



Written by Sonja Swanson

When I was eight or so, my family came to Korea for a visit and we stayed at my grandmother's house. It was a traditional home with a courtyard and tile roof, but what I remember most is climbing up the narrow stairs to a small platform over the entrance, where my grandmother kept her earthenware jars, known as onggi in Korean. They were enormous, brown pots with rounded bellies, smooth to the touch, sun-warmed; I could have easily crawled inside one at that age.



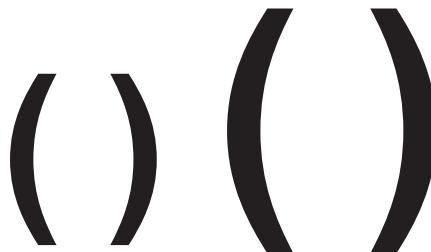


These were hangari, a type of medium-sized onggi shaped like two parentheses curving around a space, a pause, a breath. () And the smell — something nose-curling, which my child-self didn't really like, but I couldn't stop climbing up there to play and marvel at the jars.

Onggi are used for storing food, particularly fermented foods. My grandmother kept doenjang, fermented bean paste, ganjang, soy sauce, gochujang, red chili paste, and salt, along with some pickled vegetables. Onggi are made of earth, so they breathe—they let just enough air and moisture enter and escape as dictated by the natural processes of fermentation. They are as much a part of Korean cooking as a frying pan or an oven is in the West. When storing salt, for example, over the months and years, a bitter solution of minerals called gansu sinks to the bottom and can be used for making tofu. What is left at the top is pure, white, and fluffy, like snow, for gentle seasoning. You can't underestimate the value of onggi: fermented foods can last years, and onggi can last for generations. They were something of value to be passed on to the next generation, a food heritage tied to the land, the idea of being and belonging in and to a place.

Starting in the post-war 1960s, floods of Koreans began immigrating to cities, especially to Seoul, leaving behind farms and families. Today, 82.5% of South Korea's population lives in cities. While onggi in the countryside were often placed in outdoor courtyards, or buried in the ground, people in cities living in multi-story buildings instead lined rooftops and balconies with their earthenware jars. Along with modern living, however, came modern eating, and companies making pre-packaged fermented foods in factories advertised their products as healthier and more sanitary. Peek into the pantry of an average city family today, and you will most likely find sauces fermented in a factory, not in an onggi.

Seven years ago, my grandmother passed away and my parents traveled to Korea for the funeral. My mother later told me that while arranging things at her childhood home, she





discovered that someone had stolen my grandmother's onggi. I could see that my mother felt both anger and helplessness—it's not like we could have taken the enormous earthenware jars, brimming with sauces, back to U.S. with us. But it was still something we lost.

A few years ago, I moved to Seoul and fell hard for this city. The pace of life, the mountains, the mix of high rises and low brick buildings all drew me in. Seoul is a city in constant flux, with almost every stage of its history written in steel and stone and wood between the highways and alleyways. In old neighbourhoods, you'll still see some homes with onggi on their rooftops—people making food the old way. My landlady, Ms. Kim, is one of them. She led me up to her rooftop collection of earthenware jars. "I make my own soy sauce because I don't trust the factory-made stuff," she told me. And going a step beyond what home fermenters do, Ms. Kim doesn't buy her pre-fermented blocks of soybeans, called meju—she starts from the bean itself, boiling, mashing, shaping and aging the meju by hand. Making these sauces is an immense amount of work, and it's no surprise that fewer families within the last generation are undertaking it, especially with more women in the workplace.

One of my favorite old neighbourhoods, Daeheung-dong, is mostly populated by three and four-story buildings, constructed during the development drives of the '60s. It was harder to find the onggi than I remembered. And I was in for a rude shock—nearly all of the onggi-owners I did find revealed that their onggi were, in fact, empty. They'd stopped fermenting foods in them years ago. "I can't climb up those stairs anymore!" one lady laughed, a little ruefully. "You want to buy an empty jar?" a grandmother asked hopefully. It made me wonder how many of the onggi I had seen occasionally while walking around the rest of Seoul were actually empty.

Recently, there's been a small revival of home-fermentation, especially for making jang, Korea's essential fermented sauces. Song Sun-ja is the founder of Haetsal Hangari, a program that sets up communal jang-making spaces for onggi here in Seoul. By creating communal spaces and providing the ingredients and training for jang-making, Ms. Song hopes that more city-dwellers, especially younger ones, will keep these traditions alive.

I don't know if we'll still see onggi lining Seoul's rooftops in fifty years. But I've signed up for Ms. Song's next class and will be adding my own little onggi to my balcony very soon.

