

## The Korean *Yumeo* (Humor) Series Boom Narrative Memories of Key Players

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This paper shares insights from an ongoing exploration of the genesis of [South] Korean *yumeo* (“humor”), that is: canned jokes. Canned jokes boomed in Korea over the last two decades of the past century, circulating orally as well as printed. In the 1990s, they flourished thanks to Korea’s speedy digitalization, breeding the *PC tongsin yumeo* (“personal computer communication humor”) through forums for collecting and sharing. Genre-wise, these series consisted mostly of typical canned jokes, centered on one eponymous character: Sa O-Jeong, Choe Bul-am, Mandeuk, President Chun Doo-hwan, Rambo, the Tico car by automaker Daewoo, a broad-mouthed frog, a flock of sparrows, a tribe of man-eaters, etc. These days, *yumeo* series see a modest revival and form part of a broader nostalgia wave (the retro or *newtro* trend).

Sigmund Freud famously maintained that the joke is crafted, while the comical just occurs. If so, who crafted the jokes of the various Korean *yumeo* series? Searching for originators appears to be futile. After all, canned jokes are “folk lore”, stories passed-on orally by common people. This evokes a collective process, a murky evolution, and unpredictable mutations. Heuristically, asking questions about the genesis of a joke is nonetheless meaningful. Sometimes, the transmission of a joke can be reconstructed. In other cases, it is even possible to define the point at which an “imported” joke was introduced to a Korean audience (for example via the Korean editions of the *Readers Digest* or the *Playboy*).

Collecting anecdotal evidence through interviews with key players (editors of joke collections, in the first place) can offer substantial clues regarding the emergence and spread of canned jokes and *yumeo* series in Korea – not to mention that this secures narrative memories that might otherwise never get recorded. The data are interpreted in view of relevant already existing sources – which includes, among others, a scarce number of academic research, a bigger number of newspaper articles, as well as prefaces of the numerous *yumeo* collections.