

NEWS RELEASE

## KOREAN CULTURAL SOCIETY HOLDS APRIL EVENTS TO SUPPORT HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS WHILE CELEBRATING KOREAN CULTURE

*Scholarships, writing contest, educational materials for teachers, all included  
in cultural program*

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FEB. 24, 2010: The Sejong Cultural Society (Sejong Society), whose mission is to bridge Korean, American, and Korean-American cultures in the multicultural context of U.S. society, announces the fifth year of its writing competition, and the third year in which that competition has encompassed a special form of Korean poetry known as *sijo* (pronounced "SHEE-joe"). Last year, the Sejong Society's *sijo* competition garnered over 450 entries, 87 percent of them submitted by non-Korean-Americans.

The leaders of the Sejong Society are using this year's writing competition to once again introduce the beautiful poetic form of *sijo*, a traditional three-line form of poetry usually addressing spiritual or pastoral themes, to a broader audience in the U.S., in accordance with the society's goal of familiarizing Americans with fascinating, easily learnable elements of traditional Korean culture.

*Sijo* has evolved over the centuries in Korea as an elegant, popular literary form that has attracted many talented writers. Americans who have studied the Japanese art of *haiku* will recognize certain similarities, though the two forms are quite distinct, and developed independently of each other. The Sejong Society's website ([www.sejongculturalsociety.org](http://www.sejongculturalsociety.org)) offers an introduction to *sijo*, and instructions on how to begin writing in that form. The deadline for submissions to this contest will be April 30, 2010. The site also provides information on the other aspect of the writing competition, the essay competition.

The Sejong Society will award scholarships of various amounts, from \$50 to \$500, in two different age-based categories; winners' submissions may also be published in Korea Times Chicago, a local Korean-American newspaper. Both the *sijo* and essay competitions are open to high school students of any ethnic background. For more details, please see the website.

Support for this competition comes from a grant from the Korea Foundation to produce a teaching primer for *sijo* that can be used as a part of the English curriculum in order to facilitate this endeavor. To, in effect, kick off this effort, Sejong Society will be holding the following events in April, 2010:

**April 9 (Fri) 10 am -3 pm:** English *Sijo* Writing Workshop headed by Harvard Professor David McCann for high school English teachers at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Student Center East (Suite#613), 750 S. Halsted St. Chicago

**April 10 (Sat) 11 am-1 pm:** lecture on *sijo* and *sijo* Reading by Professor David McCann for the general public in the Chicago Author's Room on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor of the Harold Washington Library Center, 400 S. State St. Chicago (312-948-8939)

**April 10 (Sat) 6-8pm:** "Enchanted Evening with *Sijo*, Wine, and Arts", *sijo* reading and reception with Professor David McCann at the Andrew Bae Gallery, 300 W. Superior St. Chicago (312-335-8601)

**April 30 (Fri):** Deadline for 5<sup>th</sup> annual Sejong Writing Competition (essay and *sijo*)

### **BACKGROUND:**

The Sejong Cultural Society is committed to bringing *sijo*, a traditional Korean form of poetry writing, to the attention of the American public. To this end, Sejong Society will produce teaching materials for English teachers. In conjunction with this, Sejong Society is organizing events in April with Professor David McCann of Harvard University, the Director of Korea Institute. Mr. McCann is an expert in Korean culture and literature. He translated the work of a famous Korean poet, Kim SoWol, into English and is a published writer of his own English *sijo*. He teaches *sijo* at Harvard University. He is also a member of the Sejong Writing Competition Planning Committee and a judge for the *sijo* category.

- A. Sejong Society will be producing the teaching primer on *sijo* for high school teachers. This teaching material will include an introduction to Korean literature and *sijo*. It will provide teachers with specific instructions on how to write *sijo*.
- B. Sejong Society and the English Department of the University of Illinois at Chicago will cosponsor an English *sijo* Writing Workshop for English teachers under the instruction of Professor McCann on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2010 at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Participants will receive 4 credits of Continuing Professional Development Unit (CPDU). Through this workshop the participants will learn

to plan and present introductory sequences on sijo and general Korean literature, to teach writing poetry in sijo form and to explore similarities and contrasts between the Korean sijo and Japanese haiku. This workshop will be recorded and edited into a DVD which will be distributed throughout USA accompanied by written teaching material.

- C. On April 10<sup>th</sup>, 11am to 1 pm, there will be a lecture on sijo and sijo reading by Professor David McCann for the general public in the Chicago Author's Room of the Harold Washington Chicago Public Library as a part of month long events for Chicago Poetry Month.
- D. On April 10<sup>th</sup>, 6 pm to 8 pm, there will be a wine reception at the Andrew Bae Gallery. Sijo will be read in Korean and English by Professor McCann, Mr. Won Jung Park of Korean TV, and Ms. Ellee Pai Hong, former NBC News anchor. Sijo will be presented in the setting of Korean arts and Korean traditional wine.

In America, Japanese haiku is taught from grade school to high school and the children learn to write 3 line, 5-7-5 syllables haiku. Haiku is now accepted as a form of poetry writing in mainstream American culture and some American professional poets use this form. Even though Korean sijo is not well known in America, some who have learned it find sijo a very attractive form of poetry writing.

Sijo was first introduced in some American literary journals in the 1970s. However, it was not till the late 1980s and early 1990s that a few American poets started to use sijo form. At the present time, in addition to Professor David McCann, there is Dr. Larry Gross who publishes "Poetry in the wordshop," a Yahoo website and moderates a Yahoo discussion group "Sijo forum." Dr. Gross also teaches English sijo writing, enjoys writing sijo, and shares his writing with other poets. Ms. Elizabeth St. Jacques, who learned about sijo through well know Korean sijo expert Kim Unsong, also wrote an introduction to sijo, her own sijo, as well as English translations of Korean sijo on her "Poetry in the Light" website which has a separate section of "Sijo in the Light."

Dr. Larry Gross wrote in his Yahoo Sijo forum that for the last 40 years western poets are showing more interest in the poetry forms of other cultures. There are an increasing number of poems in the style of *ghazl* of the Middle East and *haiku*, *danka*, *renga* and *haibun* of Japan published in America. He felt that is it is in part due to the western poets desire to taste other cultures and these poetry forms were a means to connect them to these foreign cultures as they strive to seek something new.

Dr. Gross states that sijo is a cousin to haiku. However, the sijo form has a total of 44-46 syllables as compared to the 17 of haiku. Thus, it provides more room and encouragement to express emotion. This unique style of 3 lines with each line having 14 to 15 syllables has rhythmic and lyrical elements and the last line asks for a surprising ending with a twist. He also mentioned that sijo is shorter than middle eastern ghazal, but more expressive of emotion. He stated that sijo writing is a "fascinating challenge."

Professor McCann would like to make sijo popular in the English-language educational setting and would like to see a Sijo Day similar to Haiku Day in the grade school level.

Sejong Society's 5<sup>th</sup> annual writing competition (essay and sijo sections) is being held currently with the deadline being April 30. Detailed information regarding the competition and English sijo writing workshop can be found on The Sejong Cultural Society website [www.sejongculturalsociety.org](http://www.sejongculturalsociety.org).

**Attached additional materials on sijo:**

1. Newspaper article: "The new haiku? Harvard professor David McCann says America is ready for sijo" Boston Globe interview with David McCann on 6/30/2009
2. Web site article: "Welcome to Sijo", an introduction for those new to sijo, a refresher to others by Dr. Larry Gross.

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## The new haiku?

Harvard professor David McCann says America is ready for sijo



David McCann, professor of Korean literature at Harvard, is trying to popularize the sijo, a traditional poetic form in Korea. (David L Ryan/Globe Staff)

By Irene Sege

Globe Staff / June 30, 2009

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CAMBRIDGE - The class on writing Asian poetry that Professor David McCann teaches at Harvard includes units on Chinese quatrains, Korean sijo, and Japanese haiku, the last of which is so well-known that McCann's students had haiku days in middle school. Why, McCann wondered, couldn't the three-line Korean sijo that he loves enjoy the same widespread recognition as the three-line, 17-syllable haiku?



Discuss

COMMENTS (27)

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- [Three of David McCann's sijos](#)

With that, McCann, a poet and professor of Korean literature, embarked on a mission. He is the founder and chief marketing officer of a campaign to popularize the sijo (pronounced SHEE-jo), a traditional poem of 43 to 45 syllables whose third line contains a twist on the theme developed in the first two.

This spring McCann hosted a sijo festival at Harvard - the first anywhere, he believes, to feature both Korean and English sijo. A sijo contest for middle and high school students which McCann judges attracted 450 entries from two dozen states this year, up from 160

David McCann explains  
and sings sijo (mp3)



in its 2008 inaugural year. Bo-Leaf Books just published McCann's "Urban Temple: Sijo, Twisted & Straight," one of the first anthologies of sijo written in English.

"Students who have a haiku day, when they grow up and see a Japanese novel, they'll be interested," McCann says. "There could also be a sijo day. Children might find sijo something they can try, then one day see a Korean novel translated and say, 'I can read

it.' "

The haiku whose success McCann and others seek to emulate gained notice in the decades after World War II as Americans grew curious about everything Japanese, from the tea ceremony to Zen Buddhism. "Haiku," says McCann, "got to be part of American notions of what Asian was." Jack Kerouac, who became an icon of the Beat Generation, wrote haiku.

Now, McCann posits, Korea's time has come. A so-called "Korean Wave" of exported television shows, movies, and musicians is attracting attention across Asia and beyond. "Winter Sonata" has been a TV hit around Asia, pop singer Rain has played Madison Square Garden, and Park Chan-wook's "Old Boy" won the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival in 2004.

With its three lines, sijo resembles haiku, but the sijo poet has more room to develop a theme, narrative, or image before twisting and resolving it in the final line. Each line of 14 or 15 syllables consists of a string of four shorter phrases of three, four, or five syllables apiece.

"Sijo is much more flexible than haiku," says Heinz Insu Fenkl, who grew up in Korea and teaches creative writing and Asian literature at the State University of New York, New Paltz. "If you have 15 syllables per line, that's much more than the haiku. What it allows for is something haiku can't do, which is the formation of narrative inside the poem. You can express complicated things. At the same time, they sound very natural."

Originally meant to be sung, one of the earliest known sijo is a 14th-century verse:

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.

Modern Korean poets write sijo intending them to be read in print and sometimes link sijo as stanzas in a longer poem. Kim Dae Jung, who went on to

become president of South Korea and in 2000 won the Nobel Peace Prize, wrote sijo while imprisoned in the 1980s.

“Sijo goes right through the spectrum of Korean culture,” says Fenkl, whose mother was born in Korea. “Even people working in the field will take a break and tap on their lunch boxes and recite sijo. When you buy old furniture, the inside of the cabinets would be papered. The paper was often sijo. In the ’60s a lot of the popular tunes were expansions of sijo structures.”

McCann carries the imprimatur of Harvard, but he is not the first American to try to do for sijo what Kerouac did for haiku. In 1992 a Florida poet named Larry Gross found sijo translations in a poetry journal published in India, and in 1996 he and Canadian poet Elizabeth St. Jacques founded Sijo West, a journal that printed about six issues. In 1995 Mapledud Press published “Around the Tree of Light,” a volume of St. Jacques’s sijo written in English.

Gross, 81, a retired English professor who now hosts an online sijo site, is pleased to hear of McCann’s campaign. “That would be great,” Gross says. “That was my dream.”

McCann’s fascination with Korea began in 1966 when he joined the Peace Corps instead of the Army after graduating from Amherst College. “My plans were to go into the Rangers and get parachuted behind the front lines in Vietnam and see what happened,” recalls McCann, 64. “A classmate asked me if I ever heard of the Peace Corps. I was invited to train for the first program in Korea. The training was in Hawaii. That sounded good to me.”

Soon McCann, who studied Renaissance history in college, was teaching English at an agricultural high school in Andong. One day he noticed an unusual volume in a local bookstore. Its cover was red, a taboo color in anti-communist South Korea, and it contained English translations of Korean poetry. Since then McCann has translated sijo and other Korean poetry himself.

Two years ago, sitting at his favorite restaurant in Harvard Square, Charlie’s Kitchen, McCann wrote his first sijo in English on a napkin:

All through lunch, from my table

I keep an eye on your disputes,

green lobsters in the bubbling

tank by the restaurant door.

Slights, fights, bites - Whatever the cause,

make peace and flee, escape with me!

He's been writing sijo ever since for the Every Other Thursday poetry workshop, and a year ago his fellow poets started composing sijo, too. He and Fenkl plan to create an online journal for sijo in English.

"The English language begins to sort itself out in the sijo in interesting ways. There are patterns of sound that the sijo brings out in the language. The way it twists, it's almost as if I'm seeing it happen on the page," McCann says.

"Because it's short and focused it gets you away from the over self-regard of some poetry. You're encouraged to be out looking at things."

Last year Fenkl, aware of McCann's new cause, suggested a school-age sijo contest to the Illinois-based Sejong Cultural Society, which was founded in 2004 to promote Korean culture. The society sent 5,000 fliers to English teachers and principals in 20 states last year; this year it sent 20,000.

"This is something Korean culture can offer to Americans," says Ho Kim, president of the society. "At the same time Korean-Americans benefit."

Sixty sophomores at Trinity High School in Manchester, N.H., studied sijo this year, and a half dozen entered the contest. In Atlanta, teachers at the Marist School taught sijo to their 12th-grade world literature classes, and all 120 students submitted poems to Sejong.

"The sijo was really fun and different. With haiku, they would have gone, 'Oh, another haiku,' " says Tracy Kaminer, a teacher at Marist. "I think sijo is an elegant form of poetry." ■

## WELCOME TO SIJO

Sijoforum Primer #1:

An introduction for those new to sijo, a refresher for others.

**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)

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 the SIJO (see-szo or she-szo, with the J pronounced as the French pronounce Jacques). 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 in 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 "Even Now." Notice that each line usually divides into 2 phrases or 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 or 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. Let us see your latest one.

**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)

Text and adaptations by Larry Gross unless noted otherwise.

From: Larry Gross

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Subject: Sijo Primer #1

<http://www.egroups.com/message/sijoforum/15>

(Printed here with slight revisions)