



Culture

## K-Drama Star Park Ji-hu Talks *All of Us Are Dead*, NewJeans, and Crafting Empathy for Her Characters

“Instead of thinking about how hard it is, I think about how, if I work a little harder, I can overcome any hardships and accomplish both.”

BY **JAE-HA KIM**, PHOTOGRAPHY BY **JINGYU LIN**

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In the high school zombie series *All of Us Are Dead*, Park Ji-hu's character, On-jo, doesn't stand out at first. The teen has a crush on the classroom hottie, Su-hyeok (Lomon), while his friend Cheong-san (Yoon Chan-young) only has eyes for her.

When the outbreak occurs, we see On-jo fall to the cafeteria floor and get pulled to safety by Cheong-san. Just as we're about to write off On-jo as a teenage damsel in distress, she kicks into survival mode and figures out what needs to be done to keep them both alive. On-jo, whose biggest concern is often which way her hair looks prettiest, may not have the grades to get into a top university, but she is savvy. Whether she's eyeing her crush or using a firehose from the school's emergency cabinet as a battering ram to get into a locked classroom, On-jo's duality is brought to fully dimensional life by Park. Yes, we know zombie attacks are fictional, but Park's portrayal is so layered that it adds realism to an unrealistic genre.

Given Park's craft, her ability to morph into someone else isn't surprising. But the 19-year-old South Korean starlet consistently brings a sense of gravitas to her performances, embodying the youthful characters she portrays in a nuanced and truthful way. She could select girl-next-door or girlfriend roles that rely most on her physical beauty, but Park is an artist who has meticulously filled her résumé with intriguing roles that challenge her — and the viewer's perception of who she's playing.

# teenVOGUE

NEW HOLLYWOOD 2023



## PARK JI-HU

THE EMPATHETIC THESPIAN

Park Ji-hu wears an Alette **jacket and skirt**, Reike Nen **shoes**, a Katkim **ring**, and a Yael Sonia **ring**. **JINGYU LIN**

It's two days after Park Ji-hu celebrated Seollal, the Korean lunar new year, with her family in Daegu, and she's now at her management company's Seoul office for this hour-long Zoom interview. Dressed casually in a blue sweater and wide track pants,



she's wearing her long black hair straight, letting it frame her inquisitive face. Park shows no sign of fatigue, even though the self-proclaimed night owl went to bed just a few hours ago. Around the time this article is published, the actor will start her sophomore year at Hanyang University, where she's studying film and theater.

About a week after this interview, the actor took her first trip to the United States for a photo shoot with *Teen Vogue* in **New York**. Before transforming into a dramatic, ethereal character dressed in a gorgeous green designer gown and heels for the shoot, Park was wearing an oversized black sweatshirt, listening to a playlist that kicked off with EXO's "Love Shot." (Yes, she's a diehard fan of the K-pop group, and is especially fond of vocalist D.O.)

Park was just 14 when she starred in Kim Bora's **critically acclaimed** feature film *House of Hummingbird*. It was her first starring role, and she portrayed Eun-hee, a lonely high school girl seeking affirmation from a teacher. Her depiction, both somber and hopeful, won her accolades for a breakthrough performance. Park says that of all the roles she's played, Eun-hee — while completely different from herself — is the character she identifies with the most.

"Though I have not experienced in my own life the kind of loneliness Eun-hee faces, I understand her feelings at that age," Park tells *Teen Vogue*. "No matter how much love and affection you receive, you still want more."

When *House of Hummingbird* had its North American premiere at the 2019 Tribeca Film Festival, Park was invited to attend. As much as she wanted to go, she had to decline due to a conflict in her schedule. Was she shooting another film? Already at work on a new series?

"No, I had a test at school at the same time," Park explains. Then a 10th grader, she won Tribeca's best actress award in absentia.

Part of the dilemma of being a working actor *and* a full-time student is having to prioritize time management. Her schedule is a little easier these days, because she resides in Seoul with her older sister, who's also a college student. During her high school years, however, Park commuted from her family home in Daegu to Seoul to pursue her acting career. "I could've moved to Seoul earlier, but all my friends were in

high school in Daegu,” she recalls. “So I just rode the train back and forth. It was manageable.”

Given the amount of teenage bullying depicted in popular K-dramas such as *The Glory*, *Weak Hero Class One*, *Revenge of Others*, and her own series *All of Us Are Dead* — which has been confirmed for a **second season** — some viewers might assume these brutal depictions of teenage violence reflect some of what goes on in South Korean schools. But Park says shyly of her experience in school, “No one was jealous of me. I had really good friends and teachers. The kids I went to school with were really nice. If I missed a day because of work, they would share their notes with me for my homework.” Luckily, she didn't go through any of those high-stakes situations you might see on screen, nor was she bullied by classmates. “I didn't see any of those types of scenarios that you see in dramas at my high school,” she says about her unique high school experience as an already recognizable actor. “I recognize that it does happen at some schools. I've seen the news stories about bullying, and that's what I relied on for some of my work.”

Netflix's hit 2022 K-drama *Little Women* was the first project she filmed as a high school graduate. Park portrays the youngest sister in the female-centric series that also stars Kim Go-eun and Nam Ji-hyun as her protective older siblings. (The show features *Squid Game* star Wi Ha-joon too.) Park credits her cast mates with making the experience so meaningful for her, and happily points out that for the first time in her career, she wasn't the *maknae*, or the youngest, on set.

“My acting partner for much of the series was Jeon Chae-eun, [who is two years younger than I am],” Park says. “She was the one I spent the most time with, and she was the first actress who I worked with who was younger than me. And so for the first time as an *eonni* [언니, an older sister or female friend to another girl], I felt like I should be a more responsible person for her and tried to offer a little guidance as her senior.”

Park is aware that not all viewers embraced her *Little Women* character, who was bluntly honest with her sisters and at times came across as thoughtless and cruel. But Park's performance fit the character, who wanted more from life than her family could offer; she also felt enormous guilt because her siblings went without so that she could have what they never did.

“I don't dislike any of the characters I've played, but if I had to choose one that I have affectionate frustration for, it'd be In-hye from *Little Women*,” Park says. “I think it's because she says such hurtful comments to her sisters. Even while I was acting, I was thinking, Oh, she shouldn't do that, she shouldn't say that. So I, too, was hurt by having to express her thoughts.”

Park's portrayal is beautifully layered, depicting how children can be burdened by the sacrifices of loved ones. As In-hye tells her sisters on the show, “In our poor family, I was a girl who always received a lot. I was always afraid that I may not be able to pay any of it back. I was afraid I'd end up unworthy of the love you showed me.”

Park didn't grow up with plans to become an actor or performer. But, she says, her parents clearly remember she had aspirations to achieve some kind of fame. "They said that I would watch TV and tell them I wanted people to be wearing T-shirts with my face on them one day," she says with a laugh. "They recalled me saying that I wanted to be known for doing something well. While those were the thoughtless comments of a child, I do remember thinking people on TV were cool. Now I'm at a point where people are beginning to know me a little for my work."

When she was in elementary school, Park's first goal was to become a TV-news announcer. One of her favorite K-dramas, the 2017 series *Fight for My Way*, presents a female protagonist as someone who struggles to hang onto her dreams of one day becoming an announcer.

Early in her career, acting was a hobby that Park felt might be beneficial in achieving her dream job. But the more she acted, the more she fell in love with the process. "As an actor, my goal is firm and clear," she says. "Of course, it's important to be good at my job. But through that, I recognize that my career is one that can provide lots of people with comfort and renewed strength. That's my top goal and something I really want to achieve."

As a viewer, she has a love for zombie productions, which came in handy when she tackled *All of Us Are Dead*. She is hopeful that, in season two, her character will have the opportunity to kick some zombie butt alongside her costars.

She may be best known for playing somewhat somber, thoughtful characters, but Park says there's one genre she'd like to explore in the future: "My natural personality is actually very bright and cheerful," she notes. "So I'd love to be able to showcase that side some day, perhaps playing someone involved in a romance."

She won't reveal her ideal leading man — diplomatically saying there are too many talented actors to choose from — but says another career goal "is to play lots of different types of characters in a variety of genres. I'm preparing really hard to show a variety of sides to myself. So I ask that [viewers] give me lots of love."

Park's most recent role was as an enigmatic high school student in breakout K-pop group **NewJeans'** music video for "Ditto," which offered a hint of romance with Choi Hyun-wook (*Twenty-Five Twenty-One*). But unlike Choi, who is clearly recognizable, Park's full face is never shown; her character is hidden behind a camcorder or seen from behind.

"I loved the concept, and I'm a NewJeans fan," she says about the off-camera concept. "We are all of a similar age, so we had a lot in common and had fun. We talked about delicious food and the movies that we liked. Though I'm shy in the beginning and can be a little bit embarrassed and nervous, NewJeans thankfully approached me first and we were able to speak comfortably to one another."

For now, though, Park is looking forward to juggling university life with a thriving acting career. "[Even now in college], there are times it can be difficult, but acting and studying and being a student are things I want to do," she says. "Instead of thinking about how hard it is, I think about how, if I work a little harder, I can overcome any hardships and accomplish both."

The actor will next be seen opposite Park Seo-joon (*Itaewon Class*) in the film *Concrete Utopia*, where she plays "a bit of a mysterious character in the aftermath of a huge earthquake." Her role is that of a high school student who survives and navigates the disaster alongside the adult characters.

At Park's age, it's not unusual for her to play student characters. She is a petite five-foot-three-inches and still young enough to convincingly play high schoolers for the next few years if she chooses to. But what makes her an exceptional standout is the depth she brings to her characters. A less skilled actor could come off as needy or trite. But Park brings authenticity to her roles, the kind of genuineness that makes viewers forget the characters they're watching aren't real. Here's hoping that in the upcoming season of *All of Us Are Dead* – which hasn't started filming yet — she gets to fulfill her wish of tackling the zombies head-on.

*Interpreting provided by Jiye Kim.*



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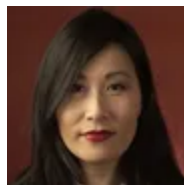
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