

Lady Hyegyeong Transcript Season 4, Episode 4

Hello, and welcome to the Time Pieces History Podcast. Today, we're looking at South Korean princess Lady Hyegyeong, who is a really fascinating character.

I'd love to know what you think of these episodes, so please come and find me on Twitter: [@GudrunLauret](https://twitter.com/GudrunLauret), or leave a comment on your audio player of choice. Alternatively, you can pop a message onto the relevant podcast page over at gudrunlauret.com/podcast, where you'll find the shownotes, useful links and an episode transcript – no email address required to access that.

Before we go any further, I'm sure I'm not pronouncing her name correctly, so please accept my apologies. I found a site that gave me a Korean pronunciation, which is what I'm using, but please feel free to get in touch and put me right – as the owner of an unusual name myself, I know how important this is.

I learned about Lady Hyegyeong from reading Margaret Drabble's novel, *The Red Queen*. I'm a huge fan of all of her work, and I included this novel in my Time Pieces History Project [blog](#) series.

The Red Queen is very different from Drabble's other books. For one thing, there are no chapters, with the book simply split into 18th century and modern times. For another, while there are two lead characters, they exist in separate eras, and never meet. The first part of the novel is based on a true story, and Drabble herself says she was so drawn to it that she wanted to dramatise it.

Lady Hyegyeong came from an educated South Korean family in the 1700s, a time where life was quite structured, with expected behaviours for men and women, the upper and lower classes. Her parents put her forward to be the wife of the Prince Regent, Sado, although they don't really expect her to be chosen.

Hyegyeong wins over the king and queen, and she and Sado are married at the age of 10, although consummation happens when they're 15. Palace life is stifling for both of them, with strict rules about where they go, formal dress codes rigorously applied, and a whole host of customs to be followed without question.

King Yongjo has two wives, a stepmother and numerous daughters, all of whom have different opinions on how Sado should behave. The young couple also experience a period of loss, when they lose their first son and a sister, grandmother and stepmother (of Sado's).

These tragedies, coupled with King Yongjo's cruel treatment of his son, including frequent, public humiliation, and an overindulged nature, soon manifest themselves in manias in the prince.

Lady Hyegyeong watches in horror as her husband's mental health deteriorates – he discards 20 or 30 outfits for state events, and slashes his clothes with his sword. He also finds release (and probably sexual gratification) from murder, and kills servants, eunuchs and even his consort.

Lady Hyegyeong does her best to protect him, but Sado's behaviour escalates, and much of it manifests in public (he brings the severed head of his first victim to show his wife and her ladies in waiting). Finally, the king and queen realise the depths their son has sunk to, and are forced to intervene to protect the dynasty.

Lady Hyegyeong wrote four versions of her memoirs, describing her life before, during and after her marriage. Her father was a scholar, and her aunt taught her to read.

It was her father who put her name forward to be considered as a potential bride for the young Prince Sado when she was nine. Although her first son died, her second son thrived, and eventually became king. She also had two daughters.

Lady Hyegyeong documents her husband's illness and declining health in her memoirs, showing surprising insight and sympathy for a woman of her time and status. She details Prince Sado's fear of thunder and how encountering his father renders him speechless.

For a long time, the princess helps her husband to manage and hide his illness, buying material so he can have multiple sets of clothes made to try on and destroy. Eventually, when he starts assaulting and raping the ladies-in-waiting, Hyegyeong goes to her mother in law.

By 1762, when the couple are aged 27, the family can do nothing more for Sado, and King Yongjo summons him for a trial. Demoted to a commoner, the king can then authorise the death of his son. Sado both pleads for his life and attempts to commit suicide, but in the end, he is sentenced to be placed in a rice chest until he dies, which happens after eight days of suffering.

I'd love to get hold of a copy of one of her books of memoirs, which must be an incredibly unusual thing for a woman of her rank to produce, especially in South Korea in the 18th century.