

Sijo Poetry  
Yi Pang-Won and Chong Mong-ju  
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August 1, 2021

Grade 10 English Language Arts  
Two Day Mini-Unit

## Lesson Objectives

- Students will be able to recognize the belief systems of Daoism and Confucianism in Sijo poems.
- Students will be able to explain how imagery is used to support the central ideas of Sijo poems.
- Students will be able to compose their own poems based on the structure and style of Sijo poetry.

## Summary

These lessons focus on the pair of sijo poems found on page 6 of the Korean literature reader. These two sijo poems were exchanged between Yi Pang-Won and Chong Mong-Ju at a dinner party in 1391. Yi was attempting to convince Chong to support a coup. He would soon overthrow the Goryeo Dynasty in order to establish the Joseon Dynasty. Yi's poem suggests that Chong should relax his loyalty and live a long and relaxing life like the vines on Mansu Mountain. Chong's response is a clear repudiation of that attempt. His poem is a declaration of loyalty to the Goryeo court. He declares that even if he dies, he will never give up his loyalty to his lord. The poems themselves are more than just political statements, they are beautiful works of art. Yi uses images of nature to support his idea that one must follow the tides of history. Chong also uses imagery and metaphor to defend his loyalty to the current royal family.

## Historical/Literary Context

These poems are tied to their historical context but can also be appreciated as representations of belief systems and as excellent examples of the Sijo form. Two of the most prominent belief systems in Korean history are Confucianism and Daoism. Daoism can be seen as a continuation of the shamanistic traditions which have existed in Korea since the earliest recordings of its history. Although other belief systems such as Buddhism and Confucianism somewhat supplanted the traditional animism of ancient Korea the reverence for ancestors and for nature remained an element of Korea's religious traditions.

Confucianism also has a long history in Korea. It spread to Korea from China around the same time as Buddhism and, although it was not adopted as the official religion like Buddhism was, it influenced society greatly. There was an established Confucian tradition which encouraged education, loyalty and filial piety. Confucianism flourished under the Joseon dynasty. Neo-Confucianism became the official state ideology. This is ironic because in the pair of sijo poems presented in this lesson Yi Pang-won, who would become the Joseon King Taejong, does not embrace the Confucian ideal of loyalty.

Besides their historical and philosophical elements, these poems serve as excellent examples of sijo poetry. Sijo would have been a new and popular form of poetry in the late Goryeo and early Joseon period. It is similar to haiku in that it typically follows a set form of lines and syllables. Sijo are written in three lines, each averaging 14-16 syllables for a total of 44-46 syllables. Each line has a pause in the center but still represents a unified idea. The third line typically begins with a three syllable group which serves as a pivot or turning point.

## Discussion questions and answers

Questions before explaining historical context to the class

- What do you think these poems are about?
  - This question is intended to provoke students thinking about the topics and themes of the poems before giving them much context about the history or the poetic form. I expect that students will see the obvious themes of loyalty found in Chong's poem. They may also notice the motif of death found repeatedly in that poem. Yi's poem, with its depictions of nature and serenity, has a

less obvious interpretation without the historical context. I hope that some students will notice the tone of passivity and relaxation.

- If I told you that one of these poets was trying to plan a coup and the other was loyal to the king, could you identify which was which?
  - This question is designed to give students a taste of the historical context so they can start to construct their own interpretation of the poems. I suspect that most students could identify Chong as the loyalist among the pair. I suspect the majority of the time spent discussing this question with a class would focus on the meaning of Yi's poem. It is counterintuitive that a poem that is so relaxed and beautiful is essentially an argument in favor of revolution. Yi is essentially saying that by stepping aside and allowing a coup to occur Chong will preserve his own life. Guiding students to that conclusion would be the focus of this class discussion.

Questions about themes (after mini-lesson about belief systems)

- Whose poem is making a Daoist argument? How do you know?
  - Yi's poem uses Daoism to make its argument. His poem uses motifs of nature, which are common in Daoist traditions. In addition, he is arguing that the correct course of action is one of inaction. That is an argument very much in keeping with Daoist traditions.
- Whose poem is making a Confucian argument? How do you know?
  - Chong's poem is in keeping with Confucian teachings. He is steadfastly loyal to his lord, which mirrors Confucian belief that one must be loyal to one's parents. Confucianism also stresses the need for a strong state and the need for a government to maintain order. Chong's poem uses these Confucian traditions of loyalty and order to bolster his argument.

Questions about literary devices

- Do you see any examples of imagery in Yi's poem? How does the imagery in create an emotional response in the reader? How can this emotional response help develop the argument or theme of the poem?
  - Imagery is used in Yi's poem to describe the vines of Mount Mansu. The vivid description of the "tangled and long" vines catch the readers attention. This gives extra impact to the poem's "twist" in the third line. One might not think they aspire to be like a mountain vine. However, when the poet suggests that we might "unwind just like them and enjoy life a hundred years more" that becomes a very appealing prospect. The natural imagery also underscores the poem's connection to Daoism, which makes his argument more than just one of personal interest but gives it a philosophical basis.
- Do you see any examples of imagery in Chong's poem? How does the imagery in create an emotional response in the reader? How can this emotional response help develop the argument or theme of the poem?
  - Chong's poem uses strong use color imagery. Of particular note is the description of "white bones" turning to dust. This vivid mental image makes it abundantly clear that Chong's loyalty will not end even with his own death. Other translations of this poem also use the phrase "red heart" in the final line. It might be an interesting extension of this lesson to provide students with

alternative translations and ask them to search for additional examples of imagery that were not preserved in one translation or another.

## Activities

I envision using this within a larger unit on Asian literature or poetry. This mini-unit includes two lessons, one focused on the context and history of the poems and one in which students study the structure of Sijo poems and write their own. Optionally, it could be followed by a day of peer editing and revision.

Day 1:

- Read Aloud: “The Sijo Exchange Between Yi Pang-Won and Chong Mong-Ju”
- Whole Class Discussion:
  - What do you think these poems are about?
  - If I told you that one of these poets was trying to plan a coup and the other was loyal to the king, could you identify which was which?
- Mini-Lesson: Historical context and belief systems
- Workshop: Small group discussion and worksheet
  - Whose poem is making a Daoist argument? How do you know?
  - Whose poem is making a Confucian argument? How do you know?
  - Do you see any examples of imagery?
  - How does the imagery in create an emotional response in the reader?
  - How can this emotional response help develop the argument or theme of the poem?

Day 2:

- Mini-Lesson: The structure of sijo poems
- Read Aloud: Reread Chong Mong-ju’s poem and other modern examples of sijo
- Workshop (Individual): Write your own sijo using the worksheet

## Works Cited

“A Basic Guide to Writing Sijo.” *Guide to Sijo | Sejong Writing Competition*,

[www.sejongculturalsociety.org/writing/current/resources/sijo\\_guide.php](http://www.sejongculturalsociety.org/writing/current/resources/sijo_guide.php).

McCann, David R. *Early Korean Literature: Selections and Introductions*. Columbia University Press, 2000.

Rutt, Richard. *The Bamboo Grove*. University of California Press, 1971.

“Sijo.” *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, [www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/sijo](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/sijo).

Appendix A: Day 1 Worksheet

- The Sijo Exchange Between Yi Pang-Won and Chong Mong-Ju

Things go this way, like them or not;  
 things go that way too.  
 What if the vines on Mansu Mountain  
 grow tangled and long? What of that?  
 Let us unwind just like them  
 and enjoy life a hundred years more.

Yi Pang-wŏn (1641)

Though this body die  
 and die and die again,  
 White bones become but dust,  
 a soul exist, then not,  
 Still this single-hearted loyalty to my lord:  
 how could it waver, ever?

Chŏng Mong-ju (1666)

Part 1: Belief Systems

Whose poem is making a Daoist argument? How do you know?

Whose poem is making a Confucian argument? How do you know?

Part 2: Imagery

What part of poem contains imagery? Write the quote here.	Explain it. What type of imagery is this?	How does the imagery in create an emotional response in the reader?

How can the use of imagery help develop the argument or theme of the poem?

Appendix B: Day 2 Worksheet

Worksheet: Write Your Own Sijo

What is your topic? (It can be narrative and tell a story or thematic and concentrate on an idea.)

Try writing your own Sijo poem on these lines. Below each line are some helpful directions and reminders. Each segment should have 3-5 syllables for a total of 14-16 syllables per line.

Line 1: Introduce the topic or conflict

\_\_\_\_\_ ( ) \_\_\_\_\_ ( )  
\_\_\_\_\_ ( ) \_\_\_\_\_ ( )

Line 2: Continue to develop that topic (try to incorporate some imagery)

\_\_\_\_\_ ( ) \_\_\_\_\_ ( )  
\_\_\_\_\_ ( ) \_\_\_\_\_ ( )

Line 3: The turn! Start with a bold or surprising line. Then end the poem.

\_\_\_\_\_ ( 3 ) \_\_\_\_\_ ( )  
\_\_\_\_\_ ( ) \_\_\_\_\_ ( )