

Five Sijo

Translated from Korean by Graeme Wilson

The *sijo*, specifically the plain (*pyong*) *sijo*, is the characteristic form of Korean poetry. It is a three-line unrhymed poem whose structure (averaging a total of some 43 syllables) is controlled by the set melody to which it was sung. For the *sijo*, though now primarily a literary form, was originally a song accompanied by a drum and wind instruments. No one knows when the singing started, but it must have been some time after the earliest Korean script (*idu*) died out in the 7th century and before the present Korean alphabet (*hangul*) was invented by King Sejong in 1446. The earliest surviving poem in the form dates from about 1050, but it may well have been recast into *sijo* form long after the original poem was composed. By the early 13th century the *sijo* was well established, and throughout the period of the Yi Dynasty (1392-1910) it accurately reflected the neo-Confucian philosophy of the Korean ruling class. Though the *sijo* began as the poetry of nobles and scholars, it also rapidly became the vehicle for the expression of Korean thought and feeling at all levels of society. Many of the best *sijo* are either anonymous or written by *kisaeng*, the Korean equivalents of *geisha*.

The *sijo* is, in fact, a typically Korean compromise between Japanese and Chinese practices. It has the brevity and much of the compression of the unrhymed Japanese *haiku*, while its content is organized (by high compression in its last line) to conform with the requirements of rhymed four-line Chinese verse where the first line states the theme, the second its elaboration, the third its twist and the fourth its resolution. Translation of the *sijo* into

English thus naturally invites use of similarly well-established forms for the English lyric. Equally naturally, modern Korean poets have found its brevity as cramping as modern Japanese poets found the brevity of the *tanka* and haiku; and contemporary sijo, though some are still composed in the classic form, are mostly being written as double-sijo, triple-sijo or even in long linked sijo-verses comparable to Japanese *renga*.

Age

Old man, heavy-burdened,
Let me take your load.

I that am young and sturdy
Could carry a stone road,
But when a man is your age
So heavy is the heart
That carrying a candle
Can crack the bones apart

CHONG CHOL (1536 - 1593)

Beauty

Had I but been what now I am,
A face not fit for praise,
No sorrows would have warped my smooth
Uncomplicated days.

Alas, I was what once I was,
And none can disengage
Time's frap of grief, that knottedness
My face bequeathed my age.

MYONG-OK (18th century)

Raven

However hard the raven croaks,
 Omens of decays,
 My old man's not up for taking.

I need hardly say
 That I myself shall not be taken
 Nor shall the greedy tomb
 Gulp down my son who ploughs the field,
 Our daughter at the loom.

But my son's wife, out hauling water
 From the awkward well,
 Raven, there's a girl I'd gladly
 See you drop in hell.

ANONYMOUS.

Nature Study

The raven's black is no black paint,
 Nor is the heron's white
 The white of age: but are to them
 As natural as flight.

Why should my love accuse me then
 Of falsities I lack?
 It is my nature to be sometimes
 White, and sometimes black.

ANONYMOUS

Apostasy

This robe, thus ripped, shall make
Some girl a saffron dress.

I'll wrap this blessed rosary
For donkey-breath to bless
Around the butt-end of its tail
That years of Buddhist bray,
Of counting beads and chanting prayers
May all be blown away.

For, locked in a woman's arms,
I've learnt this truth: that prayer
Is waste of breath, just one more kind
Of air blown out on air.

CHONG CHOL (1536-1593)