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webtoon world

HOW DIGITAL COMICS FROM SOUTH KOREA BRING STORIES TO LIFE
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DANIEL BRENNAN

Students stroll through a display of webtoon artwork in the Charles B. Wang Center at Stony Brook University.

The toon boon

Digital comics are on a roll in Stony Brook exhibit

'Webtoon: The Evolution of Korean Digital Comics'

WHEN | WHERE 9 a.m.-8 p.m. weekdays, noon-8 p.m. weekends through May 31 at Stony Brook University's Charles B. Wang Center, 100 Nicolls Rd.

INFO 631-632-4400, stonybrook.edu/commcms/wang

ADMISSION Free

ALSO "Korea's Digital Comics: The Evolution of Webtoons in a Global Context" lecture; 1 p.m. April 14 in the Charles B. Wang Center Theatre

BY JANELLE GRIFFITH

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South Korean cartoonists have ditched the strip — as far as comics are concerned.

The webtoon — a digitally based comic created in South Korea in 2003 — continues to change the way readers engage with traditional comic books. The webtoon has evolved to include 3-D and flash effects, audio and motion, creating a more interactive experience.

Webtoons are not paginated like their paper counterparts. Instead, they are presented on panels in a scrollable vertical layout, similar to websites. While wildly popular in

China, Indonesia, Japan, Taiwan and Thailand for more than a decade, there is now a growing push for webtoons in Western societies, industry experts say.

Long Islanders can see this new wave of entertainment at the Charles B. Wang Center at Stony Brook University with the free exhibit "Webtoon: The Evolution of Korean Digital Comics," open through May 31.

In South Korea, there are online platforms just for webtoons, which has helped create "a thriving digital comics industry," says Jinyoung Jin, director of cultural programs at the Wang Center. On the technical side, some webtoons are defined by their presentation, and "every week brings new innova-



DANIEL BRENNAN

Artwork from Line Webtoon's "New Brooklyn," part of the exhibition "Webtoon: The Evolution of Korean Digital Comics."

tions in audio and motion effects."

The exhibition provides a brief history of the webtoon as a global phenomenon where one creative source has been used in movies, TV dramas, animation, games and design products, Jin says. The genres — including thrillers, horror, action, fantasy and drama — can be seen in the graphics of popular characters and film promos presented in the galleries.

THE BIRTH OF WEBTOON

Korea's comic publishing industry suffered an unprecedented downturn in the late 1990s and early 2000s, mainly because of a financial crisis and a juvenile protection law that restricted adult comic magazines, Jin says. As a result, only six of the 26 Korean comic magazines survived, and a great number of professional cartoonists lost the chance to publish their work.

Then came the Internet, which introduced online computer games and chatting services that helped reshape the comic industry. Smartphones, in particular, contributed to the birth of webtoon platforms.



DANIEL BRENNAN

Artwork from the mystery thriller webtoon "Moss," created by Yoon Tae-ho and published on RollingStory's Spottoon.

The earliest incarnation of the webtoon was made from an original comic that was uploaded to the Internet and formatted into a horizontal layout.

"From 2003 onward, Korean portal sites such as Naver, Daum and Nate systematically began to build free digital comics platforms in order to attract users and to increase traffic," Jin says. "As smartphone users increased, webtoons began to make their mark."

Within a few years, webtoon artists began experimenting with new digital effects to enhance their readers' experience. Top webtoonists have started incorporating sound and motion into previously static comics, Jin says. One of the current trends is to add background music to a series of panels. Some artists have begun using 3-D animation and flash effects.

Naver, which created the first webtoon and coined the term, now has more than 6 million daily visitors.

AT THE EXHIBIT

The Wang Center's webtoon exhibit highlights works from major webtoon companies in iPad and video format such as Spottoon, a webtoon portal launched in English just last year. Spottoon is a compilation of the Korean webtoon artists' group RollingStory and The Huffington Post. Its stories cover a range of genres and subjects, from heart-wrenching tales to unpredictable and race-against-time thrillers, Jin says.

Popular film trailers and TV drama posters also are prominently displayed, such as "Secretly, Greatly," a comedy-action-drama based on a webtoon about a North Korean spy that broke box office records by selling 2 million tickets in two days.

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