

# Beware, ghostly virgins at large

Western halloween traditions are scary but for a real fright, try Korean ghosts

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The ancient Celts of Europe believed that appeasing the dead would bring protection from the horrors of a long, dark winter. The day they chose usually fell on the night of October 31. By the 1840s, when Irish immigrants flooded into America, the tradition became a community party to welcome All Hallows or All Saint's Day, which falls on November 1st. And that's how the scariest creatures in the Western Hemisphere got their own festival to spread their frightful fame.

Celebrating Halloween may be new in Korea, but appeasing the ghosts is not new to Koreans. While dreadful characters like Jack-O-Lantern, Dracula and the werewolf can easily turn any American child blue with fear, in Korea nothing beats the chill caused by Korean ghosts.

Koreans grow up hearing about spirits with awesome powers, and the Korean culture has a rich tradition of appeasing the dead. Seasonal rituals and ancestral rites performed in the home, in the mountains and at public functions invite spirits and ghosts to protect the living and bring good luck.

According to a recent survey by the weekly magazine "Cine 21," the ghosts that Koreans fear most are the Virgin Ghost (79.5 percent), followed by zombies (9.8 percent), Freddy Kruger (6 percent), vampires (3 percent) and *jiangshi*, or Chinese hopping corpse (1.7 percent).

Here are some of the scariest Korean creatures with tips for reproducing their appearance at a Halloween bash this weekend:

## Cheonyeo gwisin

In Korean legend, a young woman who dies as a virgin becomes so bitter about her "shameful" marital status that her ghost, popularly known as *cheonyeo gwisin*, or virgin ghost, hovers around her relatives and friends. She usually appears with extremely long hair and is dressed in a white *hanbok*. This ghost has a pale white face with dark circles and a small amount of blood drips from the side of her mouth.

Since her mission to get married is incomplete, it is impossible for her to cross the boundary that leads to the afterlife. It is said that the virgin ghost curses newly-wed couples. The only way to make this ghost disappear is to have an exorcism — or conduct a spiritual wedding for the virgin ghost with a bachelor ghost.

In Korea, many people believe in the existence of this ghost and blame



Illustration by Bae Min-ho

her for family illnesses or accidents. They usually see a shaman and ask for help to exorcise the victim. In Korean ghost stories, she usually appears in bathrooms, schools, lakes, around graveyards and on dark country roads. She starts her scary act around midnight and continues until dawn. The virgin ghosts in movies, such as "The Ring Virus" (1999) and "Arang" (2006) and in a popular summertime TV series, "The Country of Legends," are good examples of how *cheonyeo gwisin* is seen in Korean culture.

**Tips for dressing as a Virgin Ghost:** Put on a wig with extremely long black hair. Powder your face white. Go heavy on the eye makeup with black eyeliner and red tear drops. Fake or cosmetic blood must dribble from a corner of the mouth.

## Jeoseungsaja

If the Grim Reaper is the figure

that represents death in the United States, *Jeoseungsaja* are its counterpart in Korea. They are the envoy of *Yeon-mnadaewang*, or the king of the dead, who rules over the Buddhist hell. *Jeoseungsaja* float around wrapped in a black traditional Korean man's overcoat with long, full sleeves that cover their ghastly white hands. On their heads they wear a traditional Korean hat that casts an eerie shadow across a cadaverous face with red bloodshot eyes, deep dark circles, and a nose that resembles the beak of a crow. They guide the spirits of the dead to the gates of hell, where the king of the dead dispenses punishments or rewards.

According to Korean folk lore, these envoys were said to work in threes. In reality the *Jeoseungsaja* trios do the living no harm but are still much feared because they represent death.

**Tips for dressing up:** Powder your face and hands white. Draw deep circles under your eyes, find a traditional Korean coat and a matching hat.

## Gumiho

The *gumiho* is a legendary golden fox with nine tails, but she can morph into an enchanting beauty. In her human form, she offers an enticing place to stay over night to young men passing through the mountains. When they fall asleep, she eats their livers.

The *gumiho* is believed to be 900 or more years old. A *Gumiho* possesses a precious stone in its body which it reveals only when seducing a man, to enchant him. The stone is made of the energy of former victims sucked out from their livers, and this precious stone is the key to fulfilling the fox's wish to become a true human being.

The *gumiho* became famous after it was the focus of TV drama and a movie titled "Gumiho" (1994) starring the Korean actress Ko So-young. **Tips for dressing up:** Hang a fox tail, or nine, on a homely *hanbok*. Put on foxy makeup and keep a glow-in-the-dark ball in your mouth, revealing it only when "seducing" a man.

## Mongdal gwisin

Along with the virgin ghost, there is a bachelor ghost, called a *Mongdal Gwisin*. He doesn't have a face. Depending on how he died, the Bachelor Ghost can be of two kinds. The ones who died as miserable single men pull all kinds of evil tricks and make curses, just like the virgin ghost. If the ghost used to love a woman when he was alive, he will haunt or curse that woman. If someone dies a bachelor and something terrible happens to his family later, they assume it

was due to this curse. At which point the family members dig up the grave and nail down the coffin lid before burying it again. They then beat a stake into the soil to prevent the ghost from escaping in future.

**Tips for dressing up:** Wear a white *hanbok* and cover your face with a white or skin colored swimming cap.

## Dokkaebi

Unlike other Korean ghosts, a *dokkaebi*, or goblin, is not created after someone dies, but from thrown away objects such as brooms, straw shoes and old furniture. The word *dokkaebi* is a combination of two words, "*dot*," meaning fire or seed, and "*abi*," which means a grown up man. A *dokkaebi* was regarded as a male character and happens to be crazy about pretty women. Useless discarded objects turn into *dokkaebi* at night and fire balls, or *dokkaebigul*, to mark the creation of each one.

A *dokkaebibul* is a blue-colored flame and sometimes appears alone in one place, or in many places simultaneously. It soon disappears.

There are some who say that a *dokkaebi* is gigantic and has only one leg, and he loves to wrestle with people. A *dokkaebi* is said to be so strong that it can move even mountains. He often plays pranks on innocent people, but also rewards kind people with treasures and money.

**Tips for dressing up:** Put horns on your head and wear a green or blue mask with one eye in the center of the face. Carry a cudgel in one hand.

## Hwajangsil gwisin

The *hwajangsil gwisin* appears in the toilet, especially the old traditional ones made from holes dug in the ground. No one has ever seen the ghost itself but its red hand is said to sometimes protrude from the toilet bowl, so you might want to take a good look before you sit down in the rest room.

When you are about to use the toilet paper, the hand might appear from the toilet and ask you a question: "Do you want red toilet paper or blue toilet paper?" Anyone who answers the question dies immediately. Experts suggest you answer by saying, "I don't use toilet paper, I use a bidet instead."

**Tips for dressing:** You can wind some red and blue toilet paper around your body. Be sure to wear dirty clothes and to smell like a toilet.

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