

RESEARCH

The Humanity of the Zombie: A Case Study of a Korean Zombie Comic

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Originally defined as an undead human body by Haitian and Northern African voodoo culture, the zombie has become a popular cultural product. However, in most entertainment media, the zombie has been standardized as a frightful enemy to humans. The dominance of zombie-related Western media content has led to a number of variations in other cultures. In Korea, the concept of the zombie has evolved into the "ghost" concept of *han* (한, 恨), a unique emotional concept in Korean culture that stems from the country's historical and geopolitical situation. Analyzing the narrative of the Korean online comic ("webtoon") series *Every Moment of Your Life* (당신의 모든 순간), this paper discusses how the Western conception of the zombie has evolved in *han*, motivating audiences to reflect on the meaningfulness of human life.

Keywords: ghost; han; Korea; online comics; zombie

The Zombie

Today, the zombie is a popular cultural product in various media, including movies, television shows, novels, video games, and comics. The zombie has become a topic of cultural criticism, politics, biology, and even ontological philosophy. According to popular cultural definitions, the zombie dwells in limbo between the human and inhuman; having been human, it is now dead, yet it moves. Thus, "zombie" is a paradoxical concept, combining life and death, human and monster, and volition and unconsciousness (Dendle 2011). Although the zombie has been interpreted in a variety of ways, in current Western entertainment media, zombies are typically presented and viewed as monstrous enemies of human beings.

To extend the zombie concept beyond the idea of "monster," this paper looks at zombie image trends in the media and proposes a modified concept that combines

the zombie with the traditional characteristics of the Korean ghost. When viewed in association with the Korean ghost concept, the Western concept of zombie yields new meanings, demonstrating that cultural products in popular media vary from one culture to the next and tend to reflect the values of the culture in which they are consumed.

The “walking dead” zombie concept originated in Haiti and Northern Africa (Boon 2007; Carroll 1990). During the U.S. occupation of Haiti, which lasted from 1915 to 1934, Haitian folk tales and superstitions about the walking dead were widely shared with American culture. One of the earliest Western literary examples of zombies is William Seabrook’s story about emotional experiences in Haiti, *The Magic Island* (1929), in which the zombie is described as a corpse that turns over in its grave after a voodoo ceremony (Kee 2011). Zombies are also portrayed as unconscious slaves in early movies such as *White Zombie* (1932). In this movie, zombies appear as undead workers on sugar cane plantations controlled by a voodoo sorcerer; however, they have no volition or instinct to eat fresh meat (Dendle 2007). This early slave concept of the zombie being controlled by a zombie sorcerer could represent the fear that another being might gain control of the human race (Dendle 2001).

After transforming from dead to undead, zombies acquired the image of dangerous creatures that attack humans. This concept of a ghoulish zombie took shape in George Romero’s zombie film trilogy: *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), and *Day of the Dead* (1985). This predator concept increased the tension and suspense of the films (Newbury 2012). Moving beyond the slave concept, Romero’s zombie can be categorized as the modern zombie or a second-generation zombie. Through the media, this ghoul zombie has been described as a dangerous predator of humans (McGlotten & Vangundy 2013).

Danny Boyle’s film *28 Days Later* (2002) introduces new zombie characteristics. Unlike their earlier counterparts, the zombies in this film are fast, outrunning and hunting humans as a group. The zombies are also depicted as stronger and smarter than previous renditions. The zombies in *28 Days Later* do not rise from graves; they are essentially sick humans, transformed after being infected by a virus that is leaked

from a laboratory. Not so much “undead,” these zombies are victims of a pandemic disease, much like Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) or Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). This spreading infection could be a metaphor for global crises caused by human greed, uncontrolled technology, or even anxiety about the other, such as homophobia (McGlotten & Vangundy 2013).

Political conditions around the world (e.g., economic unrest and terrorism) have influenced the interpretation and presentation zombies, especially in the direction of anxiety about the apocalypse and post-apocalyptic life (Bishop 2009). In this context, the fast, aggressive zombies in *28 Days Later* represent conditions we perceive as dangerous threats to global stability and security: war, infectious disease, biological attack, terrorism, uncontrolled technology, even the influx of immigrants from other countries (Birch-Bayley 2012; Cameron 2012). According to Boon (2007; 2011), Western entertainment media includes three primary zombie types: (a) the zombie drone, without volition, (b) the zombie ghoul, a flesh-eating monster, and (c) the bio zombie, afflicted by a viral infection.

On a basic level, then, zombies are dehumanized versions of the human, typically viewed as our enemies in Western media. But this concept is not universal. This paper presents an alternative zombie concept that combines humanity and Korean sentiment—*Han* (pronounced *Haan*, 한, 恨). *Han* is a unique emotional concept in Korean culture that stems from Korea’s historical and geopolitical situation, primarily its unfair treatment at the hands of powerful neighbouring countries, including China, Japan, and Russia (Chu 2008).

Exploring alternative representations of zombies that are more human than monstrous, that portray zombies as sympathetic members of society, can open discussion about the ways in which we perceive and treat out-group members (Stratton 2011). According to the Korean idea of ghosts and monsters that were once human, the zombie represents a nexus of conflict between the human and the other, symbolizing the gaps among various social classes. When people are zombified unintentionally and become the object of slaughter by other groups—humans, in this context—the Korean concept of *han* refers to the feelings of the zombies. Originally, *han* connoted the mixture of frustration and sorrow due to feelings of isolation

(Shim 2004). *Han* is also defined as 'a sense of unresolved resentment against injustices suffered, a sense of helplessness because of the overwhelming odds against, a feeling of total abandonees, a feeling of acute pain of sorrow in one's guts and bowels making the whole body writhe and wriggle, and an obstinate urge to take "revenge" and to right the wrong—all these combined' (Hyun 1985: 7). This concept of *han* can be found in Korean ghost folktales. Those who have been victimized and murdered leave behind a spirit that might be a ghost with *han* rather than one that peacefully moves on to heaven. In Korean ghost stories, *han* is not a grudge against an assailant but a feeling of self-pity (Kim 1999).

Interpreting the Zombie as Human through *Han—Every Moment of Your Life*

Western zombie images are popular in Korea; however, the concept of *han* has created an alternative image for Korean audiences. This image is clearly seen in the Internet comics known as webtoons, which can be viewed using digital media technology such as tablet computers and smartphones (Jin 2015). Webtoons delivered via major Korean web portals such as DAUM (www.daum.net) and NAVER (www.naver.com) have gained popularity in Korea, and many webtoons have become influential not only because of their original comic style but also because of their impact on basic scripts for other media formats, including printed books, plays, and movies. One example of the market power of webtoons, cartoonist Kang Full's *Sonjungmanwha* (순정만화) recorded 60,000,000 total page views from October 24, 2003 to April 7, 2004 through the webtoon section of DAUM (<http://webtoon.daum.net/webtoon/view/kangpool>). *Sonjungmanwha* was later published as a printed comic series and then produced as a major film in Korea (Kang 2007). Currently, the webtoon is one of the most dominant online entertainment media formats in Korea—the monthly click rate is 7,000,000 for NAVER webtoons and 3,000,000 for DAUM webtoons (Song 2012).

Among the webtoons that Korean audiences enjoy, zombie stories are some of the most popular. To localize apocalyptic situations and zombie characteristics, some Korean webtoonists have conveyed the sorrow that a zombie feels having lost life as a human. One popular webtoon that explores this idea is called *Every Moment of*

Your Life (당신의 모든 순간). Written by Korean cartoonist Kang Full and containing 30 sequential episodes about apocalyptic zombification in Seoul, Korea, this webtoon was available on the major Korean web portal DAUM from August 30, 2010 to January 17, 2011 (see the appendix for a synopsis of each episode; Chung 2017). The average page view for each episode of *Every Moment of Your Life* was 2,000,000, while cumulative page views numbered over 100,000,000 (Kim 2011). The webtoon was eventually printed as a series of books, and the content was later prepared for a film.

At the beginning of the story, many citizens have gathered to celebrate New Year's Day in downtown Seoul, the capital of South Korea. Just after midnight, for an unknown reason, the people become zombies, and the zombification spreads throughout the city. The main character, Jung-Wook, who lives with his older brother in a shabby apartment complex, waits for his brother, who works as a night-shift street cleaner, to come home, but his brother never arrives. Jung-Wook then prepares to live by himself in his apartment, using relief supplies sent by the military. While waiting for his brother, Jung-Wook observes the behaviour of zombies through his apartment window and develops feelings for Ju-Sun, a female survivor who is living in the next apartment complex. Jung-Wook recognizes that the zombies wandering around the apartment were once his neighbours.

Jung-Wook's older brother has become a zombie, and when he arrives at home, Jung-Wook takes him into his room. According to traditional Western zombie rules, a zombie should attack a human, even a family member, without hesitation, but Jung-Wook's brother does not attack him. When the zombified brother recognizes that he has come back home and is with his still-human brother, he sheds tears and dies permanently. This pattern is typical for Korean ghosts; when they resolve a grudge, they die properly. After his zombie brother dies, Jung-Wook understands why so many zombies are roaming the town, knocking on apartment doors. In Episode #15, Jung-Wook says, 'Everything stopped at the last memory, and the last memory became every single moment. My brother's every moment was me.' In Episode #19, once Jung-Wook recognizes that zombies live with only their last memory, he refers to them as "human." In line with this epiphany, the zombie as

victimized human is the most important concept in this webtoon: 'The zombie is the human who lives with the last memory.'

Jung-Wook meets a little girl zombie who is always raising her hand. The girl zombie is guided by her mother's last words to hold her hand high during the evacuation. Jung-Wook lets the girl zombie stay with Ju-Sun without fear that the zombie will attack her. Indeed, when Ju-Sun sings the girl zombie a lullaby one night, the same lullaby that her mother sang to her, the girl zombie dies peacefully because her last memory was a happy moment with her mother. For this scene, the author depicts Ju-Sun and the girl zombie as Ju-Sun's mother and the young Ju-Sun, respectively. This transformation underscores that as Ju-Sun helps the girl zombie, Ju-Sun also consoles herself (see **Figure 1**).

When Ju-Sun is attacked by a zombie, her mother sucks Ju-Sun's affected area using her mouth, as if to withdraw a poison. Although her instinctive love and sacrifice delays Ju-Sun's zombification, the mother herself becomes a zombie after trying to save Ju-Sun. And while Ju-Sun also feels the onset of her zombification, she hides her infection from Jung-Wook because she worries that he might dislike her. To save Ju-Sun, her father, who has also been infected, takes his zombie wife in a wheelchair and walks toward the sea while Ju-Sun is sleeping. He worries that he and his wife will come back to Ju-Sun as zombies after losing their consciousness as humans. When they reach the seashore, zombified Ju-Sun's father wades into the deep water with his zombie wife to die (see **Figure 2**). These examples show that zombies in *Every Moment of Your Life* are not only capable of humanity but also feel the deepest human emotions, as demonstrated by their personal sacrifices to protect the ones they love.

In Episode #22, Jung-Wook notices that the zombies hanging around the town are obeying their homing instincts, much like spirits in limbo: 'Perhaps my brother could not die before reaching home. Other zombies might be the same . . . they might knock on the door wanting to come home. Everybody wants to go home. What they do, where they belong, in the last memory, they want to go home . . . the destination is home . . . they are humans, too . . . they are humans who are coming back home.' Jung-Wook helps the zombies find their homes after checking them against photographs on display in various dwellings. But when Jung-Wook takes the zombies



Figure 1: A girl zombie dying in Ju-Sun's arms (Kang 2011: episode #24) © Kakao Corp.

to their homes and they try to leave, he realizes the emotional connection that the zombies are seeking. They want to be with their loved ones, not alone in their empty homes that only remind them of what they have lost.

These zombie behaviours suggest human attachment and human thought. As Jung-Wook observes, 'Zombies want to come back to their family. They remember



Figure 2: Ju-Sun's zombified parents go into the sea in order save their daughter (Kang 2011: episode #19) © Kakao Corp.

the most valuable thing. The most important memory remains as the last thought, and zombies live with the repetition of that important memory' (Episode #25). Furthermore, the webtoon explores Jung-Wook's personal anxiety about zombification. While helping zombies find their families, he accidentally becomes infected. Afterwards, while watching his lover, Ju-Sun, become a zombie, he thinks, 'If I became a zombie, if I were . . . what would my last memory be?' (Episode #16). Jung-Wook expects that Ju-Sun's last memory will be her attachment to him, but

after becoming a zombie, her last memory is actually tied to her ex-boyfriend, who has already become a zombie and is wandering around town to find Ju-Sun. With his remaining human consciousness, Jung-Wook takes Ju-Sun to her ex-boyfriend, who is sitting on a bench, and surrounds that spot with a brick wall to protect the couple from the military mop-up operation. After finishing the work, Jung-Wook is shot by soldiers. As he dies, he has a smile on his face because he can die with one last happy memory of Ju-Sun, as he wishes.

The sacrificial choices made in *Every Moment of Your Life*, along with the emotional experiences of the zombies in the story, underscore the contrast between the unfeeling “inhuman” Western zombie and the sentimental Korean zombie. In media representations, killing a zombie with a human form can be ethically provocative, for the zombies are often those who were once our relatives, friends, or neighbours. The zombies in *Every Moment of Your Life* are victims, innocent citizens heading for the homes in which they lived before zombification. In Western media, zombies are typically a metaphor for viruses that we wish to eradicate, but in *Every Moment of Your Life* zombies are suffering humans who seek to resolve their emotional attachments before they die properly. Korean cultural critic Myung-Suck Lee (2012) argued that ‘zombies become a mirror of us. Zombies are the homeless as a result of the credit card debt, children who bully others with the pressure of study, the left-wing demonstrators or the right-wing conservatives, or the activists who have different thoughts from me. All of the actions of people whose thoughts are different from mine could be the zombie attack. After a loss of sympathy, we have only two choices: zombie or zombie slayer (*The Hankyoreh* 2012).’

We ostracize other groups as if they were zombies when they have points of view that differ from ours (Dendle 2007). However, if we identify with that part of a zombie that is still human, or at least retains some semblance of the human, we are more likely to think of them as members of our society. *Every Moment of Your Life* extends the possibility of defining zombies as more human than monster because of their fixation on the last moment of life, on a memory that needs release before death. The zombies in *Every Moment of Your Life* remember the one most valuable memory from the time they were human, and their actions are influenced by these

memories. This humanistic view is clear in Jung-Wook's tragic but altruistic love for Ju-Sun before and after zombification.

The zombies in *Every Moment of Your Life* possess *han* because they retain a last memory of their beloved even after zombification. Like Korean ghosts with *han*, the zombies in *Every Moment of Your Life* wander around town burdened by their last memory of a loved one; consequently, they cannot experience a peaceful death. These zombies are innocents who do not understand why they have become zombies and feel aggrieved by their circumstances. In Korean folktales, if humans soothe the *han* of the ghost, the ghost can escape limbo and peacefully move on to heaven. The readers of *Every Moment of Your Life* see two zombies, Jung-Wook's brother and the little girl zombie, weep tears of gratitude after Jung-Wook and Ju-Sun, respectively, help them resolve their *han*. In Korean ghost folktales, the soothing is usually accomplished by heroes or shamens, and the soul of the dead is portrayed as a butterfly. In the scene showing the death of Jung-Wook, a butterfly hovers over his dead body (see **Figure 3**).

Thus, readers can assume that Jung-Wook's soul is going to heaven, dispelling his *han*. In the following scene, the yellow butterfly is shown flying up to Ju-Sun's yellow shirt, which is hanging on a clothesline outside the apartment complex. This

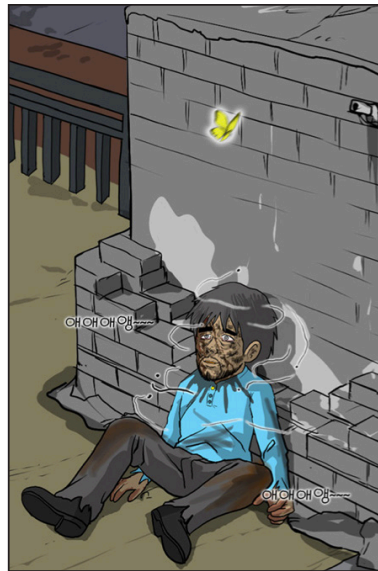


Figure 3: A yellow butterfly representing Jung-Wook's soul leaving his dead body (Kang 2011: episode #30) © Kakao Corp.

image represents Jung-Wook's supreme love for Ju-Sun. Through the concept of *han*, *Every Moment of Your Life* gives a zombie story sentimental appeal, inviting readers to expand the definition of zombie beyond the threatening monster that dominates Western media representations.

If zombies are out-group members under distress, appeasing their *han* is the work of an exorcist or shaman, not a zombie slayer. The zombies in *Every Moment of Your Life* represent a neglected class of people who suffer *han* and cannot accept their situation. As a result, the audience feels a sentimental attachment to the zombies that, in Western media, is reserved for human survivors who have lost their loved ones to zombie attack. Lee (2011) argued that living in agony, like Hamlet, is a metaphor for existing in a state of *han*. In this context, Jung-Wook's role as a shaman who can release the *han* of zombies by sacrificing himself raises the question 'what makes living meaningful?' By extension, *Every Moment of Your Life* dramatizes the Korean virtues of understanding the experience of *han* in other and having compassion toward out-group members who are suffering.

Conclusion

Oliver and Bartsch (2010) and Oliver and Raney (2011) characterized meaningful entertainment media experiences as eudaimonic enjoyment, which involves appreciation, mixed emotions, and truth-seeking, as opposed to hedonic enjoyment, which involves fun, laughter, and pleasure. In this context, the humanistic portrayal of the zombie in *Every Moment of Your Life* undermines the traditional Western zombie concept. Zombie content need not only be consumed for amusement but can also bring insight, creating a meaningful experience for the audience. In *Every Moment of Your Life*, the altruistic behaviours of humans and zombies create thought-provoking moments that appeal to readers with a capacity for empathy. While zombies have frequently been depicted as the opposite of human, *Every Moment of Your Life* explores the human emotions that zombification cannot extinguish completely. In this webtoon, the zombies emphasize the meaningful life with others that remains the most important aspect of our society. *Every Moment of Your Life* also inspires us to think about ourselves as *han*-afflicted zombies, to empathize with the disadvantaged that walk amongst us.

As a case study of a zombie story based on the Korean concept of *han*, this paper suggests that diverse media environments can extend or modify cultural concepts to appeal to audiences who seek greater meaning in life. Although situations that explore the humanity of survivors can be found in Western zombie stories such as *The Walking Dead* series, the humanizing elements of the Korean webtoon *Every Moment of Your Life* focus more on the afterlife experience of *han* in humans who have been zombified. As this paper also suggests, digital media and web portals for webtoons can help authors create and disseminate their work to wide audiences, but future studies should also consider how these media platforms facilitate re-creation and localize popular media content, just as Western zombie concepts have been revised and transformed by the Korean concept of *han*.

Additional File

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Appendix.** Synopsis of the 30 episodes of *Every Moment of Your Life*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/cg.81.s1>

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