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 36. (1976), pp. 114-134.

Sejong Cultural Society: [www.sejongcultural society.org](http://www.sejongcultural society.org)

Un, Ko, *The Three Way Tavern, Selected Poems*, California, University of California Press, 2006.

## **HANDOUT 1: THE POETRY OF KO UN**

Ko Un, Buddhist monk for over a decade, uses a Buddhist vision in his poem “Hometown” and ends on a note of life today with its trash and modern life.

### **Hometown**

If you go back before you were a man,  
that’s where your home is.  
No, not even there, go back further.

Just try yelling without yearning  
in the simple voice of an animal  
what the beast returns to,  
the pure land, that’s home.

I came back  
to where trash  
blooms like flowers—  
this is the world I longed for.

The following poem speaks of a day in grade school during the Pacific War and Ko Un’s Japanese teacher asked the students what they wanted to be. Ko Un stated he wanted to be emperor of Japan. This response caused great turmoil for Ko Un, and he was banned from school for three months. He was asked the question again and he replied, “mailman”.

### **Letters**

When the principal asked his pupils what they wanted to be,  
boys wanted to be General Yamamoto Isoroku.  
They wanted to be General Nogi.  
Girls wanted to be nurses  
to care for the wounded at the Battle of Rabaul in the South Pacific.  
When he asked me,  
I told him I wanted to be Emperor, and  
a thunderbolt struck.  
“You, scoundrel, want to be Emperor?  
How dare you insult our Emperor of the world!  
You are dismissed at once!”  
My homeroom teacher begged him,  
Father followed him home to beg for a reprieve  
and got off with three months’ suspension instead of dismissal.  
Principal asked me again,  
I told him a mailman.  
I wanted to be a man who delivers messages from one man to another.  
I loved the mailman and the mail.  
When the mail bike showed up, I closed my books and trotted after it,  
though no letters came for me.

Twenty pieces of mail are all the village gets a year.  
Anttum Tamok  
received the mail by the village entrance,  
opened the letters,  
used some for toilet paper and folded some for playing cards.  
If he didn't get rice cake, he bore a grudge.  
He read their mail and laughed at them.  
There was no mail for our village, no news  
For a while during the Japanese occupation.  
No news about life or death  
for those away from home.  
At last Tamok was caught,  
the mailman fired, and  
Tamok dragged to court and released after ten days.  
I wanted to be the mailman,  
but a new mailman came; he had no eyebrows.

### **Mansooni, Comfort Woman**

Though her face was full of freckles  
like spilled sesame seeds,  
her pretty eyes and eyebrows  
swept up in a breeze;  
her shadow cast on the water  
was an absolute beauty.  
she picked castor beans to fill the quota  
during the late occupation,  
then she was gone, to the comfort unit,  
wearing her rising sun bandana.  
Taken by a woman from the patriotic women's association,  
she went to earn some money at the warplane-tail assembly plant.  
The women left flying the Japanese flag.  
At the house of Mansooni  
there arrived a coupon for a sack of rice, and  
a bottle of wine sent by the fawning magistrate.  
Ha, what good fortune for the family.  
Liberation came, everyone returned,  
white bellflowers bloomed and  
cicadas sang,  
but there was no word of Mansooni.

## HANDOUT 2: POETRY

Pak Chaesam

### **Sound of the Taffy Seller's Shears**

There is illness in my body lingering,  
like the debt that must be repaid,  
but I can deal with that.

The sudden sound of the taffy seller's shears  
as they begin their new composition  
scatters brilliant gems  
on the grassy meadow of my mind.

If I go out into the sound of  
the taffy seller's shears,  
close companion to the sunlight,  
and get a little piece snipped off  
just to try the taste,  
will the law of nature be revealed, or  
will I arrive at the mistaken notion  
that I have rounded the corner  
toward eternity?

Yun Tongju

The poem "Self-portrait" conjures self-loathing and self-regard in describing the mentality of colonization.

### **Self-portrait**

Below the mountain  
beside a field  
alone I look into a lone well.

In the well, moons glow  
where clouds flow down opened skies  
before pale blue winds,  
and there is autumn.

And a young man.

Somehow despising  
that young man  
I turn away.

Turn away, reflect,  
perhaps begin to pity that young man.

Returned, looking in as before  
is a young man.

Again somehow despising  
that young man  
I turn away.

Turn away, reflect,  
perhaps begin to remember...

In a well, moons glow  
where clouds flow down opened skies  
before pale blue winds.  
Autumn is there,  
and like a pale memory,  
a young man.

In Yun Tongju's poem, "A Poem that Came Easily," refers to a time period during colonialism when the Korean language banned and all Koreans had to assume Japanese names. He refers to Japan as an alien country.

### **A Poem That Came Easily**

The night rain whispers outside the window  
of my six-mat room, in an alien country.

The poet has a sad vocation, I know;  
should I write another line of poetry?

Having received my tuition from home in an envelope  
soaked with the smell of sweat and love,

I tuck my college notebook under my arm  
and go off to listen to the lecture of an old professor.

Looking back, I see that I have lost my childhood friends:  
one and two at a time—all of them.

What was it that I was hoping for,  
and why am I simply sinking to the bottom alone?

Life is meant to be difficult:  
it is too bad  
that a poem comes so easily to me.

My six-mat room in an alien country:  
the night rain whispers outside the window.

I light the lamp to drive out the darkness a little,  
and I, in my last moments, wait for the morning,  
which will come like a new era.

Extending a small hand to myself,  
I offer myself the very first handshake,  
tears, and condolences.

Pak Tujin

Pak Tujin's poem "Sun" is an expression of the Korean peoples' yearning for national liberation.

**Sun**

Sun, come forth! Sun, come forth! Sun with your fair face  
washed clear, handsome sun, come forth! Over the hills,  
over the hills, eating up the darkness, over the hills all  
night through, consuming the darkness, with blazing  
young face, handsome sun, come forth!

No more moonlight nights, no more. I hate moonlight  
nights in vales of tears. I loathe moonlight nights alone in  
the empty garden.

Sun, handsome sun! If you only come, if only you come,  
I will exult in the green hills. I rejoice in the green mountains  
with their green wings flapping. In the presence of  
the green hills I am content to be alone.

After the deer, after the deer toward a sunny spot, toward  
sunny places, following the deer, meeting the deer and  
playing with the deer.

After the fierce tiger, after the tiger, meeting the tiger  
and playing with the tiger,

Sun, handsome sun, sun come forth! When I meet you  
dace to face, not in my dreams, we will rejoice together in  
that fresh day of innocent beauty when flowers and birds  
and beasts all sit together in one place, are all called to  
come and sit down together.

Kim Chiha

Activist poet during the 1970s, persecuted under the Park regime.

**In Burning Thirst**

Before dawn in a back alley  
I write your name, Democracy.



My thoughts long ago turned from you,  
and long, long ago my steps turned away.  
The single fragment remaining, memory  
of my burning heart-thirst.  
Where no one knows, Democracy,  
I write your name.

In some back alley that dawn has not  
reached, the sound of steps, a whistle, someone  
pounding on a door,

the single long, extended cry, the sound  
of groans, wailing, sighs, and within these,  
within my very core,

above your deeply engraved name,  
above the desolate brilliance of your name

the pain of life reviving,  
the memory of clear blue freedom,  
of the blood-stained faces of friends dragged away  
reviving,

with trembling hand and heart,  
in trembling, teeth-chattering rage

on a wooden plank  
and white chalk  
in an unfamiliar hand  
I write these all down.

And choking, sobbing,  
I write your name where no one knows.  
in burning thirst,  
burning thirst

Democracy, long life!

### **HANDOUT 3: INTRODUCTION TO SIJO POETRY**

Sijo Forum Primer, November 30, 2000

by Larry Gross

<http://www.sijopoetry.com/resources>

It seems to be the nature of mankind continually to try something new. That is just as true in poetry as it is in other areas. During the past forty years or so we have shown increasing interest in Asian verse patterns. The Middle Eastern ghazal has its devoted followers in the West, and Japanese forms like haiku, tanka, renga and haibun are now commonly found in small press and commercial poetry periodicals. Journey through the Internet and you will see these forms blossoming everywhere. We Westerners have fallen in love with Asian patterns, patterns that connect us tenuously with ancient cultures so different from our own.

So it is with SIJO (see-szo). The roots of this lyrical Korean cousin of haiku and tanka stretch back well over 1000 years. It has been the most popular form of lyric verse in Korea for over 500 years, sung equally by Confucian scholars, members of the royal court and common folk.

I say sung because the sijo is, at heart, a song. It is for the Koreans what the ballad is for Western Europeans. Originally, that word referred only to the music. The lyric was called tan-ga, an ancient verse based on still earlier Chinese patterns which also influenced Japanese poetry. Eventually, the term sijo (which is both singular and plural) came to be applied to both words and music.

Sijo is traditionally composed in three lines of 14-16 syllables each, between 44-46 total. A pause breaks each line approximately in the middle, somewhat like a caesura, as illustrated by this verse by Yun Son-do (1587-1671), one of Korea's most revered poets:

You ask how many friends I have? Water and stone, bamboo and pine,  
The moon rising over the eastern hill is a joyful comrade.  
Besides these five companions, what other pleasure should I ask?

Each half-line contains 6-9 syllables, the last half of the final line may be shorter than the rest, but should contain no fewer than 5 syllables. This natural mid-line break comes in handy, since printing restrictions often cause Western sijo to be divided and printed in 6 lines rather than 3. Indeed, some translators and poets have adopted this technique in their writing, so most editors accept either format.

The sijo may tell a story (as the ballad does), examine an idea (as the sonnet does), or express an emotion (as the lyric does). Whatever the purpose may be, the structure is the same: line 1 of the 3-line pattern introduces a situation or problem; line 2 develops or "turns" the idea in a different direction; and line 3 provides climax and closure. Think of the traditional 3-part structure of a narrative (conflict, complication, climax) or the 3-part division of the sonnet, and you'll see the same thing happening.

Though the ancients seldom titled their sijo, some modern writers, such as Elizabeth St. Jacques in the following verse, frequently do:

Even Now  
Just us two in the photograph  
his arm around my thin shoulder.  
That strong limb I then leaned against  
would break so many falls.  
We stood like this but only once  
but his strength holds me still.

(Elizabeth St. Jacques, *Around the Tree of Light*, 1995)

To achieve the rolling, musical quality so characteristic of sijo, each half-line is further divided into two parts averaging 3-5 syllables each. Look at Elizabeth's "Een Now." Notice that each line usually divides into 2 phrases of word groups ("just us two/in the photograph?"). Some people find parallels between this rhythm and that of Bible verses, and others find a likeness to sprung rhythm popularized by Gerard Manley Hopkins. Regular meter is not vital to sijo, but that musical quality is. Here is Yun Son-do once more, with a verse from his masterpiece, "The Fisherman's Calendar".

When autumn arrives on the river, all the fish grow fatter.  
We savor unnumbered hours swept along by gentle currents.  
Man's dusty world fades away, doubling my joy with distance.

Like haiku, sijo usually displays a strong foundation in nature, but, unlike that genre, it frequently employs metaphors, puns, allusions and other word play. And it loves to play with sounds. The first word (or two) of the final line is very important. It provides a "twist"; a surprise of meaning, sound, tone or other device, much as the beginning of a final sestet does in the sonnet for the final line does in a haiku. That final sijo line is frequently lyrical, subjective or personal, and may very well supply a profound, witty, ironic, humorous or proverbial twist.

Remember the three characteristics that make the sijo unique—its basic structure, musical/rhythmic elements, and the twist. It is shorter and more lyrical than the ghazal. It is more roomy than the haiku, and it welcomes feelings and emotions which haiku either discourage or disguise. It should please lovers of ballads, sonnets and lyrics, and the downplay of regular meter and rhyme should appeal to writers of free verse. In short, it's a fascinating challenge.

#### **HANDOUT 4: SIJO POETRY--EXAMPLES**

Carefully I lifted it from the branch, an empty cocoon,  
took it home and mounted it center stage on the mantel.  
Hear it speak? What does it say of living, what of the dead?  
Parnassus (Winter 1996)

See the house fall at our feet, faithful timbers come crashing down;  
Those with our life in their hands join the termites, gnaw at beams,  
Till the dawn, hold me while we sleep—in the cold, that is enough.  
(TOP #14 May 1995; Canadian Writer's Journal, Fall 1995)

The spring breeze melted snow on the hills then quickly disappeared.  
I wish I could borrow it briefly to blow over my hair.  
And melt away the aging frost forming now about my ears.  
U T'ak (1262-1342)

Oh that I might capture the essence of this deep midwinter night  
And fold it softly into the waft of a spring-moon quilt  
Then fondly uncoil it the night my beloved returns.  
Hwan Chin-I (1522-1565)

A single sole was lost today, deep in the rive Yalu,  
Trashing, twisting, torn to shreds with color quickly fading  
On the bridge a small boy laughs, holding out his empty shoe.  
Creasy Clauser (12<sup>th</sup> grader, 2009 Sijo Writing Competition winner)

Paulownia Blooms  
Misty moonlight spills over the top of the wall  
One or two paulownia blooms silently drop  
My feet hesitate to go; I turn and look back.  
Yi Byung-Gi (1891-1968)

I will break the back of this long, mid-winter night,  
Folding it double, fold beneath my spring quilt,  
That I may draw out the night, should my love return.  
Hwang Chin-I (1506-1544)