

Korean Sijo Poetry

Sijo (the word is both singular and plural) resembles haiku in having a strong foundation in nature, but its lines average 14-16 syllables, for a total of 44-46. For best results, poets follow these and other guidelines very closely.

Either narrative or thematic, this lyric verse introduces a situation or problem in line 1, development (called a **turn**) in line 2, and a strong conclusion beginning with a surprise (a **twist**) in line 3, which resolves tensions or questions raised by the other lines and provides a memorable ending.

Bandanas wave from cedar boughs; beneath, a pyre of stone.
On army land Geronimo sleeps, clouds pass over the sun.
This warrior cry inside my head, an echo or just a dream.

...Rick Long, in The Sijoforum

Korean poetry can be traced at least as far back as King Yuri's *Song of Yellow Birds* (17BC), but its roots are in still earlier Chinese quatrains. Sijo, Korea's favorite poetic genre, is often traced to Confucian monks of the eleventh century, but its roots, too, are in those earlier forms. Its greatest flowering occurred in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Sijo is, first and foremost, a song. This lyric pattern gained popularity in royal courts as a vehicle for religious or philosophic expression, but a parallel tradition arose among the 'common' folk. Sijo were sung or chanted with musical accompaniment, and still are. In fact, the word originally referred only to the music, but it has come to be identified with the lyric as well.

As stated earlier, historically, sijo consists of 3 lines of from 14 to 16 syllables each:

beneath wisteria clusters, hidden, I wait in purple.
perfumed by petals, these longings rise, twine, intertwine and rise...
rise to break apart among clouds...silently break among clouds.

...Debi Bender, in The Sijoforum

However, some contemporary poets and editors prefer to split the long lines in half for formatting reasons, resulting in a 6-line format which has become quite acceptable:

Remember when we made a seine
of gunny-sacks and broomsticks?
Soaked to the waist, we filled milk-pails
with channel-cat and crawdads.
A snapping turtle snagged our net
and bit clear through a broomstick.

...gino peregrini, in The Sijoforum

Again like haiku, sijo may use puns, allusions and similar word play. Unlike its Japanese cousin, however, it may use metaphor and other figurative language more openly.

Frankincense and ancient chants
embrace upon this holy air.

The stone vault, sealing their ascent,
is the art of a cathedral.

But the bolder leap of our open kiss
cannot be wed to earth.

...Donald Lanska, in *The Sijoforum*

An important feature at the beginning of the final line is the **twist**: a surprise of meaning, sound, tone or other technique. The final line is likely to be more subjective and personal, and it frequently takes a profound or witty turn.

Although most sijo in the classic tradition have no titles, the author of the following verse chose to use one. In this case, I believe it supplies important information that might otherwise slow the progress of the body of the poem.

Zuisen-ji (Kamakura: January Second)

Climbing stairs to Zuisen-ji,
I go deeper into the hills.
In the garden of the temple,
narcissus lean against stones.
Once at home again, a thought rings true;
even stones have friends.

...Carmen Sterba, in *The Sijoforum*

Although the classic sijo adheres closely to syllabic restrictions, it doesn't simply count syllables. It is more phrasal than syllabic. Because of its nature and the nature of Hangeul, the Korean script, the structure of sijo resembles Hebrew & biblical verse. In English it may resemble Hopkins' sprung rhythm. To achieve this effect, each long line, once divided, is divided again, into quarters averaging 3-5 syllables. This phrasal quality is a basic feature of the form. Meter is not vital in sijo, but that musical link is. In the following verse, the midline break is represented by two slashes (//) and the quarter-line breaks by one (/).
how lovely / this spruce tree // its limbs laden / with virgin snow
the bloodred / on a robin's breast // the skyblue / of a mountain jay
for such wonder/ what wise man // would not know / his Creator ?

...an'ya, in *The Sijoforum*

The poet should not lose sight of three basic characteristics that make the sijo unique: its structure, its musical/rhythmic elements, and the twist.

*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, author of this oldest surviving sijo)*

More ancient than haiku, the Korean SIJO shares a common ancestry with haiku, tanka and similar Japanese genres. All evolved from more ancient Chinese patterns.

Sijo is traditionally composed in three lines of 14-16 syllables each, totaling between 44-46 syllables. A pause breaks each line approximately in the middle; it resembles a caesura but is not based on metrics.

*My body, in its withering, may become a lovely swallow.
Under the eaves of my loved one's home I'll build my nest of twigs.
After dusk I'll fly aloft and glide gently to his side.*

. . . Anonymous

*Mind, I have a question for you - How is it you stay so young?
As the years pile up on my body, you too should grow old.
Oh, if I followed your lead, Mind, I would be run out of town.*

... Anonymous

Each half-line contains 6-9 syllables; the last half of the final line is often shorter than the rest, but should contain no fewer than 5.

*A drum beats in the far temple; I think it's in the clouds.
Is it above the meadow and hill, perhaps below the sky?
Something sends a veil of mist, I cannot heed the drum.*

... Anonymous

*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.*

..Hwang Chin-i (1522-1565) most revered female Korean classical poet

The sijo may be narrative or thematic, introducing a situation or problem in line 1, development or "turn" in line 2, and resolution in line 3. The first half of the final line employs a "twist": a surprise of meaning, sound, tone or other device. The sijo is often more lyrical, subjective and personal than haiku, and the final line can take a profound, witty, humorous or proverbial turn. Like haiku, sijo has a strong basis in nature, but, unlike that genre, it frequently employs metaphors, symbols, puns, allusions and similar word play.

*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?
... Yon Son-do (1587-1671)*

Printing restrictions often cause Western sijo to be divided at the natural break and printed in 6 lines. Some translators and poets have adopted this technique, so modern sijo may appear in either 3 or 6 lines;

*Under our oak the grass withers,
so we plant petunias;
We water them, we coddle them,
burn their youth with chemicals.
Digesting their timely death,
the oak renews our summer shade.*

Because it was meant to be sung, and because of the nature Hangul (the Korean script), the structure of sijo often resembles biblical phrases. In English, it may resemble Hopkins' sprung rhythm. To achieve this phrasal quality, each long line, once divided, is divided again, into quarters averaging 3 - 5 syllables, as indicated by the slashes:

*Without the pines / the wind is silent;
without wind / the pines are still;
Without you / my heart is voiceless,
without that voice / my heart is dead.
What potent power / of yang and yin
pairs us / before we sleep?*

Though quarter lines are seldom divided so obviously, a discernible (even if slight) pause is usually evident. Sijo may be highly repetitive. Phrases may be repeated or echoed, a trait revealing the sijo's heritage to be sung or chanted. Meter is not vital, but that musical link should no be overlooked.

The 6-line form was preferred by William Kim (Unsong) in his translation of 100 classical sijo (*Poet, An International Monthly*, March, 1986). Kim experimentally employed end rhyme and broke the verse into three separate couplets, two conventions not usually used by other translators. Take care in using such devices. They can result in a poem that looks, sounds and acts so Western that it obscures its unique heritage. I have written both 3-line and 6-line patterns, but usually prefer the former when format allows. Poets are always free to make choices, but Elizabeth St Jacques, a leader in the sijo movement, offers good advice: never lose sight of the three characteristics that make sijo unique: basic structure, musical/rhythmic elements, and the twist.

*Let me ask you, butterfly, do you remember your cocoon?
Perhaps you recall spinning thread, a caterpillar's ungainly crawl?
If we can jog your memory, maybe there is hope for me.*