

# DETAIL OF THE RICE CHEST

By Monica Youn



In the 2015 Korean film *The Throne*, the rice chest sits in the center of the vast, symmetrical courtyard of Changgyeonggung Palace.

The film is called *The Throne* in English; in Korean it is called *Sado*.

A Korean-speaking audience would be presumed to know in advance who Prince Sado was.

An English-speaking audience is presumed not to have this knowledge.

Although this is a historical film, for a Korean-speaking audience the well-known story functions as mythology, at the level of symbol.

For an English-speaking audience the unknown story functions as narrative, at the level of plot.

There is an "I" in this poem.

I know who Prince Sado is, I can read the Hangul word *Sado*. But I do not speak Korean.

I am a member of the English-speaking audience.

I know about Prince Sado from *The Memoirs of Lady Hyegyeong* (1804). But I know about *The Memoirs of Lady Hyegyeong* from Margaret Drabble's *The Red Queen* (2004).

Margaret Drabble's *The Red Queen* is about Lady Hyegyeong. But Lady Hyegyeong was never a queen, nor is she associated with the color red. The name is misleading.

The name of the film *The Throne* is also misleading. The film does not focus on the throne; it focuses on the rice chest.

Like a magnifying glass, the stone courtyard focuses the gaze on the rice chest. The gaze increases in intensity and heat.

July temperatures in Seoul average 84 degrees Fahrenheit, with average humidity of 78 percent.

I have been to Seoul in July, I have worn *hanbok* on a summer day, but only once.

I have never seen a rice chest.

The rice chest is a functional object and stands in contrast to the highly decorative architecture of the palace courtyard. Its plainness renders it inscrutable, impenetrable.

According to the website *Hanji Happenings*: "The solid rice chest was generally made of pine but never decorated as a reminder of the importance of its presence in the home." I learn from that statement that in Korean culture to be decorative is not to be important, and, conversely, that to be plain, inscrutable, is to be important. I do not know whether this is true.

According to the book *Things Korean*, the rice chest "always looks chock-full. There are always those four pillars at its corners which seem to be holding up a massive roof, as if this were some imposing religious edifice."

Because of its oversize lid, the rice chest appears top-heavy, charged with kinetic potential. With four small feet it seems to be crouching on its haunches, to be hunkering down.

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"Hunker down" is a Scottish term that refers to squatting on the balls of one's feet, low to the ground but in readiness. It implies an apprehensive stasis, tense with the potential for sudden movement, poised to flee or to attack.

I have hunkered down, but only once.

Midway through the film, the rice chest is bound with thick rope, with a knotted webbing of four or five thicknesses of coarse, fibrous rope. The quantity of rope exceeds the function of the rope to such an extent that the rope binding seems decorative, symbolic.

I have been bound with rope, but only once.

There is something almost comic about such an excess of rope to bind a single imprisoned and dying man, the way there is something almost comic about a circle of guns pointed at a single unarmed man. I say almost comic rather than actually comic because, although these images provoke the same pent-up tension as suppressed laughter, I do not know who would find either of these images funny.

After it is bound, the lid of the rice chest is heaped with grass.

For a Korean-speaking audience, the grass-covered rice chest would resemble a traditional grassy burial mound, would evoke ancestral tombs, or even the prehistoric dolmens, which feature massive rocks perched on four small feet.

I have seen the grassy burial mounds of my ancestors, but only once.

For me, the rope-clad, grass-covered rice chest resembles a barbarian idol.

According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, the word "barbarian" originally comes from the Greek meaning any non-Greek and carries a derogatory connotation for those who speak a language different from one's own.

When I say "barbarian," it means I find the rice chest foreign, inscrutable, although it is Korean—Koreans speak a language different from my own.

In the film, the walls of the rice chest are made of thick planks, with chinks between them that admit slim shafts of light, drips of water.

But the walls of Korean rice chests are made of solid panels of wood. Planks with chinks between them would admit pests, especially insects, into the rice chest. Such a design would not be functional.

Partway through the film, we see a multilegged insect enter the rice chest through a chink between the boards. "We" here refers to both English-speaking and Korean-speaking audiences.

The single insect is followed by a horde of identical multilegged insects wriggling through the chinks in the walls. We understand the insects to be a hallucination of the dying Prince Sado. Their function is symbolic, the danger of allowing chinks in the walls.

In the film, through the chinks in the walls, Prince Sado is able to see and to speak to his dog and to his ten-year-old son, the Grand Heir.

But in fact these incidents never took place. They are not hallucinations but fabrications of the filmmakers just as the multilegged insects, the chinks in the walls of the rice chest are fabrications of the filmmakers.

The chinks allow the gaze to penetrate what would otherwise be impenetrable, to penetrate the inscrutable, barbaric figure of the rice chest, to reach the human inside.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which is familiar to both Korean- and English-speaking audiences, Tom Snout, a "rude mechanical," plays the part of a wall that features "a crannied hole or chink."

The joke is that a human being portrays an inhuman object, since only an inhuman object would feature such a chink. I do not know who would find this joke funny.

When asked to "Show me thy chink," Tom Snout holds up two fingers.

I have seen boys hold up two fingers. Calling me a chink, they would place their two fingers at the corners of their eyes, stretching their eyes into narrow slits through which it must have been difficult to see. They found this joke funny.

I have seen men hold up two fingers. They would use their tongues to penetrate the chink between their fingers, rendering the gesture obscene. The tongue thrust between the fingers reads as sexual, whereas an outthrust tongue without the fingers would be merely rude. Neither gesture is intended to be funny.

Both the boys and the men would use their two fingers to symbolize my body, a body that, without a chink, might seem impenetrable.

The primary meaning of the English word “chink” is a split or crack, a narrow fissure or valley. It derives from the same root as *germ*, as in “germinate.” “The connection being in the notion of bursting open,” as the Online Etymology Dictionary explains.

*Chink* also has a racially derogatory meaning, referring to a Chinese person, or, by extension, to any East Asian person, since an English-speaking person using a racially derogatory term would not be expected to differentiate among East Asian peoples.

I have asked boys to differentiate among East Asian peoples. Upon being called a chink, I would say, “You’re so stupid! I’m not a chink, I’m a gook!”

The Korean-American comedian Margaret Cho later used a similar statement as a punch line to a joke. I find this joke funny, and some members of a Korean-speaking audience might find this joke funny. I do not know whether other members of an English-speaking audience would find this joke funny.

The term *gook* was used by English-speaking soldiers to refer to Korean people during the Korean War. It was later used by English-speaking soldiers to refer to Vietnamese people during the Vietnam War, since English-speaking soldiers do not differentiate among East Asian people.

The term *gook* may derive from the Korean word for “American”—*miguk*. Hearing Korean people say this word, English-speaking soldiers thought the Korean people were calling themselves gooks (“me gook”) and followed suit.

The word *miguk* in Korean means “beautiful country.” *Miguk* is a transliteration of the Chinese characters *meiguo*, which also mean “beautiful country.”

I know how to pronounce *miguk* but not *meiguo*.

There are several accounts of why *meiguo* came to mean “American.” Some claim it’s simple phonetic approximation; others claim that *meiguo* was selected out of several possible phonetic approximations by nineteenth-century American missionaries and then made official in the 1901 Boxer Protocol after China’s defeat by eight foreign powers. I do not know which account is true.

All commentators seem to agree that neither Korean people nor Chinese people literally believe that America is a beautiful country.

But both Korean people and Chinese people must call America beautiful in order to speak its name.

Neither Korean people nor Chinese people refer to themselves as gooks or chinks.

Neither Korean people nor Chinese people refer to themselves as Korean or Chinese.

*Korea* is an English word, which seems to derive from a mispronunciation of the name of the Goryeo Dynasty by Silk Road traders that was first recorded by Marco Polo.

*China* is an English word, which seems to derive from a mispronunciation of the name of the Qin Dynasty by Silk Road traders that was first recorded by Marco Polo.

I have said Marco Polo’s name many times in a game that requires you to say his name many times. I do not know the origin of the game. Because of the *r* and the *l*, “Marco Polo” would be a difficult name for Korean speakers to say, but I am not a Korean speaker.

I have called myself a gook many times.

I have called myself a chink only once, when a white high school friend used the term in conversation, then stopped, realizing her gaffe. “Don’t worry,” I said. “I know what you mean. [X] is such an FOB.” “What’s an FOB?” she asked. “Fresh off the boat,” I said. “I may be a chink, but at least I’m not an FOB.” We laughed together, to relieve the tension, although I do not think either of us found my joke funny.

I used the term "FOB" to show that I considered [X] to be foreign, a barbarian. I called myself a chink to make myself seem more American.

*Fresh Off the Boat* was my white husband's favorite television show during the time we were married. When we watched it, I hoped that laughing at the pushy Chinese immigrant mother on the show would lessen his dislike of my pushy Korean immigrant mother.

I hoped that allowing my white husband to treat my parents as endearingly foreign, fresh off the boat, like the endearingly foreign TV family of *Fresh Off the Boat*, would make me seem more American.

None of the actors in *Fresh Off the Boat* are fresh off the boat. Nearly all of them were born in America. By pretending to be foreign, they make English-speaking audiences feel more American.

My parents are not fresh off the boat. They have been in America for over fifty years. They speak both Korean and English.

A television is a box that allows us to put people inside it.

The television is sometimes called an "idiot box," from the Latin for "private person," from the Greek *idios*, meaning "one's own." But those inside the box have no privacy.

We put the inscrutable into a box so they may be scrutinized.

I made [X] inscrutable. I put [X] into the box.

I made my parents inscrutable. I put my parents into the box.

I decorated the box so it seemed foreign, barbaric. I made the box inscrutable so it seemed like a distant ancestor. I buried it so it seemed like a grave.

I made a chink in the box that the gaze could penetrate.

I stayed outside the box. I treated what was inside the box as a joke.

I was the English-speaking audience.

I watched *Fresh Off the Boat* on the idiot box.

I watched *The Throne* on the idiot box.

In *The Throne* a parent puts his son in the rice chest.

After the son's death, the rice chest is forced open.

After the son's death, his mouth is forced open. Three spoonfuls of rice are forced into his mouth, rice that might have kept him from starving to death in the rice chest.

After the son's death, a name is forced into his mouth.

The name is Sado, a name which has meaning for Korean-speaking audiences.

I have said Sado's name many times.

The son never called himself Sado.

There was never a chink in the rice chest.

No one could see into the rice chest.

There is a "you" in this poem.

You are a member of the English-speaking audience.

I let you see into the box, into what is private, into what is foreign, into what is inscrutable, into what has been buried.

I am the chink in the box. ■