

# Korea's Forgotten War:

APPROPRIATING AND SUBVERTING THE VIETNAM WAR IN KOREAN POPULAR IMAGININGS<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

One of the best films made in Korea during the cinema boom of the nineties and the noughties, is *Raybang* 라이방, a movie that would not have been made without the Vietnam War and that is in fact one large indirect reference to the South Korean participation in that war and the issues surrounding that participation. The title of the movie, *Raybang*, is the Korean pronunciation of the American brand of sunglasses Ray-Bans, made popular in Korea during the Vietnam War, when many soldiers would send home pictures of themselves wearing those sunglasses, purchased in the post exchanges (PX) of the US army.<sup>2</sup> In the movie, three taxi drivers try to find a way out of their economically difficult lives and finally settle on attempting to rob a wealthy woman in their neighbourhood. With the money, they plan to escape their poverty-ridden and dead-end lives to start all over again in Vietnam. One of the taxi drivers has an uncle who runs an army dump and has fought in Vietnam. This uncle dresses in fatigues as if he is still serving, offering advice to his nephew and staying in touch with other veterans. Never married and active in a socially little appreciated profession, he symbolizes the status of Vietnam veterans in contemporary Korean soci-



Helicopter from the Maenghoda Division

ety: marginalized, unrecognized for their contribution to South Korea's economic growth and only accepted if they detach themselves from their war experiences (which is something the uncle cannot and will not do). *Raybang* is a subtle tribute to the unrecognized toils and sacrifices of the silent majority of hard-working men and women who never had any prospect of making good. In the movie, their sunglasses serve to demarcate the space between the outside world and its demands, and their inner space, which is filled with their dreams. Other elements in the movie, such as the distrust of one of the men, a university alumnus, of the domestic media and the economic and political analyses presented by the uncle, not only show

1 I would like to express my gratitude to Dr Shin Hyunjoon 신현준 and Dr Kim Yerim 김예림, who helped me in thinking about the topic and who obtained articles for me which I would otherwise have not been able to consult in time. Professor Yook Youngsoo 옥영수 commented on this article and had some very helpful suggestions, for which I am thankful.

2 It is now used as a generic term for any kind of sunglasses, in particular those that resemble the pilot sunglasses made popular during the early seventies. This example is from Hwang Sok-yong's first published short story *Camel's Eye*: "그는 믿기지 않는다는 듯이 라이방을 벗고 자세히 살핀 다음, 손가락에 끼워 운전 수의 컷전에다 비벼 주었다."

a high degree of understanding about their position in South Korean society, but also reinforce the importance of the multivalent image of Vietnam in South Korean popular imaginings.

The story of the South Korean participation in the Vietnam War also offers insight into the interaction between professional and public or amateur views on history. I will argue that the mainstream professional views on the history of South Korean participation owe everything to the public/amateur views that preceded them. With the exception of a tiny number of professional historians (who furthermore have only recently started publishing on this subject), professional, official and public perceptions of the Vietnam War largely coincide, even if the significance read into it may be different. The historical understanding of the South Korean participation seems to have escaped a defining characteristic of post-Korean War South Korean historiography: the notion that in writing history, the historian (whether professional or amateur) should attempt to hold accountable persons (events) in order to arrive at a moral evaluation of a particular part of history. Despite the importance of the Vietnam War in Korean history, this did not happen with regard to historical narratives of the war in South Korea. Instead, the politics of suffering (the exploitation for political ends of human suffering) have determined and, I would add, obstructed the debate. It is this phenomenon that I wish to look into here as it will provide excellent insight into the junction of public, private, professional and official historiography.

This article mainly deals with the experiences of South Korean soldiers who went to Vietnam. As such, it deals only with male experiences. Yet, the Vietnam War was a war fought and experienced by women as much as by men. Moreover, the war was fought not only by Viet-

namese, but also by Korean women, as one recent movie (*Sunny* 님은 먼 곳에) shows.<sup>3</sup> Korean women went to Vietnam for many of the same reasons Korean men went: to escape from poverty, chase the desire for change and adventure, grab an opportunity for success and wealth, or because they were forced by their jobs. The women who went there were entertainers, singers, dancers, musicians, prostitutes, businesswomen and merchants. Fortunately, the subject is not completely ignored,<sup>4</sup> although much research remains to be done on this subject to dispel the powerful myth that women in Vietnam were, like the myth says they are in most conflict situations, passive bystanders or victims. This article, however, is not the place to do that.

It should be mentioned here that the exploitation and suffering of certain groups for political ends is a widespread phenomenon. Not only in Korean history (the way the comfort women's suffering has been mobilized in the interest of the nation comes to mind), but particularly so in post-colonial contexts. Examples of American reactions to the Vietnam War, Dutch denials of the horrors wrought by colonial domination in Indonesia or Japanese failures to come to terms with the atrocities committed during World War II (and in Korea) come to mind – a complete list of similar cases would be virtually endless. These cases are united by a mechanism that prioritizes (and ultimately exclusively recognizes) the suffering of the perpetrators and depends on the (tacit) approval of the public.

The participation of South Korean army units in the Vietnam War is a largely forgotten event in South Korean popular imaginings, even if the financial benefits associated with what was then called the *wõllam p'abyõng* 越南派兵 (dispatch of troops to Vietnam) made possible

3 In this movie by Yi Chunik, the female protagonist (Suni or Sunny) goes to Vietnam to find her husband, sleep with him and bring his seed home in her womb to start a family, all on the insistence of her mother-in-law. Although I read *Sunny* at first as not much more than a (particularly well-executed) tearjerker, the struggles of a young married woman with patriarchy (enforced by older women) and her journey from a virginal performer to an experienced entertainer who uses her body to entice men in order to realize her objectives, make this movie stand out between similarly themed movies. I owe the suggestion not to dismiss *Sunny* as a work of art that sincerely engages with these problems to Dr Choi Kyeong-Hee, which I gratefully acknowledge here. As a film dealing with the subject of women going to war in Vietnam, it is an important contribution. As a film dealing with the ROK participation in the Vietnam War, it is much less so for reasons I will explain later. Just before this issue of *Korean Histories* went to press, an article was published that examined two South Korean films dealing with the Vietnam War, one of which was *Sunny*. The author explains *Sunny* as a movie that turns the battlefield into a home front, thus removing the ideological aura of the Vietnam War for Korea from the historical experience. Although that article is a thoughtful study which lays bare several links between popular culture and the Vietnam War in South Korea, I cannot but disagree with this particular statement. As I will argue, the process of turning the Vietnam War into a Korean affair (a process encountered in literature and historiography as well) is *ipso facto* ideological by harnessing the historical experience of the South Korean participation in the Vietnam War in narratives of South Korean development. A particular poignant example is a newspaper article that includes the 350,000 ROK soldiers who went to fight in Vietnam as part of the Korean diaspora, turning an act of military aggression into a cause of pride. See Im Sunman 임순만, “창간 20주년 맞아 ‘한국인 디아스포라의 재발견’ 특집 시리즈,” 국민일보 10 December, 2008, p. 41; Youngju Ryu, “Korea's Vietnam: Popular Culture, Patriarchy, Intertextuality,” *Review of Korean Studies* 29.3 (2009): pp. 101-123.

4 Kim Hyõna 김현아, *Chõnjaeng-gwa yõsõng: Han'guk chõnjaeng-gwa Paet'unam chõnjaeng sog-õi yõsõng, kiõk, chaehyõn* 전쟁과 여성: 한국 전쟁과 베트남 전쟁 속의 여성, 기억, 재현 (Seoul: Yõrum õndõk 여룸언덕, 2004).

South Korea's remarkable economic growth during the late sixties and seventies. The reluctance in popular media to reminisce about the Korean participation in the Vietnam War – where an estimated total of 350,000 South Korean soldiers were deployed during a ten-year period, there never being less than 50,000 soldiers for most of this period – is tied to a complex set of perceptions of Vietnam, the Vietnam War and Korea's role in it. This reluctance is also reflected in the lack of historical studies confronting this essential part of post-war South Korean history.<sup>5</sup> Ironically, in more recent decades South Korea has looked at Vietnam with renewed interest, seeing it as a country to make investments in, to get cheap but educated labour from and to import brides from. Vietnam is also looked upon as a mirror, both with regard to Korea's future as an already unified country and with a sense of nostalgia as a developing country. The presence of historical memories of Vietnam – a country where 350,000 ROK soldiers fought and over 5,000 died – is nonetheless surprisingly limited.

State censorship concerning historical research about



Inscription that says that all invaders of Vietnam with blood on their hands will not return home. Still from R-Point (2004)

the Vietnam War can offer no more than a partial explanation for this phenomenon.<sup>6</sup> The potential embarrassment for the ROK government is still enormous: massacres committed by ROK troops in Vietnam are known to have happened. Given South Korea's experience of US massacres during the Korean War, the ROK government would find itself in a very awkward position if it were to be accused of similar atrocities by the Vietnamese government.<sup>7</sup> As a result, censorship of academic research did exist and the Vietnam War is still a much neglected topic in Korean academia.<sup>8</sup> Censorship has been lifted for more than a decade, but the Vietnam War is still as absent as ever in South Korean popular imaginations. The only place where the Vietnam War and the South

Korean participation in it seem to be remembered, is in the arts, in particular literature and cinema, and even then not in any abundance. In this article, I will scrutinize literary and cinematic perceptions of the Korean participation in the Vietnam War against the backdrop of contemporary relations between South-Korea and Vietnam. This backdrop – which is inhabited by immigrant

5 Comprehensive histories of modern Korea barely pay any attention to the Vietnam War and the consequences the ROK army's presence had. For an insightful overview of the lacunae in research on the Vietnam War in South Korea, see Pak T'aegyun 박태균, "Han'guk-kun-ui Pet'unamjŏn ch'amjŏn 한국군의 베트남전 참전," *Yŏksa pip'yŏng* 역사비평 80 (2007): pp. 288-311.

6 Pak T'aegyun 박태균, "Han'guk-kun-ui Pet'unamjŏn ch'amjŏn," pp. 288-311.

7 As indeed happened several times. It needs to be pointed out here that the ROK government was initially opposed to an in-depth investigation of the Nogun-ri massacre. Charles J. Hanley, Sang-Hun Choe and Martha Mendoza, *The Bridge at No Gun Ri: A Hidden Nightmare from the Korean War* (New York: Holt, 2001). For an account of massacres perpetrated by ROK troops, see Kwon, Heonik, *After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

8 Most research focuses either on technical issues, such as the minutiae of the decision-making processes leading to the South-Korean participation, or positions itself squarely behind the then government, citing the need to fight communism in Asia. A few scholars have undertaken the task of charting the influence of the Vietnam War on the South Korean economy (and culture), but their work, valuable though it is, has not (yet) been made part of mainstream historical narratives in South Korea or abroad. These articles are particularly worth reading: Pak T'aegyun, "Han'guk-kun-ui Pet'unamjŏn ch'amjŏn," pp. 288-311; Ch'oe Ch'ŏnggi 최정기, "Han'guk-kun-ŭi Pet'unamjŏn ch'amjŏn, ottŏk'e kiŏk-toego innŭn-ga? Kongshikchŏk kiŏk-kwa taehang kiŏg-ŭi ch'airŭl chungshim-ŭro 한국군의 베트남전 참전, 어떻게 기억되고 있는가? - 공식적인 기억과 대항기억의 차이를 중심으로," *Minjuŭi-wa in'gwŏn* 민주주의와 인권 1 (2009): pp. 65-92; Yun Ch'ungno 윤충로, "'Pet'unam chŏnjaeng ch'amjŏn kunin-ŭi chiphapchŏk chŏngch'esŏng hyŏngsŏng-gwa chibae ideologi-ŭi chaesaengsan 베트남전 참전 군인의 집합적 정체성 형성과 지배 이데올로기의 재생산," *Kyŏngje-wa sahoe* 경제와 사회 76 (2007): pp. 196-221, 324; idem, "'P'awŏl kisolcha-ŭi Pet'unam chŏnjaeng kyŏnghŏm-gwa saenghwal segye-ŭi pyŏnhwa 파월(派越) 기술자의 베트남전쟁 경험과 생활세계의 변화," *Sahoe-wa yŏksa* 사회와 역사 71 (2006): pp. 217-250; idem, "Itch'in chŏnjaeng, itch'in saramdŭl: 'kunjŏn-omnŭn kunin' p'awŏl kisolcha-ŭi Pet'unam chŏnjaeng iyagi 잇힌 전쟁, 잇힌 사람들 - '군 번없는 군인' 파월기술자의 베트남전쟁 이야기," *Mal* 말 248 (2007): pp. 72-77; idem, "'Pet'unam chŏnjaeng shigi 'Wŏllam chaebŏl'ŭi hyŏngsŏng-gwa p'awŏl kisolcha-ŭi chŏhang: Hanjin-gŭrup-ŭl chungshim-ŭro 베트남전쟁 시기 '월남제벌'의 형성과 파월(派越)기술자의 저항 - 한진그룹의 사례를 중심으로," *Sahoe-wa yŏksa* 사회와 역사 79: (2008): pp. 93-128. Finally, Kim Yerim 김예림, "1960nyŏndae chunghuban kaebal naesyŏnllijŭm-gwa chungsan ch'ŭng kajŏng p'ant'aji-ŭi munhwa chŏngch'ihak 1960년대 중후반 개발 내셔널리즘과 중산층 가정 판타지의 문화정치학," in "*Naengjŏn Ashia-ŭi munhwa p'unggyŏng* 2: 1960-1970nyŏndae 냉전 아시아의 문화풍경 2 - 1960~1970년대, edited by Sŏnggonghoedae Tong-Ashia yŏn'guso 성공회대 동아시아연구소 (Seoul: Hyŏnshil munhwa yŏn'gu 현실문화연구, 2009), pp. 403-431.

labourers, import brides, expatriate businessmen and investors, war veterans, popular language and culture guidebooks, and North Koreans in transit – places the virtual absence of shared memories in South Korea of the Vietnam War in an intricate and interesting perspective, one that obfuscates rather than clarifies matters. Such a perspective moreover begs the question how it is possible that one of the defining events of Park Chung-Hee's 박정희 presidency, and indeed of modern Korean history, has remained so neglected, while at the same time being so accessible. The majority of Vietnam veterans are still alive, yet other than through their activities in (now also web-based) veteran associations for which there is little interest outside of the group of veterans themselves, they are not very visible in South Korean society as a significant social group.

The neglect that has befallen the role of the Vietnam War as the economic catalyst in the developing economies in Asia during the sixties and seventies is mirrored in the disregard in South Korea for the Korean participation in this war. The wealth of American literature and movies on the Vietnam War contrasts sharply with its virtual absence in South Korea.<sup>9</sup> Australia, which sent less than 4,500 soldiers to Vietnam, also produced so-called Vietnam War literature.<sup>10</sup> South Korean literature has produced just a handful of novels or novellas dealing with the Vietnam War, although among these novels, *The Shadow of Arms* by Hwang Sok-yong is one of the masterworks of postwar Korean literature. Similarly, Korean cinema, despite experiencing a boom in the last two decades and despite having a fixation with historically themed movies, has not produced many movies that deal with the Vietnam War. Moreover, among the movies that in one way or another deal with Vietnam and the war, there are no truly excellent movies, no movie that is in any way comparable with Hwang's *The Shadow of Arms*. Interestingly, American literature on the Vietnam War generally

deals with the experiences of individual soldiers during and after the war, while its Korean counterpart displays a very strong awareness of the larger international circumstances, which made the individual soldiers in their own estimation in fact 'American mercenaries.'<sup>11</sup> This awareness contrasts sharply with the selective remembrance the Korean participation has encountered in Korea itself, where that same awareness is almost completely lacking. It is this tension between the awareness of the position of the Korean soldier in Vietnam (both by himself and by the nation that sent him there) and his crucial contribution to the economic and social development of Korea on the one hand, and the oblivion to which he was sentenced in Korea after the war on the other hand that is at the centre of this article.

### SOUTH KOREAN TROOPS IN VIETNAM, 1966-1975: HISTORICAL PERCEPTIONS

When in 1965 the first Korean combat troops were shipped out to Vietnam (after an initial commitment in 1964 of 130 military instructors and 10 Taekwondo instructors),<sup>12</sup> President Park Chung-Hee in his farewell speech likened the leaving soldiers to a crusader army, clearly signifying the epochal nature of their mission. Park's decision to respond positively to Lyndon Johnson's call for troops was considered to be 'inevitable,' as it would enable the ROK government to repay the sixteen countries that had come to the ROK's military aid in 1950.<sup>13</sup> While this was quickly realized by the president and his advisors,<sup>14</sup> however, it was at the same time decided that the South Korean troops would not come cheap for the US.<sup>15</sup> According to one high-ranking bureaucrat in the Park administration, Vietnam was "Korea's El Dorado, where riches could be gained instantly."<sup>16</sup> Besides the obvious economic benefits associated with participating in the Vietnam War, the disappearance of security concerns related to a possible withdrawal of US troops from the peninsula was

9 John Newman with Ann Hilfinger, *Vietnam War Literature: An Annotated Bibliography of Imaginative Works about Americans Fighting in Vietnam* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1988).

10 Jeff Doyle, Jeffrey Grey, and Peter Pierce, *Australia's Vietnam War* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press Consortium, 2002).

11 Pak Jinim, *Narratives of the Vietnam War by Korean and American writers* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).

12 Ironically, the export of Taekwondo to Vietnam during the war is celebrated as a positive achievement in South Korea. See Pak Chôngjin 박정진, "Mu-rül t'onghae pon Han'guk munhwa: Han'guk-üi ch'oego- bürandü T'aegwöndo 武를 통해 본 한국문화: 15. 한국의 최고 브랜드," *Segye ilbo* 세계일보, 23 September 2009, pp. 26-32.

13 Pak Jinim, *Narratives of the Vietnam War*, p. 78; Robert M Blackburn, *Mercenaries and Lyndon Johnson's "More Flags,"* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Company, Inc.); Ch'oe Chônggi, "Han'guk-kun-üi Pet'ünamjön ch'amjön, ottök'e kiök-toego innün-ga?" pp. 65-92.

14 Kyudok Hong, *Unequal Partners: ROK-US Relations during the Vietnam War* (PhD. dissertation, University of South Carolina, 1991).

15 Although the impact of the Vietnam War on Korea's economic development has been decidedly understudied, the decision-making processes leading to South Korean participation have been studied rather intensively.

16 Yun Ch'unngno, Pet'ünam chönjaeng shigi 'Wöllam chaeböl'üi hyöngsöng," p. 96.

also taken into account.<sup>17</sup> Participation was furthermore considered to exercise a beneficial influence on domestic solidarity, constituting an effective means of countering the spread of communism in Asia.<sup>18</sup> The point that North and South Vietnam also furnished a compelling example to the Korean situation hardly needs to be made. Historians agree that security concerns and economic profit were the main reasons why the South Korean government agreed to send troops to Vietnam.<sup>19</sup> Economic benefits consisted of direct and indirect US financial aid, a per capita remittance for each soldier sent, the pay for the soldiers, advantageous loans, more favourable conditions for Korean export goods on the US market and the chance to manufacture and sell Korean products in Vietnam to the US army. Although Park's appraisal of the economic opportunities South Korea would gain on account of its participation in the Vietnam War – which were based on the example of the enormous profits Japan made during the Korean War – was correct, ironically Japan (which did not send troops to Vietnam) would make ten times more profit from the Vietnam War than South Korea.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, the South Korean economy was quite literally built on the economic profits generated by the Vietnam War and it is probably not an exaggeration to suppose that the miracle on the Han would not have taken place had South Korean troops not served in the Vietnam War.<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, there have been only very few analyses that stress the importance of the Vietnam War for the emergence of the economic miracle in South Korea (and in other Asian countries).<sup>22</sup> A representative general his-



South Korean entertainers in Vietnam. Still from *Sunny* (2008)

tory of Korea (one of the best-selling histories of Korea in Korea) states the following:

*The dispatch of troops to Vietnam was criticized on the ground that it was like 'selling the blood of our young people' and indeed many soldiers died over there, while there are even now veterans who suffer all kinds of after-effects caused by the defoliants [used in Vietnam], but it also considerably helped along economic development. Construction companies penetrated Vietnam which opened the way for the export of labourers, and after the war these labourers and their installations came to penetrate the Middle East. Leaning on the special privileges associated with the Vietnam War, economic development began to become visible after the second half of the sixties.*<sup>23</sup>

This view of Korea's economic development attributes much more weight to other factors, such as Park Chung-Hee's administrative policies (in which the state planned

17 See for instance Ch'oe Chōnggi, "Han'guk-kun-ūi Pet'ūnamjōn ch'amjōn, ottōk'e kiōk-toego innūn-ga?" p. 76. According to a 2004 report by the Ministry of Defense, there were three reasons why South Korea decided to intervene in the Vietnam War: 1. the mission served the strengthening of domestic political stability and international (US) ties; 2. to raise the strategic and fighting capabilities of the ROK army and increase its military self-reliance; 3. to obtain economic support and cooperation from US and to secure special prerogatives connected to Vietnam mission, which would in effect mean the establishment of the foundations needed for rapid economic growth. It was also noted in the same report that the defeat in Vietnam was used for propaganda purposes in order to strengthen authoritarian rule in South Korea. See Kukpangbu (ed.), *Pet'ūnam chōnjaeng-gwa Han'guk-kun* (Seoul: Kunsu p'yōnch'an yōn'guso 군사편찬연구소, 2004).

18 Ch'oe Chōnggi, "Han'guk-kun-ūi Pet'ūnamjōn ch'amjōn, ottōk'e kiōk-toego innūn-ga?" p. 76.

19 Pak T'aegyūn, "Han'guk-kun-ūi Pet'ūnamjōn ch'amjōn," pp. pp. 288-311.

20 Kyudok Hong, *Unequal Partners*; Richard Stubbs, *Rethinking Asia's Economic Miracle: The Political Economy of War, Prosperity and Crisis* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), Ch. 4.

21 Stubbs, *Rethinking Asia's Economic Miracle*. See in particular Chapter 4 "The Vietnam War as economic catalyst."

22 Stubbs, *Rethinking Asia's Economic Miracle*, Ch. 4; Woo, Jung-en, *Race to the Swift: State and Finance in Korean Industrialization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 86.

23 Han Young-woo (Han Yōngu), *Tashi ch'annūn uri yōksa* (revised edition, Seoul: Kyōngsewōn, 2005), p. 594.

and led the economy), American development aid (while neglecting to specify how Vietnam War-related spending boosted regional economies in Asia) and the virtues of the export-oriented economy.<sup>24</sup> As in the example cited above, one paragraph is the length usually devoted to the Korean participation in the Vietnam War.<sup>25</sup> The successful penetration of Vietnam by Korean construction companies is seen as the first step to South Korea's remarkable economic growth and as such celebrated. Any attention to non-economic details is reserved for the consequences suffered by veterans, whose illnesses and traumas have never been recognized by the government.<sup>26</sup> In most accounts of the Vietnam War (and certainly in the most influential ones), criticism of the government is aimed at its neglect of its loyal soldiers, not at the decision to go to Vietnam and fight. The critical attitude characterizing much modern historiography has been entirely focused on domestic issues connected to the Vietnam War, blurring its international aspects.

Domestically, the consensus among professional and official historians is that both for economic and security-related reasons, South Korea did not have any option but to send troops to Vietnam. Even when acknowledging the Vietnamese suffering that resulted from this decision, which of course was allowed to stand for a decade, the tone of the debates emphasizes that the Koreans themselves suffered as much as the Vietnamese (if not more: the peninsula has still not been unified after all). There

are roughly three categories of Korean suffering routinely invoked in discussions of the Vietnam War: 1. Korean casualties (over 5,000 soldiers died in Vietnam and many more were wounded); 2. traumatized and wounded veterans 3. the fact that the training and experience gained by the ROK army in Vietnam was used against its own people when troops were put on the streets during the suppression of the Kwangju rebellion (when Vietnam veteran Chun Doo Hwan was president). This last point in particular is noteworthy. It is indeed true that the ROK army gained the skills, weapons and means to crack down on the insurgents in Kwangju in Vietnam. However, such a perception – that the Vietnam War caused the bloodshed in Kwangju – also makes clear to what extent the public ignores the consequences of the Korean participation in the Vietnam War for Vietnam itself. It is hard to imagine that such a bold statement, which completely passes over in silence any Vietnamese suffering, would otherwise be possible. At the same time, the consequences of the participation in the war that were beneficial to Korea are also not acknowledged, not even by left-leaning scholars.

Table 1 contains the number of ROK troops that served in Vietnam between 1964 and 1972. Both the soldiers themselves and the Korean government were paid by the US per soldier sent overseas; in addition, the ROK benefitted in several direct and indirect ways from increased US funding and from preferential treatment by the US. It goes without saying, then, that the full economic impact

<sup>24</sup> Stubbs, *Rethinking Asia's economic miracle*, Ch. 4.

<sup>25</sup> This is also true for South Korean histories of Vietnam. While such works treat the Vietnam War in detail, the Korean participation in this war is quickly glossed over. See for instance Yu In-sŏn 유인선, *Pet'ūnam-sa* 베트남사 (Seoul: Minūmsa 민음사, 1987); Song Chŏngnam 송정남, *Pet'ūnam-ūi yŏksa* 베트남의 역사 (Pusan: Pusan taehakkyo ch'ulp'anbu 부산대학교출판부, 2001; Ch'oe Pyŏnguk 최병욱, (*Ch'oe Pyŏnguk-gwa hamkke ilgŭn*) *Pet'ūnam hyŏndaesa* 베트남 근현대사 - 최병욱 교수와 함께 읽는 (Seoul: Ch'angbi 창비, 2008). An exception to some degree is Yu In-sŏn 유인선, *Saero ssūn Pet'ūnam-sa* 새로 쓴 베트남의 역사 (Seoul: Isan 이산, 2002). Han Honggu's *Taehan min'guk-sa 2: Arirang Kim San-esŏ Wŏllam Kim Sangsa-kkachi* 대한민국사 2 - 아리랑 김산에서 월남 김상사까지 (Seoul: Hangyŏre shinmunsa, 2003) is the only general history (although focused on a limited number of themes and by no means comprehensive) that takes issue with the victim consciousness that pervades perceptions of popular and professional Korean histories. In a provocative chapter Han Honggu deals with the Korean involvement in the Vietnam War. The title of this chapter is "From Arirang Kim San to Merchant Kim from Vietnam," juxtaposing the life of a Korean communist guerrilla in Manchuria with the economic profits derived from the ROK's army mercenary activities in Vietnam. It should incidentally not pass unnoticed that this book was published by the Hangyŏre company, whose weekly *Hangyŏre 21* initiated the debate about Korean atrocities committed in Vietnam.

<sup>26</sup> The articles by Yun Ch'ungno have remedied this situation to some extent. In several articles he makes use of history based on archival research and oral history to compile pictures of the formative influence of the Vietnam experience on Korean society and the growth of its export-oriented economy. Through interviews with technicians who went to Vietnam and whom he called "soldiers without service numbers," Yun established that these men shared their motivation to go to Vietnam with the ROK soldiers. For them too escape from poverty, new professional experiences and an escape from the daily drudge of their lives at home were the main reasons to go to Vietnam. Yun's research offers an excellent avenue to appreciate how through the waging of war militarism, authoritarianism and developmentalism may be positioned in such a way as to unite with a people's desire for wealth, in effect establishing developmentalism and authoritarianism as the mainstays of a healthy economy (or at least, such perceptions). See Yun Ch'ungno, "Pet'ūnam chŏnjaeng ch'amjŏn kunin-ūi chiphapchŏk chŏngch'esŏng hyŏngsŏng," pp. 196-221, 324; idem, "P'awŏl kisuлча-ūi Pet'ūnam chŏnjaeng kyŏnghŏm," pp. 217-250; idem, "Itch'in chŏnjaeng, itch'in saramdŭl," pp. 72-77; idem, "Pet'ūnam chŏnjaeng shigi 'Wŏllam chaebŏl'ūi hyŏngsŏng," pp. 93-128. Also see the intermittent mainstream newspaper articles about Agent Orange and the suffering of South Korean veterans, such as for instance: U Hyŏnsŏp 우현섭, "Yŏron madang: 'chalmot' injŏng anŭn kukka yugongja 여론마당/ '잘못' 인정받은 국가유공자," *Munhwa ilbo*, 5 April 2001, p. 7; anon., "Nyusŭ kkurŏmi: Koyŏpche kohyŏrap, p'ibuyŏm wonin il sudo 뉴스 꾸러미/ '고엽제 고향업, 피부염 원인일수도," *Kyŏngnyang shinmun* 경향신문, 14 October 2004, p. 10; Pyŏn Yŏngjun 변영준, "'Weekend raunji: 'Chŏnu-yŏ, 40nyŏn man iguna' p'awŏl yongsa tashi mungh'inda," Weekend 라운지/ "전우여, 40년 만이구나" 파월 용사 다시 뭉친다." *Kungmin ilbo* 국민일보, 23 May 2009, p. 5; Pak Kŏnhŏng 박건형, "6il hyŏnch'ungil... toere koeroun kukka yugongja-dŭl 6일 현충일... 되레 괴로운 유공자들," *Sŏul shinmun* 서울신문, 6 June 2009, p. 8.

Table 1: ROK troops in Vietnam (1964-1972)

	Total	Regular troops					Misc.
		Total	Army	Navy	Airforce	Marines	
1964	140	140	140				
1965	20,541	20,541	15,973	261	21	4,286	
1966	45,605	45,605	40,534	722	54	4,295	
1967	48,839	48,839	41,877	735	83	6,144	
1968	49,869	49,838	42,745	785	93	6,215	31
1969	49,755	49,720	42,772	767	85	6,096	35
1970	48,510	48,478	41,503	772	107	6,096	34
1971	45,694	45,663	42,345	662	98	2,558	31
1972	37,438	37,405	36,871	411	95	28	33

Source: Ministry of Defense, Kunsu p'yönch'an yön'guso, *Pet'ünam chönjaeng-gwa Han'gukgun* (Seoul: Ministry of Defense, 2004), p. 196.

of the Vietnam War in South Korea was immense. The economic benefits associated with the Vietnam War have of course not gone unnoticed, although their full measure has rarely been taken.<sup>27</sup> As with the argument that the Koreans suffered as much as the Vietnamese, the economic motives for participating in the war are more often than not presented as being coercive:

*The testimony of the minister of National Defense shows that the Korean government could not withdraw their soldiers from Vietnam because Korea was able to enjoy enormous economic benefits from sending its soldiers to Vietnam [...] according to the statistics in America, the amount of money Korean soldiers in Vietnam have earned is as much as 171 million dollars in 1968 and 200 million dollars in 1969. Besides, the suggested amount of financial support from America when the Korean government dispatches additional military forces was 200 million dollars. Considering that Korean GNP was no more than 5.2 billion, it is obvious that Korea could not withdraw from the Vietnam War.*<sup>28</sup>

To put it differently, the poverty of South Korea in the sixties made it impossible to refuse the economic (and other) benefits associated with going to war in Vietnam. The poverty argument is not only popular with economists, but is advocated by mainstream historians as well.<sup>29</sup> It has also found expression in literature and cinema, more about which below.

A crucial element of the way the Korean participation in the Vietnam War is perceived is the mirror function attributed to Vietnam. Not only do Vietnamese and Koreans share the burden of being Asian in a century marred with wars, exploitation and colonization, on a more mundane level Vietnam represented how Korea had been in the past as well as how it could be in the future. Interestingly, historians agree that the consideration of this mirror function played a part in the decision-making processes that led to the ROK army's participation.<sup>30</sup> As Ch'ae Myöngshin, the first commander of the ROK troops in Vietnam, put it in his biography *The Vietnam War and Myself: The Memoirs of Ch'ae Myöngshin* (베트남 전쟁과 나: 채명신의 회고록), in the end the downfall of freedom and South Vietnam should serve as a lesson to

27 According to documents only declassified in 2005, South Korea received 546 million dollars from the US between 1965 and 1969 for the soldiers it had sent to Vietnam. From 1970 onwards, more money was paid on the condition that the number of South Korean troops in Vietnam would increase. Interestingly, the salary of ROK soldiers (officers, NCOs and privates alike) was lower than that of the Philippine or Thai army. In all, during these five years, South Korea earned less from the Vietnam War than Japan and about as much as Taiwan. Both countries, of course, never sent troops to Vietnam. According to the same documents, the pay per diem for the troops (including NCOs) ranged from 1.25 dollar to 1.90 dollar. See Ch'a Yun'gyöng 차운경, "Pet'ünamjön oegyo munsö konggae: Pet'ünamjön 5nyön ch'amjön kyöngjejök idük 5ök tallö 베트남전 외교문서 공개/베트남전 5년 참전 경제적 이득 5억 달러," *Segye ilbo* 세계일보, 27 August 2005, p. 7.

28 Mun Changgük 문장극, *Han-Mi kaltüng-üi yön'gu* 한미 갈등의 연구 (Seoul: Nanam 나남, 1994), p. 129. Quoted in Pak Jinim, *Narratives of the Vietnam War*, p. 91.

29 Han Young-woo, *Tashi ch'annün uri yöksa*, pp. 594.

30 See Ch'oe Chönggi, "Han'guk-kun-üi Pet'ünamjön ch'amjön, ottök'e kiök-toego innün-ga?" p. 76.

31 Ch'ae Myöngshin 채명신, *Wöllam p'abyöng-gwa na: Ch'ae Myöngshin-üi hoegorok* 베트남 전쟁과 나: 채명신의 회고록 (Seoul: P'albokwön 팔복원), p. 484.

South Korea.<sup>31</sup> While for the soldiers who went there Vietnam mirrored their own experiences of almost two decades before, for policy makers the Vietnamese case offered useful food for thought. The notion that Vietnam could serve to show what would happen in a country that had been unified by arms but was still divided by ideology, was closely related to the idea of Vietnam as a training ground for Korean troops to prepare for the inevitable clash with communist Asia in general and North Korea in particular. The ROK troops were trained in practical skills, among others obtained through the numerous search-and-destroy missions undertaken by them; they also acquired and familiarized themselves with new weapons (most notably the M-16). Vietnam moreover represented a battlefield where the struggle against communism could be fought and rehearsed in case that struggle would visit the peninsula again.<sup>32</sup>

Such a perception of Vietnam in relation to South Korea inevitably obscures the view of the true importance of the Vietnam War for South Korean development. It makes an indexation of the profits derived from the war impossible, even though it clarifies South Korea's position in the world and shows its powerlessness in the face of US imperialism. Both of these latter lessons have been learned and incorporated by historians of South Korea. The first has been neglected. Along with a severe underestimation of the economic importance of the Vietnam War for South Korean development, two other issues have received less critical treatment than otherwise might have been the case. The first issue is the question whether the South Korean soldiers were mere mercenaries fighting just for money. The second is the contentious issue of the massacres allegedly perpetrated by ROK troops on Vietnamese civilians.

Opinions are divided on the suggestion that the ROK



Colonial associations. Still from *Muoi* (2007)

soldiers were mercenaries,<sup>33</sup> but here it is not so much the answer but rather the debate itself that is of interest. This discussion clearly shows that the moral dimensions of the South Korean participation in the Vietnam War are being debated (the implicit principle being that fighting as a mercenary is morally wrong, while fighting to root out communism or to repay a debt is not), but also that those moral dimensions are restricted to Korea. There is little to no debate concerning the participation itself; the discussion merely centres on its status. This is a theme that also frequently recurs in fictional works on the Vietnam War, since it is an issue closely related to the self-perception of the Vietnam veterans.

The second issue is much more serious and has deeper implications. Partly prompted by American debates about massacres such as My Lai, reports about massacres of civilians were already in circulation during the decade that ROK troops were active in Vietnam. The efficiency of the ROK troops inevitably came at a high civilian cost,<sup>34</sup> prompting Commander-in-Chief Ch'ae Myōngshin to issue instructions on how not to hurt civilians. A source of pride for Ch'ae, at the same time the issuing of these instructions served as a red flag for historians.<sup>35</sup> In his memoirs, Ch'ae offered the following explanation for the numerous civilian massacres:

<sup>32</sup> A recent paper from the (government-funded) Korea Institute for Industrial Economics and Trade (KIET, 산업연구원) provides a good example of this notion. It uses Vietnam as an example in an attempt to devise realistic (trade) policies with regard to North Korea. See Kim Sōkchin 김석진, *Pet'ūnam sarye-rūl t'onghae pon Pukhan taeoe muyōk chōngsanghwa chōnmang* 베트남 사례를 통해 본 북한의 대외무역 정상화 전망 (Seoul: Sanōp yōn'guwōn 산업연구원, 2007).

<sup>33</sup> Comprehensive histories tend to skirt the issue. The debate is basically divided between conservative voices who maintain that the ROK troops fought in the name of freedom and anti-communism, and non-conservatives who think that the ROK troops were simply sent to Vietnam for money. This is one of the reasons why Vietnam veterans are usually more sympathetic to the conservative forces in South Korean society than to the progressive camp.

<sup>34</sup> Ch'ae Myōngshin, *Wōllam p'abyōng-gwa na*, pp. 177-192.

<sup>35</sup> Kim Hyōna, *Chōnjaeng-ūi kiōk, kiōg-ūi chōnjaeng* (Seoul: Ch'aekkalp'ī 책갈피, 2002), pp. 12-16.

*The massacres of civilians perpetrated by the Vietcong were manufactured to look as if the Americans had committed them.*<sup>36</sup>

He also claimed that the massacres had been carried out by the Vietcong and North Korean soldiers dressed as South Korean soldiers.<sup>37</sup> While these claims cannot be taken as representative, South Korean involvement in these massacres is a thorny subject. The issue is from time to time revisited at the insistence of the Vietnamese government and it is still a source of embarrassment for the South Korean government.<sup>38</sup> Although one historian estimates that between 1970 and 1972 alone thirty-one civilian massacres took place,<sup>39</sup> the issue is mostly neglected in official and professional histories. Historians generally choose to either not mention the issue or to quote Ch'ae Myōngshin's famous instructions to his soldiers that it is "better to let 100 guerrillas escape than to kill one innocent man," implicitly elevating this statement to the plane of historical truth.

Except for the recent work of a very small number of historians, the South Korean involvement in the Korean War is severely lacking in research. This is particularly noteworthy given the war's epochal importance for the development of South Korea and the present importance of Vietnam for South Korea. This short overview of professional and official perceptions of the Vietnam War suggests that the origin point of these perceptions should perhaps not be located within the realms of professional historiography, given the noticeably restricted nature of the investigations and their similarity with the views already popular with both politicians and the people on the streets. As mentioned above, the arts are a good place to start looking for perceptions of the Vietnam War. One of South Korea's most celebrated authors, Hwang Sok-yong, quite literally built his career on his experiences in Viet-

nam. His prose debut *Camel's Eye* (낙타 눈깔)<sup>40</sup> is a short story about a Korean soldier who has just returned from Vietnam and is waiting for his train home. *The Shadow of Arms*, arguably Hwang's greatest work of fiction, is an exploration and demasqué of the economic and political global mechanisms behind the Vietnam War.

## THE VIETNAM WAR IN LITERATURE

The deployment of Korean troops in Vietnam lasted a decade and committed some 350,000 soldiers, but only a handful of mainstream novels and novellas have been devoted to this subject. These novels are Hwang Sok-yong's *The Shadow of Arms*,<sup>41</sup> Pak Yōnghān's *The Faraway River* and An Junghyo's *White Badge*. The dearth of Vietnam War literature in South Korea has been related to South Korea's 'passive' contribution to the war.<sup>42</sup> The argument is basically that since the South Korean soldiers were involved in the war as mercenaries, their emotional attachment was not sufficient to produce 'real' literature in any significant amount.<sup>43</sup> The absence of a literary tradition on the Vietnam War has also been understood as a consequence of the virtual neglect of the war in South Korean public discourses.<sup>44</sup> Regardless of the reasons behind this phenomenon – which can probably not be separated from the general disinterest in the Vietnam War – the few novels dedicated to the Korean participation in this war share a number of similarities with the general discourse. Even though *The Shadow of Arms* and *The Faraway River* are products of what is usually known as the progressive forces in South Korean society, the lack of other novels dealing with similar concerns, themes and background has created a situation in which the interpretation of the significance of the Vietnam War is not truly contested.<sup>45</sup> A similar situation is found in Korean cinema, if only because the connection between literature and cinema is traditionally strong in South Korea.

<sup>36</sup> Ch'ae Myōngshin, *Wōllam p'abyōng-gwa na*, p. 484.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 487.

<sup>38</sup> See <http://www.hani.co.kr/h21/vietnam/vietnam280.html> for an index of the stories *Hangyōre 21* covered [accessed 5 February 2009].

<sup>39</sup> Yi Samsōng 이삼성, *Iship segi munmyōng-gwa yaman 20세기 문명과 야만* (Seoul: Han'gilsa 한길사, 1998), pp. 221-226.

<sup>40</sup> English translation to be found at <http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article.php?lab=CamelsEye> [accessed 10 February 2009].

<sup>41</sup> For an excellent explanation of *The Shadow of Arms* as a critique of US aggression in Vietnam Korean war memories as a counterhistory of the Vietnam War, see Theodore Hughes, "Korean Memories of the Vietnam and Korean Wars: A Counter-History", *Japan Focus*, 12 April 2007, found at [http://japanfocus.org/Theodore\\_Hughes/2406](http://japanfocus.org/Theodore_Hughes/2406) [accessed 12 February 2009].

<sup>42</sup> Song Sūngch'ōi 宋承哲, "Pet'ūnam chōnjaeng sosōllon: Yongbyōng-ui kyohun 베트남전쟁 소설론: 용병의 교훈," *Ch'angjak-kwa pip'yōng* 80 (1993): pp. 77-94.

<sup>43</sup> Although this may explain a lack of interest from the part of the South Korean audience, this does not explain the lack of works produced.

<sup>44</sup> This neglect in public discourse is among others caused by the fact that the suffering of Korean Vietnam veterans is conceptualized as individual suffering rather than suffering resulting from their participation in the Vietnam War. See Ch'oe Chōnggi, "Han'guk-kun-ūi Pet'ūnamjōn ch'amjōn, ottōk'e kiōk-toeg innūn-ga?" pp. 65-92.

<sup>45</sup> Which cannot be said about any other event of similar importance in Korean modern history.

Both the official and the popular perceptions of the participation in the Vietnam War reappear in literary guise in these works. The realization that money was the main motivation for participation and that the young soldiers, often from poor backgrounds themselves, were sacrificed in order to maintain the economic momentum, pervades in particular *The Shadow of Arms*.<sup>46</sup> This novel is almost completely devoted to the economic mechanisms behind modern warfare; it can be read as an exploration of the economic motives leading to and sustaining warfare.<sup>47</sup> The universal approach underlying this novel also underscores the mirror function Vietnam has with regard to Korea: Korea also experienced a similar civil war and occupation by the US army. The protagonist of *The Shadow of Arms* is well aware of his position in Vietnam, sandwiched in between the US army and the Vietnamese. Both in the novel and in separate essays, Hwang stressed that poverty was the main reason for Korean soldiers to enter the Vietnam war.<sup>48</sup> At the same time, Hwang denies the responsibility of the average Korean soldier, arguing that the ROK had little choice in the matter:

*What difference was there between my father's generation, drafted into the Japanese army or made to service Imperial Japan's pan-Asian ambitions, and*



First volume of the Korean original of *The Shadow of Arms* by Hwang Sok-yong

*my own, unloaded into Vietnam by the Americans in order to establish a "Pax Americana" zone in the Far East during the Cold War?*<sup>49</sup>

Forced by the US, whose imperial ambitions were no less than those of the Japanese empire of the thirties and forties, the ROK sent troops to Vietnam and – this is what is implied – bears no more responsibility for atrocities committed in Vietnam than for the atrocities committed by the Japanese Imperial Army in World War II.<sup>50</sup> The novel never confronts the issue of Korean atrocities in Vietnam directly, but in several passages it is clear that Hwang

recognizes that the erstwhile victims of civil war and US massacres have now become perpetrators themselves.<sup>51</sup> Nonetheless, in the end Hwang's approach is universal: massacres are an inescapable truth of war that have little to do with the nationality of the perpetrators<sup>52</sup> (although in the novel only real massacres, committed by US soldiers, are described, while Hwang remains silent about the massacres committed by ROK troops of which he had personal knowledge).<sup>53</sup> *The Shadow of Arms* is a literary masterpiece of rare quality precisely because it manages to describe the inevitable mechanisms of modern warfare and their consequences in uncomfortably measured and restrained universal language. At the same time, however, the parallels Hwang draws between the Vietnamese and

<sup>46</sup> Hwang writes: "After peering over the cliff of sudden death dozens of times and at long last emerging from the jungle swamps, a fighter about to embark for Korea would be unlikely to have saved from his combat pay more than three hundred dollars, a paltry sum of money stuck in a savings account somewhere back home. 'A life worth two bits' had become a familiar phrase among crawlers. Putting our lives at risk brought us each forty dollars a month, in fact, apart from the economic, military and financial support provided by America back home and the privileges received by businessmen in Seoul. And army privates would sail back home with their plywood crates holding a couple of Japanese appliances or electronic items they had conjured up on the sly." Hwang Sok-yong, *The Shadow of Arms* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell East Asia Program, Cornell East Asia Series 73), translated by Chun Kyung-Ja, pp. 201-202.

<sup>47</sup> The author has repeatedly confirmed that such a reading of *The Shadow of Arms* is correct. Personal communication with Hwang Sok-yong on November 4 and 5, 2008.

<sup>48</sup> A significant number of soldiers had volunteered to go to Vietnam instead of waiting to be drafted and not knowing where they would end up. Vietnam was widely regarded as an opportunity to earn money in South Korea, which explains why young men would risk their lives there without external pressure. An escape from poverty was their motivation.

<sup>49</sup> Hwang said as much in his essay "Yanusū-ūi ōlgul" in *Hangyŏre 21* (1999) when he stated that "the suppressed are cruel towards the suppressed." See <http://www.hani.co.kr/h21/data/L990906/1p949601.htm> [accessed 4 February 2009].

<sup>50</sup> The comparison Hwang draws, while certainly not without merits, is also misleading. Although there certainly was an element of coercion present in the process that led to the dispatch of troops to Vietnam, the situation South Korea found itself in during the late sixties was in no way comparable to the colonial situation. One major difference, for instance, was that now South Korea stood to gain from imperialism instead of suffering from it. Rather, the colonial metaphor seems to be applicable to Vietnam.

<sup>51</sup> Hwang later repeated this statement literally in the above-mentioned essay on the Vietnam War.

<sup>52</sup> It should be mentioned though that Hwang did play an important role in the *Han'gyŏre 21* initiative that aimed to expose the massacres and obtain compensation for the survivors.

<sup>53</sup> See his short story *Pagoda*.

the Koreans in terms of their suffering as Asians in the twentieth century preclude any sense of wrongdoing on the part of the Koreans. If anything, the Koreans suffered as much as the Vietnamese, and they suffered alongside them. In a revealing scene, Hwang detaches the South Korean soldiers from their US allies by having an American soldier hypocritically declare to the protagonist that the Korean soldiers are in fact honorary whites, just as their women are:

*"You're a Korean, aren't you? Your girls are also nice. There were two Korean girls in the strip show at the club last night. Both of them looked exactly like American women."*

*"You mean an American club?"*

*"Yes, but Koreans can go there if they're working for investigation headquarters. No gooks, though."*

*"Who are gooks?"*

*"Vietnamese. They're really filthy. But you are like us. We're the Allies."<sup>54</sup>*

Later developments make it abundantly clear that the US army does not consider Korean soldiers as being fully equal to American GIs. Hwang is consistent in his assertion that the Koreans and the Vietnamese share infinitely more with each other than with the Americans. Early on in their relationship, the Vietnamese assistant of the protagonist An Yōnggyu (Ahn Yong Kyu in the English translation) unambiguously states one of the book's main themes, namely the similarity of Koreans and Vietnamese and their respective histories:

*"You and I, Ahn, we're both gooks. Slopeheads."*

*"In the eyes of the Americans I suppose."*

*"In our own eyes, too. It's nothing to feel bad about."<sup>55</sup>*

Given the fact that the most used racist term for Vietnamese was 'gook,' the irony of the scene is not lost on the reader (especially not since Hwang explains the etymology of 'gook' as being derived from 'Hanguk'; during the Korean War this term was used to denote Koreans in the same racist way). ROK soldiers are not white nor honorary whites; they share the vicissitudes of modern fate

with the Vietnamese. Later on in the novel, conversations between An Yōnggyu, a Korean, and his Vietnamese colleague and friend point in the same direction: the Koreans have no business being in Vietnam and they know this, as they have been through the very same experiences themselves. To a certain extent, these shared experiences enable the South Korean soldiers to see Korea mirrored in Vietnam. *The Shadow of Arms* contains a number of evocative passages in which the Korean suffering during the Korean War is directly reflected in the suffering of the Vietnamese.<sup>56</sup> Ahn Junghyo's soldiers also see home echoed in their Vietnamese experiences: they have frequent flashbacks to their own experiences during the Korean War, most of them triggered by the young Vietnamese boys that can always be found around them. The mirror function of Vietnam is not restricted to the past; Korea's future is also mirrored in Vietnam's future (which was the present when the three novels were written and hence the present of their readers) as a unified country. *The Shadow of Arms* in particular forges a strong link between Korea's future and Vietnam's present as a unified country.<sup>57</sup> Incidentally, as discussed above, this also functions as a mechanism to subject the image of Vietnam to suit South Korean (governmental) purposes.

Their kinship with the Vietnamese (through their shared historical experience as well as their shared Asian heritage) makes the Koreans as much victims as perpetrators: neutrality ("first, do no harm") is their only way out, both ethically and practically. Hwang's take on South Korea's position in the Vietnam War effectively shifts the blame to the US and the international world, although it needs to be mentioned that Hwang does not present an easy excuse for the South Korean participation as Ahn Junghyo does (by stating that the Korean soldiers did not have any choice). Hwang's reasoning is not without merit; his meta-analysis of how modern wars are started, fought and maintained transcends the South Korean participation in the Vietnam War and as such also leaves behind the complicated issue of blame. From this vantage point, the choice to "do no harm" that Hwang's protagonist adheres to, is wholly understandable. The subsequent disappearance of the moral question marks associated with the South Korean participation are logical and,

<sup>54</sup> Hwang, *The Shadow of Arms*, p. 25. The "Ttaihan" (as the South Koreans were known among the Vietnamese) rank somewhere in between a US soldier and a Vietnamese soldier in terms of ransom it costs to free them. See Ahn Junghyo, *White Badge* (New York: Soho, 1989), p. 56.

<sup>55</sup> Hwang, *The Shadow of Arms*, p. 140.

<sup>56</sup> In *White Badge*, the protagonist has a flashback to the moment he was chasing GIs during the Korean War, when he himself is chased by Vietnamese boys.

<sup>57</sup> Paik Nak-chung, "Foreword," in *The Shadow of Arms*, pp. v-vii.

against the background of domestic discourses in South Korea, conventional. The following passage, in which the protagonist of *The Shadow of Arms* is involved in a heated discussion with an American deserter he had helped to leave the army, is representative of Hwang's view:

*As I work with Americans, the one thing I hate most is to listen to you people say how alike we are, how I'm no different from an American, and other garbage like that. In the same breath I hear you guys whispering how filthy the Vietnamese gooks are. 'Gook' is the label American soldiers picked up in the Korean War from the word 'Hanguk,' mispronouncing it 'Han-gook.' Americans used it with a racist edge. I just point out to you people that I'm more like a Vietnamese myself.*

*The conditions we're living through now are the exact same conditions almost all Asians have endured for the past century. On many continents whites have fought each other with bloodied teeth and claws, like predators quarrelling over prey. Don't pretend to be alarmed. Even if you refuse to take part in this lousy war and succeed in escaping, you'll have to live the rest of your life burdened by what you've seen and heard on the battlefield. It'll be the same with me, of course, but I've made up my mind to make up for it when I go back home.*

*In your newspapers I saw photos of demonstrators carrying picket signs that read: 'We don't want to die for Vietnam!' What could be more absurd and hideous than that? What? Die for Vietnam? Your soldiers were dragged over here from the back alleys of filthy slums, from the dark bars where they were drinking, from the supermarkets where they rushed with discount coupons, from greasy floors beneath automobiles. You ask me why? Because the children of the wealthy were not about to come, that's why. Ask your businessmen and their salesmen who conduct politics. It's for them that you've been dying like dogs in the swamps of Vietnam.<sup>58</sup>*

There is however a problematic element hidden in

Hwang's position. In the above-mentioned essay, Hwang states with brutal honesty that the very fact that South Korea is now in a position to question the massacres perpetrated by ROK soldiers in Vietnam only signifies that South Korea succeeded in obtaining the economic (and hence psychological) freedom or luxury to enjoy 'Western humanity.'<sup>59</sup> Leaving aside the issue of the questionable (and lazy) morals underlying this statement, it does point at an uncomfortable moral dimension of the Korean participation that apparently needs solving. The moral question marks have not completely disappeared, it seems. This argument, both honest and dangerous, is also found in a simplified version in *White Badge*, where the bloodshed of civilians is considered tragic but inevitable.<sup>60</sup> This argument, however, is only applicable to Vietnam; as soon as it is applied to Korea during the Korean War, more personal considerations come into play. The tension between the inevitability of innocent bloodshed in any war and the bloodshed in the Korean War is present in all three novels and not resolved anywhere. Perhaps the solution of the protagonist in *The Shadow of Arms* is the only one realistically attainable: maintain a stance of strict neutrality in so far as it is feasible. The protagonist makes a promise to himself not to make things worse and not to profit from the war at the expense of the Vietnamese.

Profit from the war South Korea did, however. Reliable detailed estimates are not available, but in pure financial terms, up to ten percent of the South Korean GNP was derived directly from the Vietnam War, which lasted from 1968 to 1973.<sup>61</sup> The realization that money, goods and privileges were taken home from Vietnam pervades all three novels, but none of the novels (not even Hwang's narrative, which is otherwise extremely aware of economic causes and effects) followed through with an appraisal of what happened to the money once it arrived in South Korea.<sup>62</sup> The elements for constructing the story of how the Vietnam War paid for the economic growth of South Korea are all there, but the story has not been put together.

In the end, even the soldiers who fought there them-

<sup>58</sup> Hwang, *The Shadow of Arms*, pp. 343-344.

<sup>59</sup> Hwang, "Yanusū-ūi ōlgul," <http://www.hani.co.kr/h21/data/L990906/1p949601.htm> [accessed 4 February 2009].

<sup>60</sup> Shin Sūnghūi 신승희, "Pet'ūnam chōnjaeng-gwa Han'guk munhak: 'Hayan chōnjaeng-ūi munjejōm 베트남전쟁과 한국문학: '하얀 전쟁'의 문제점," *Ōmun yōn'gu* 어문연구 77-78 (1993): pp. 214-227; Chang Tuyōng 장두영, "Pet'ūnam chōnjaeng sosōllon: P'abyōng tamnon-gwa-ūi kwallyōn-ūl chungshim-ūro 베트남전쟁 소설론-파병담론과의 관련을 중심으로," *Han'guk hyōndae munhak yōn'gu* 한국현대문학연구 25 (2008): pp. 383-425; "Song Sūngch'ōi, Pet'ūnam chōnjaeng sosōllon: Yongbyōng-ūi kyohun," pp. 77-94.

<sup>61</sup> These figures do not take account of indirect financial aid from the US, the economic effects of the advantageous import duties for South Korean products in the US, and the like.

selves did not consider the Vietnam War as a Korean war. The Koreans did not belong there, they were there merely because they were drafted into the war by the workings of US imperialism. As a result, any moral blame associated with the Vietnam War shifted to the US. What remains is the Korean suffering, which, just like the suffering of the Vietnamese, was caused by the US. While *A Faraway River* and *White Badge* emphasize the suffering of the ROK soldiers in Vietnam (and as veterans after returning home), caught between their commanders and the US army, *The Shadow of Arms* squarely places the blame on the US:

*We are here because you asked us to come. Your government wanted us to join you to save the lives of young American men. We have nothing to do with this filthy war. True, we've sold ourselves for the paltry sum of money you threw at us, and now here we are. But don't forget this, those two soldiers just barely survived combat operations set in motion by a command from your headquarters. They were on the front instead of you. The money you snatched and won't give back is blood money!*<sup>63</sup>

The tension between the South Korean motivations to go to war in Vietnam, the suffering of the soldiers and the suffering of the Vietnamese is not solved in the novels dealing with it. At the very most, novels on the Vietnam War transfer the problem onto the US, which is considered to be the main culprit. Furthermore, Vietnam is not as central to the novels as South Korea is, even if according to one influential critic a novel like *The Shadow of Arms* should have contained more explicit references to the



English translation of *White Badge*, made by the author himself.

South Korean situation to emphasize its importance as a novel for South Korean society.<sup>64</sup>

Although not a Vietnam veteran himself like the three writers mentioned above, and as such not within the scope of this article, the work of Pang Hyönsök should not go unmentioned here. A notable exception in the literary scene in Korea in the sense that his books depict Vietnam on its own terms (or at least, not only on Korea's terms), Pang Hyönsök's novels indirectly deal with the Vietnam War and with Vietnam's position in Korea. A founding member of the *Society of Young Writers For Understanding Vietnam* (베트남을 이해하려는 젊은 작가들의 모임), Pang

is a writer who from the eighties onwards has shown himself to be a staunch supporter of the progressive forces in South Korean society. In his *Form of Being* 존재의 형식 (recipient of the 2003 Hwang Sunwön Literary Prize 황순원문학상) he tackles the problems of literary translation and intercultural communication by having a Korean writer and a Vietnamese translator work on the translation of a film script about the Vietnam War.<sup>65</sup> In his novel *Time To Have Lobsters* 랍스터를 먹는 시간, he records the following dialogue about the Iraq war and the decision to send ROK troops there:

*"We too know that the US is not right. But we still cannot disobey the words of the US, so we send troops despite the resistance of the people. Couldn't they call the soldiers going to Iraq 'Roh Moo Hyun's soldiers,' just like you called the soldiers coming here to Vietnam 'Park Chung Hee's soldiers?'"*  
*Könsök now tried to brush it aside with a joke. But Pham Banh Cuc was having nothing of it. The smile*

<sup>62</sup> In *White Badge* there is a scene in a hostess bar where friends (Vietnam veterans) start arguing about the father of one of them, who got rich from the war by supplying the military. The son then uses the money to pay for a prostitute for his complaining friend. The symbolism in this scene (whether intended or not) is very rich. First, it emphasizes the central importance of money in the historical memory of the Vietnam War. Second, the unequal distribution of the wealth earned in Vietnam is acknowledged, as is the sacrifice of life and limbs by the young soldiers (who are now men approaching middle age getting drunk). Third, women are used as a means of barter: the money earned in Vietnam is used to purchase a female body for one of the soldiers, who sacrificed their youths in Vietnam. Like in most narratives of the Vietnam War, women do not get to play a role other than that of passive victim or active hooker.

<sup>63</sup> Hwang, *The Shadow of Arms*, p. 208.

<sup>64</sup> Paik Nak-chung's criticism of *The Shadow of Arms* states quite explicitly that the novel did not deal sufficiently with South Korean contemporary society. Paik Nak-chung, "Foreword," pp. v-vii.

<sup>65</sup> Pang Hyönsök 방현석, "Chonjae-üi hyöngshik," in *2003 che 3hoe Hwang Sunwön munhaksang susang chakp'umjip* 2003 회황순원문학상수상작품집 (Seoul: Chungang Ilbo, Munye Chungang 중앙일보, 문예중앙, 2003).

that had lingered on his face now disappeared:  
 “So the Iraqi people have to understand a Korea that comes at them with a gun pointed towards them, just as happened in Vietnam. Don’t you think that idea is a bit too easy?”  
 “Many Koreans feel sorry about Vietnam.”  
 “Then all they have to do is feel sorry about Iraq too, once that’s all over.”<sup>66</sup>

Pang’s literary and social engagement with Vietnam is reminiscent of the *Hangyŏre 21* initiative that was supported by Hwang Sok-yong. Just like this initiative’s relative marginality with regard to the continuation of South Korean perceptions of Vietnam though, Pang’s literature (at least with regard to his view on Vietnam) has also remained restricted to a small minority: the same minority that was sympathetic towards the *Hangyŏre 21* initiative. South Korean popular perceptions of Vietnam are not monolithic; there are dissident voices, but these are heard by few people. Compared to the enormity of South Korea’s commitment to the Vietnam War and the far-reaching influence it exercised on the formation of contemporary South Korean society, very little has been written about this war by literary authors, and even less has been written from a vulnerable position such as that of Pang.

### THE VIETNAM WAR IN CINEMA

A number of high-profile movies have been made about the Korean participation in the Vietnam War.<sup>67</sup> Foremost among them would be the cinema version of *The Shadow of Arms*, but despite years of rumours of its imminent shooting (a director was chosen and the project was supposed to be a co-production with the Vietnamese government), the movie has not yet been made. Another novel was made into a movie: *White Badge*, starring An Sŏnggi, was released in 1992. This Vietnam movie was followed by the horror flick *R-point* in 2004, by teen horror slasher *Muoi* in 2005 and by *Sunny* (a terrible translation of the original literal meaning *My Love in a Faraway Place*)

in 2008. All together, a very modest number of movies have been made about the Vietnam War, and particularly so when compared to the number of American movies dealing with the same subject. *Raybang* can in fact not be counted among these movies, since it does not deal with the Vietnam War and only uses Vietnam as a symbol. Paradoxically, it is perhaps the only movie that deals with the true significance of the Vietnam experience for South Korean society.

Korean cinema has a strong tradition of producing movies that are critical of contemporary society, whether by using realism, sarcasm, comedy or drama. Just as in the literature on the Vietnam War, however, a critical attitude is not easily located in movies dealing with Vietnam. *White Badge* is a fairly faithful adaptation of the novel, stressing the plight of the South Korean Vietnam veterans, whose suffering went unrecognized and whose memories were not allowed in the public arena.<sup>68</sup> The emphasis in the movie is on the traumatic experiences of the Vietnam veterans, most clearly portrayed by the protagonist, a former sergeant who ends up committing suicide. In its conception and execution *White Badge* is very much like the archetypical American Vietnam War movie: avoiding any direct confrontation with the issue of South Korea’s participation in Vietnam, it centers on the suffering of the ROK soldiers and to a significantly lesser extent on the suffering of the Vietnamese. At the same time, there is a distinct sense of mirrored experiences, with the Vietnamese going through what the Koreans had gone through some decades earlier. A revealing scene takes place in a sex club in It’aewŏn, the bar district frequented by American GIs stationed in Seoul. The similarity between Vietnamese and Koreans is emphasized by showing Korean women (sex workers) servicing American GIs, while earlier scenes in the movie depicted Vietnamese women servicing South Korean soldiers. Intriguingly, the comparison between the Vietnamese and the Koreans is repeatedly alluded to (both visually and textually in the novels), while the latent comparison between ROK soldiers in Vietnam and American GIs in South Korea is left

<sup>66</sup> Pang Hyŏnsŏk, *Rabsūt’ū-rŭl mŏngnŭn shigan* 랍스터를 먹는 시간 (Seoul: Ch’angbi 창비), 2003, p. 170.

<sup>67</sup> See the following articles: Kim Kwŏnhŏ 김권호, “Han’guk chŏnjaeng yŏnghwa-ŭi palchŏn-gwa t’ŭkchŏng: Han’guk chŏnjaeng-esŏ Pet’ŭnam chŏnjaeng-kkachi han’guk chŏnjaeng-ŭi malchŏn-gwa t’ŭkchŏng: Han’guk chŏnjaeng-esŏ Pet’ŭnam chŏnjaeng-kkachi han’guk chŏnjaeng-ŭi malchŏn-gwa t’ŭkchŏng,” *Chibangsa-wa chibang munje* 지방사와 지방문화 제9.2 (2006): pp. 77-108; Kang Sŏngnyul 강성률, “Namhan yŏnghwa-rŭl t’onghae pon Pet’ŭnam chŏnjaeng-ŭi kiŏk 남한 영화를 통해 본 베트남전쟁의 기억 - 반공영화 <월남전선 이상없다> 에서 동지적 유대감의 <님은 먼 곳에> 까지,” *Yŏksa pip’yŏng* 역사비평 84 (2008): pp. 404-425; idem, “‘Hayan chŏnchaeng,’ ‘R-Point’-wa Pet’ŭnam chŏnjaeng: uri-egye Pet’ŭnam chŏnjaeng-ŭn muoshinga? <하얀 전쟁> <알 포인트>와 베트남전쟁 - 우리에게 베트남전쟁은 무엇인가,” *Naeil yŏnŭn yŏksa* 내일을 여는 역사 21 (2005): pp. 253-258. I have not included older movies dealing with the Vietnam War in this article on account of their generic proximity to propaganda.

<sup>68</sup> The protagonist, played by An Sŏnggi, tries to get his novel about Vietnam published, but he is obstructed by the government. During the time the movie was set (the early eighties), President Chun Doo Hwan banned veteran associations (one of which had been active since the late sixties).

for what it is. Other themes present in the original book (which are also present in the two novels by Hwang and Pak discussed above) also appear in the movie. *White Badge* presents the cinematic version of the often-used excuse given to explain civilian massacres: that the confused ROK soldiers did not know who was the enemy and that they had suffered casualties (due to boobytraps) before murdering an entire village. The theme of poverty also surfaces. Just before embarking to Vietnam, the soldiers of the platoon gather and



South Korean soldiers as the colonizer in *R-Point* (2004)

get drunk. Towards the end of the inebriated evening, the camera zooms in on the wall where one of them has written: 'Wait for me, Sunja, I will return a rich man from Vietnam.' Finally the idea that Vietnam was an exercise for Kwangju returns in the dramatic finale of the movie: the protagonist has just picked up his former corporal from the hospital where he had been admitted on account of having sliced off his own ears (in an act of atonement, as this was the same fate that befell dead Vietcong and dead Vietnamese civilians who in official reports were listed as Vietcong). Walking through the streets of Seoul, the soldiers get lost in a student demonstration. Battlefield scenes and flashbacks of massacres merge with the increasingly violent demonstration and scenes of police brutality, underscoring the point of Vietnam as a prelude to and a metaphor for modern South Korea's tribulations.

The 2008 movie *Sunny* was eagerly anticipated, as it was directed by Yi Chunik. Yi had also directed *The King and the Clown*, a sensitive historical movie about the love between two men, and *Once upon a Time in a Battlefield*, which despite its awkward English title is a very good movie about history, regional tensions and personal sacrifice. Yi Chunik has proved himself to be an innovative director who is not afraid to tackle sensitive subjects such as homosexuality and regionalism. Moreover, he does so in a way that enables these taboos to be discussed within society. In both movies Yi succeeded in giving the silent (and oppressed) minorities a voice. With *Sunny* he produced an ambiguous movie. In one sense, it is a powerful movie showing the quest of a young woman trying to find her husband who is serving in Vietnam in order to get

pregnant and take his unborn baby back home. Urged to do so by her mother-in-law, *Sunny* is a sensitive portrayal of one woman's struggles with patriarchy. It is also a coming-of-age story in which a naive, virginal country girl is transformed into an experienced and sexually assertive entertainer. The setting of the story in Vietnam gives it the necessary dramatic mass to engage the viewer in the implausible quest of Suni, but at the same time, it gives the movie a colonial and Orientalist flavour within the black-and-white tradition of British Orientalist cinema. The Vietnamese hardly figure in *Sunny*, though, other than the (predictable) bunch of mama-sans, whores, innocent youths and Vietcong guerrillas (whom one only recognizes as Vietcong soldiers when it is already too late). In one memorable scene, Suni and the group are taken captive by a group of Vietcong and asked why they are there. "To earn money," they answer, at which the Vietcong commander retorts: "So you're here for the same reason as the South Korean army." This scene is memorable both for this exchange, which shows unambiguously what the director thinks of the ROK army's role in Vietnam, and for the shameless and facile sentimentalist take that follows. When the group is about to be executed, Suni starts to sing, unlocking all kinds of pent-up emotions in their Vietnamese captors. The group members are then made captive guests, working alongside the Vietcong guerrillas and their families, digging tunnels and such after which in the evening they all come together to listen to Suni, swaying and handclapping along with the Korean songs she sings. The notion that the South Koreans and the Vietnamese are fundamentally alike and that it is only the war (the US in other words) that keeps them apart, is clearly



Poster for Muoi (2007)



Poster for Sunny (2008)



Poster for Sunny (2008)

articulated in this sequence of scenes. After the underground guerrilla shelter is raided by the US army and the guerrillas killed or taken prisoner, it is again music which saves the group members. When three guerrilla leaders are executed on the spot, the band leader starts to sing the *Star-Spangled Banner*, signalling the South Koreans' likeness with the Americans. Re-establishing their difference with the Vietnamese vis-à-vis the US army, the South Korean group members survive by singing tunes from the US. Although the director has a proven track record and although he has turned a movie about homosexual love into the most popular movie ever made in South Korea (until this record was surpassed by *The Host* the following year), he does not further explore this fundamental ambiguity of the South Korean position in Vietnam. While the movie is commanding as a story about a woman's quest in an extremely male-dominated environment, and while it certainly does not shirk difficult choices (such as when Suni decides to sleep with the American commander who can help her find her husband), *Sunny* is a solidly Korea-centric movie, in which the Vietnam War takes a back-seat to more pressing domestic concerns. Perhaps the interpretative tradition associated with the Vietnam War was too strong for the director to overcome or maybe there were other points he wanted to make, but the unambiguous depiction of the complete impotence of the South Korean army in Vietnam with regard to making its own decisions or to helping Sunny find her husband only reinforces the same point made over and over again in South Korean Vietnam literature, historiography and cinema: that the ROK army was only in Vietnam as

a mercenary force. It did not have a say in its actions and consequently did not bear responsibility for its deeds. In this movie, as in the literature on this subject, the responsibility needs to be located with the US army.

The horror movie *Muoi: Legend of a Portrait*, in which a South Korean writer visits an old friend of hers in Vietnam and becomes fascinated by the tragic story attached to a portrait of a young girl, is in all senses of the term a colonial movie. *Muoi* is the type of exotic horror movie that is situated in an exotic foreign location. This setting is at first presented as a veritable Garden of Eden: the rich foliage of the tropics is adorned with servile males and beautiful maidens, who are dressed in their seductive white *ao dai*. It is a mysterious place where money can buy infinitely more than at home: the evil counterpart of the protagonist is able to maintain a posh lifestyle in her own villa with the inheritance she brought with her from Korea. Despite the pretty pictures and the capable cinematography, which show Vietnam in alluring detail, this movie is not about Vietnam. It is about Korea and at most about Korean imaginings of Vietnam. While the Korean part in the Vietnam War is neither discussed nor alluded to, the similarity between the recent history of Vietnam and Korea is remarked upon several times.

The colonial aspect of the way South Korea imagined Vietnam is also clearly played out in another horror movie, *R-point*. Vastly superior in all aspects (cinematography, production values, acting, script, direction, editing, and the like) to *Muoi*, it is the story of a platoon of ROK soldiers sent to an abandoned French plantation (the so-called R-point) where they must find out what

happened to another Korean platoon that went missing there. Strange things then start to happen and the soldiers start going mad or die suddenly, while it slowly becomes clear that the Koreans are being targeted because they are invaders and occupiers of Vietnam. The plantation was built on a reclaimed lake that had been the site of a battle between Chinese invaders and a Vietnamese army. A small stele with an *g* comes into view at the end of the movie upon which it has been written that all invaders of Vietnam will be killed. The Koreans, as allies of the Americans, are placed in the same line of colonial conquerors as the Chinese, the French and the Americans, all of whom had been killed at the same site. *R-point* is an exception in the sense that it actually assigns blame to the ROK soldiers for their actions in Vietnam. Again, as in the other movies, the Vietnamese do not really figure in this film, but *R-point's* message is unambiguous: invaders are morally wrong and will be punished – in horror movies at least, if not in real life. The subtle way in which *R-point* makes it almost impossible to judge whether the hapless Korean soldiers who one by one fall victim to vengeful Vietnamese ghosts are victims, perpetrators or both is reminiscent of *The Shadow of Arms*, in which the same dilemma is presented but not solved. *R-point* goes one step further in assigning blame; the movie still fits in the South Korean discourse though, as it portrays the South Korean soldiers in Vietnam first as victims (of their government, the US and the Vietcong), before acknowledging the colonial power they exercised (and the abuses associated with it). The hypocrisy of *Muoi* or *White Badge*, films which emphasized the shared suffering of Vietnam and Korea, is absent, but the Vietnamese still remain invisible (in this movie often quite literally so).

In the end, *Raybang*, while not a movie about Vietnam, is perhaps the best symbol for Vietnam in Korean popular imaginations. The movie barely mentions Vietnam, yet without Vietnam there would have been no movie. Vietnam figures as the site on which dreams may be projected and where money can still be earned (as the corny picture of the uncle wearing Ray-Bans with a pretty Vietnamese woman standing next to him suggests). The

allusion to Vietnam is triple: it exists in the history of the sunglasses themselves, in the dreams of the three taxi drivers to escape to Vietnam and lead better lives there and in the implicit comparison between the sacrifices to the economy made by the generation of the uncle, and the sacrifices made by this generation to the same economy, while suffering the same misrecognition. Vietnam is often hidden away, but it always remains present as the site of unfulfilled dreams and untold sacrifices.

## PERCEPTIONS OF VIETNAM

Vietnam experienced a high amount of interest in South Korea in the nineties and the early years of the new millennium. After diplomatic relations had been restored in 1993, South Korean businessmen started to travel to Vietnam to recruit trainees (who are cheaper than Korean workers and easier to get work permits for), outsource manufacturing and establish branch offices or factories.<sup>69</sup> The articles written by a South Korean businessman right after the re-establishment of diplomatic relations are revealing in that they reflect what was popularly thought of Vietnam.<sup>70</sup> The writer chronicled his excitement tinged with fear in a manner that is more than a little reminiscent of writings from colonial authors visiting the outer provinces of the empire:

It is said that Koreans visiting Vietnam recently have experienced the strange phenomenon of personally experiencing the superiority of Koreans rather than experiencing fear of socialism.<sup>71</sup>

The combination of fear of the unknown and feelings of superiority is a well-known colonial trope (in particular when combined with the economic exploitation of Vietnamese trainees and workers in South Korea during the nineties). The same attitude is also reflected in the ease with which the author employs colonialist stereotypes to dismiss memories of the Korean participation in the Vietnam War. The Vietnamese, like other Southeast Asian peoples, forget their suffering easily and “the past is the past.”<sup>72</sup> Moreover, as the author asserts, the Vietnamese now like the Koreans: “The scars from the war are still present, but the Vietnamese have forgotten about South

<sup>69</sup> The outpour of Vietnamese language books, Vietnamese travel guides and investment handbooks testify to the enormous popularity of Vietnam as a country to invest in.

<sup>70</sup> The titles of these articles are revealing in themselves: “Vietnam, the unknown country where they imitate capitalism,” “Looking for the Pearl of the Orient of yesterday’s movies, Hanoi,” “Twenty tear-stained years... My father was a Ttaihan.” See Kwŏn Sŏuk 권서욱, “Chabonjuŭi-rŭl hyungnae-naenŭn miji-ŭi nara Pet’ŭnam 자본주의를 흉내내는 미지의 나라 베트남,” *Pukhan* 北韓 9 (1993): pp. 94-99; idem, “Yet yŏnghwa toech’ajŭryŏnŭn ‘Tongyang-ŭi chinju’ Hanoi 옛 영화 되찾으려는 ‘동양의 진주’ 하노이” *Pukhan* 10 (1993): pp. 142-147; idem, “Nunmul-lo ŏllukchin 20-nyŏn.... Na-ŭi abŏji Ttaihan 눈물로 얼룩진 20년... 나의 아버지 ‘파이한,’” *Pukhan* 11 (1993): pp. 136-141.

Korea's participation on the side of the US."<sup>73</sup> The war is still present in the back of the minds of the South Korean visitors; it has not been forgotten, merely repressed and ignored, like the black sheep in the family, the awkward uncle no one wants to meet. At the same time, the writer merrily travels the country, looking for the "Pearl of the Orient," as the French called Hanoi.<sup>74</sup> Every page of his travel writings breathes a sense of nostalgia for the lost colony of olden times. Remarking that "Vietnamese farming villages look just like our Korean farming villages,"<sup>75</sup> the author is completely immersed in a colonial daydream. His apprehension about the war seems to be unfounded. Everywhere he goes, he is told that "Ttaihan [South Korea] number one!"<sup>76</sup> Nowhere does he engage in a discussion about the war, not even in his travel writings. The only remnant of the war that is allowed into the present is what he (and others) call the "second generation Ttaihan," or children of South Korean fathers and Vietnamese mothers. The entire war is reduced to these children, many of whom have had difficult lives on account of their ancestry. To sum it up, this kind of attitude (that pervades this kind of travel writings published in popular weeklies and monthlies) is colonial and patronizing in a literal sense: the author mentions several businessmen who have taken a paternal interest in the second generation Ttaihan children and pose as their fathers. Any sense of wrongdoing regarding the war is sublimated in righteous indignation concerning the fate of the Korean-Vietnamese children – it should not escape notice that these children are seen as second generation Koreans and that the consequences of the South Korean participation in the Vietnam War are predominantly seen in terms of the human cost to the second generation of Ttaihan in Vietnam.

Vietnam could all but disappear from the popular consciousness and resurface only as a site of projected dreams, partially because of how Vietnam veterans were received upon returning home. Towards the end of the

military involvement on Vietnam the reception of the veterans in South Korea changed dramatically, becoming negative in the early seventies. There are several factors that contributed to this shift: the attitude of the US media, which was increasingly negative, rising casualty numbers among the South Korean soldiers, victories obtained by the North Vietnamese Army and, lastly, the growing awareness within South Korean society of massacres of Vietnamese civilians committed by ROK troops.<sup>77</sup> According to one sociologist:

*The most decisive factors for the memories regarding Vietnam never taking hold as a collective memory, was the fact that this was a minority experience that never received the approval of the South Korean people; consequently, the empathy from the people as a whole was never secured.*<sup>78</sup>

If we add state censorship and the suppression and subversion of memories to the equation, this statement certainly rings true. As a result, something that is akin to the orientalizing of Vietnam took place. On the back of South Korea's rapid economic development and its hunger for overseas investments in the nineties, Vietnam was reconstructed in the popular consciousness as a site of possibilities, the place where a man might go and make something of himself. The war seemed to have been forgotten. When speaking to the Vietnamese president in 1992 on the eve of the re-establishment of diplomatic relations, President Roh Dae Woo (a Vietnam veteran himself) barely mentioned the war. He merely stated: "I find it regrettable that there was a very ill-fated period in our histories."<sup>79</sup> Kim Dae Jung was as circumspect when he addressed the Vietnamese president in 2001:

"I regret the fact that by participating in an ill-fated war we unwillingly caused the Vietnamese people to suffer and offer you these words of consolation."<sup>80</sup>

Although the war is indirectly referred to, it is also clear

71 Kwön Söuk, "Yet yonghwa toech'ajuryönün 'Tongyang-üi chinju' Hanoi, p. 146.

72 Ibid., p. 146.

73 Ibid., p. 143.

74 Ibid., p. 143.

75 Ibid., p. 143.

76 Kwön Söuk, "Nunmul-lo öllukchin 20-nyön... Na-üi aböji 'Ttaihan,'" p. 137.

77 Shim Chuhyöng 심주형, *Pet'unamjön ch'amjön-e taehan kiög-üi chöngch'i* 베트남전 참전에 대한 기억의 정치 (Seoul: MA thesis, SNU, 2003), pp. 37-38.

78 Ch'oe Chönggi, "Han'guk-kun-üi Pet'unam ch'amjön, öttök'e kiök toego innünga?" p. 75. As mentioned before, Ch'oe also concluded that the individualized suffering of the veterans precluded their being accepted as a social group within South Korean society.

79 *Kyöngnyang shinmun*, 23 December 1992, quoted in Ch'oe Chönggi, "Han'guk-kun-üi Pet'unam ch'amjön, öttök'e kiök toego innünga?" p. 77.

80 *Munhwa Ilbo* 문화 일보, 24 August 2001, quoted in Ch'oe Chönggi, "Han'guk-kun-üi Pet'unam ch'amjön, öttök'e kiök toego innünga?" p. 77. This is as far as Kim would go. Responsibility for the murder of Vietnamese civilians was not taken then or at any other time.

that the responsibility for what happened is not located in South Korea. At the same time, however, Vietnam was regarded with new interest in South Korea and the South Korean popular consciousness. With South Koreans forming the second-largest group of expats in Vietnam (54,000 in 2007 and 84,000 in 2009),<sup>81</sup> investments in Vietnam soared from \$2 billion in 1996 to \$ 11 billion in 2007.<sup>82</sup> There are between 2,000 to 3,000 marriage agencies established in South Korea that actively mediate between Vietnamese women and South Korean men.<sup>83</sup> Banners advertising “Vietnamese virgins 베트남 처녀” are consequently frequently seen flying in non-urban areas. These agencies seem to be quite effective as well: from 2006 onwards approximately 5,000 Vietnamese women each year have married South Korean men (farmers mainly), in search of financial security and the elusive lifestyle popularized by the Korean Wave (soap operas in particular were well-received in Vietnam).<sup>84</sup> Practical guides, popular histories of Vietnam and Vietnamese language kits flooded the market, although interestingly in the histories the presence of ROK troops during the Vietnam War is barely mentioned (if mentioned at all).<sup>85</sup> The present importance of Vietnam for Korea is complicated by the past the two countries share. When President Lee Myoung Bak visited Vietnam in 2009, controversy surrounded the preparations for the visit. Like his predecessor Roh Moo Hyun, Lee decided to visit the mausoleum of Ho Chi Minh to lay a wreath there, explaining that



The autobiography of General Ch'ae Myōngshin, Commander-in-Chief of the ROK forces in Vietnam

Ho “as the leader of the Vietnamese people is a symbol that I cannot simply pretend to not know.” He did this despite considerable domestic resistance against the idea of the South Korean president paying his respects to a man who had once been the country’s enemy. Neither Kim Young Sam nor Kim Dae Jung had visited the mausoleum during their visits to Vietnam in 1996 and 1998 respectively. Complicating matters this time was Lee’s signing of a legislative proposal designed to improve the treatment of South Korean Vietnam veterans. This proposal included the following phrase, to which the Vietnamese government strenuously objected: “the meritorious veterans of the Vietnam War

who contributed to the maintenance of world peace.” The South Korean government gave in to Vietnamese pressure and promised to “pursue a course that would leave out any expression which would be diplomatically offensive to either party.” Having to navigate between his own conservative supporters by “being extremely sincere with regard to our [national] past” and “humbly” seeking important “future-oriented” economic relations with Vietnam, Lee experienced the pitfalls of South Korea’s perceptions of the Vietnam War.<sup>86</sup>

Vietnam (due to its close economic ties with South Korea and its status as a communist state) also plays an important role in the handling of North Korean refugees. South Koreans operate several safe houses in Vietnam for North Korean refugees and the road to Vietnam is not

81 See [http://www.korean.net/morgue/status\\_4.jsp?tCode=status&dCode=0105](http://www.korean.net/morgue/status_4.jsp?tCode=status&dCode=0105) [accessed 2 October 2009]. According to these statistics Vietnam is tenth on the list of countries with South Korean populations. According to an article in the *Korea Times*, a whopping 500,000 South Koreans are (temporarily) staying in Vietnam. These figures, incidentally, are not supported by the official government numbers: [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/special/2009/05/211\\_13761.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/special/2009/05/211_13761.html) [accessed 2 October 2009].

82 See <http://members.forbes.com/global/2006/0918/028.html> [accessed 9 February 2009]. For detailed figures, see the website of the Korean Trade-Investment Promotion Agency ((대한무역투자진흥공사): <http://www.kotra.or.kr>.

83 See [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/21/world/asia/21iht-brides.4670360.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/21/world/asia/21iht-brides.4670360.html?_r=1) [accessed 2 October 2009].

84 See for instance So Tonghun 서동훈 and Pak Yōnggyun 박영균, “Hallyu-ga Pet'ūnam ch'ōngsōnyōn-ūi munhwa ūshig-e mich'inūn yōnghyang 한류가 베트남 청소년의 문화의식에 미치는 영향,” *Han'guk ch'ōngsōnyōn kaebalwōn yōn'gu pogoso (yoyakchip)* 2007 (2007): pp. 100-102. For an analysis that smacks of cultural imperialism (on how to “guide” Vietnamese viewers to the “right way” of understanding Korean culture through Hallyu products), see Kim Sōngnan 김성란, “Pet'ūnam-esō-ūi Hallyu-e taehan p'yosangjōk punsōk: yōsōng p'yosang-ūl chungshim-ūro 베트남에서의 ‘한류’에 대한 표상적 분석 - 여성 표상을 중심으로,” *Inmun k'ontench'ū* 인문콘텐츠12 (2008): pp. 61-79.

85 Any browsing session in a (sufficiently large) Korean bookstore will confirm this.

86 Kim Sanghyōp 김상협, “MB, pandae murūpsūgo Ho Cchimin myoso- chamber MB 반대 무릅쓰고 호찌민묘소 참배,” in *Munhwa ilbo*, 21 October 2009, p. 4.

as dangerous as other escape routes.<sup>87</sup> In 2004 Vietnam incurred the wrath of North Korea by allowing 468 refugees to be airlifted out of Vietnam and into South Korea.<sup>88</sup> Vietnam, in other words, plays the role of middleman in the North-South Korean relationship.

What is the role of the Vietnam veterans in this new relationship between Vietnam and South Korea? Almost none, it would seem. They have been edited out of the picture rather efficiently. After having been ignored for two decades, in 1992 it was made public that many veterans were suffering the aftereffects of Agent Orange and other defoliants used in Vietnam.<sup>89</sup> Several veteran associations campaigned to have the symptoms recognized and the veterans compensated.<sup>90</sup> While this battle is still raging, Vietnam veteran associations are mainly active on the web, displaying few activities in other areas. Maintaining websites that are steeped in nostalgia for a Vietnam that disappeared four decades ago, the veterans' associations through these websites and their members aim to keep alive the memories of the Vietnam War: the sacrifices that were made and the horrors that were experienced.<sup>91</sup>

There is one exception to the almost total amnesia regarding South Korea's part in the Vietnam War. Right in the middle of the Vietnam boom in 1999, the leftist weekly *Hangyöre 21* launched an initiative to repair the damage done to the Vietnamese by the ROK troops.<sup>92</sup> The 'Let us pray that our embarrassing history may be forgiven'-initiative aims to raise funds for various purposes: to build hospitals in Vietnam; to enable journalists to pay visits to the sites of civilian massacres for research purposes; and to conduct interviews with Vietnamese survivors of such massacres as well as Korean ex-soldiers who are willing to talk about their part in the massacres.<sup>93</sup> The initiative

quickly gained the support of the Korean women who had been forced to serve Japanese soldiers in World War II as comfort women.<sup>94</sup> Rapidly obtaining a (provocative) reputation, the initiative made possible the emergence of three NGOs that are concerned with offering reparations to Vietnam in the form of humanitarian aid. At the same time, it predictably angered the Vietnam veterans who felt betrayed now that the moral justification for their personal sacrifices was denied by *Hangyöre 21*. They staged protests and even attacked and invaded the premises of the *Hangyöre* group, assaulting several of its employees with iron bars.<sup>95</sup> Through the years, there have also been other voices urging a reconsideration of South Korea's role in the Vietnam War, but these voices have been lone-some, never coming close to gathering the recognition (or infamy to some) of the *Hangyöre 21* initiative. Despite its scale and one-year-long activities (with hundreds of articles published on the massacres in Vietnam), it did not succeed in penetrating South Korean popular consciousness. This is clear from the fact that the South Korean population had not significantly changed its perceptions with regard to Vietnam after the initiative ended in 2001: products from popular culture (movies, TV dramas, novels et cetera) still prefer not to discuss the Vietnam War and South Korea's involvement in it.

## CONCLUSION

While the profits accrued during the Vietnam War were essential for South Korea's rapid economic developments during the seventies, the strength of the discourse of what may be called 'the politics of suffering' in South Korea has caused the South Korean participation in the Vietnam War to be conceptualized in terms of Korean suffering,

87 North Korea recognizes Vietnam as a model in developing its economy and the Vietnamese leader visited North Korea in 2007. See Chang Hyangsoo 張亨壽, "Pet'ünam-üi kukche hyömnöyk kyöngghöm-i Pukhan-e chünün shisajöm 베트남의 國際協力 經驗이 北韓에 주는 시사점," *Kyöngje yön'gu* 經濟研究 24.1 (2003): pp. 85-96; Cho Myöngch'öi 조명철 and Hong Ikp'yo 홍익표, *Chungguk, Pet'ünam-üi ch'ogi kaehyök, kaebang-gwa Pukhan-üi kaehyök kaebang* 중국-베트남의 초기 개혁·개발정책과 북한의 개혁방향 (policy report, Seoul: KIEP, 2000); Pak Songwan 박성관, "Pukhan-üi Taedongnam-a oegyo pyönhwa 북한의 대동남아 외교변화," *Kukche chöngch'i nonch'ong* 國際政治論叢 4.3 3 (2003): pp. 235-253.

88 See the following articles: <http://theseoultimes.com/ST?url=/ST/db/read.php?id=816> [accessed 1 October 2009]; <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/30/international/asia/30korea.html> [accessed 1 October 2009]. Although in far lesser numbers, North Korean refugees still find their way to South Korea through Vietnam: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/25/world/asia/25korea.html> [accessed 16 October 2009].

89 Ch'oe Chönggi "Han'guk-kun-üi Pet'ünam ch'amjön, öttök'e kiök toego innünga?" pp. 73-79.

90 See <http://www.vietvet.co.kr> (Wöllam p'abyöng tongjihoe 월남파병동지회) [accessed 9 February 2009].

91 See <http://cafe3.ktdom.com/vietvet/main.htm> [accessed 8 February 2009]. Also see <http://www.vk.co.kr/index.php> [accessed 9 February 2009].

92 This initiative was succeeded by three NGOs with roughly similar aims: I and We, Medics with Vietnam, and Peace and Young Korean Writer's Solidarity for Vietnam. These NGOs aim to follow up the *Hangyöre* initiative to look into and atone for the massacres committed by the Korean soldiers in Vietnam War. See Ngoc Pham Die, *Pet'ünam chönjaeng-gwa kwallyön-toen Han'guk tanch'edür-üi hwaltong-gwa Pet'ünam panüng* 베트남전쟁과 관련된 한국단체들의 활동과 베트남의 반응 (MA thesis, Sönggöng Taehakkyo NGO taehagwön 성공회대학교 NGO대학원, 2006).

93 See the index of the initiative at: <http://www.hani.co.kr/h21/vietnam/> [accessed 5 February 2009]. Several hundred pages with testimonies and research articles are attached to this site.

94 See <http://www.hani.co.kr/h21/vietnam/vietnam282.html> [accessed 5 February 2009].

95 Cho Hyöngch'öi 조현철, "Han'györe shinmunsa nanip shiwi 한겨레신문사 난입 시위," *Kyönghyang shinmun* 경향신문, 28 June 2000, p. 19.

with some minor exceptions. This discourse claims that Korea suffered as much from the war as Vietnam, a statement whose truth has not and cannot be measured. This discourse further harnesses the mirror-like image of Vietnamese history within the narrative of South Korean economic development for the sake of South Korean discourse of identity and history. The politics of suffering now firmly belongs to the public domain, having been planted there by decades of government-led censorship on Vietnam War-related research. The very real suffering experienced by the ROK soldiers in Vietnam and the South Korean labourers who contributed to the miracle on the Han have fortified the discourse. The few novels written about the Vietnam War by Vietnam veterans strengthened the image that the Korean participation in the war was forced, the ROK's responsibility absent (the US being deemed responsible) and Korean suffering as great as that of the Vietnamese.

Professional historiography has for the main part uncritically followed popular perceptions of the Vietnam War to the extent that a history of Vietnam published in Korean by a professional historian completely omits the issue of the participation of ROK troops. The failure of professional historians (until very recently) to engage with what one Korean historian has called “the most influential international event that Korea was ever confronted with outside the Korean War,”<sup>96</sup> has made it possible for two popular historical and defining national myths to remain unchallenged: the myth that the miracle on the Han was completely homegrown instead of funded by the Vietnam War and the myth that Korea has never invaded another country. These myths – which are in fact mythomoteurs or constitutive political myths – are of crucial importance in maintaining contemporary South Korean self-perceptions and national identity. Reconsideration of the significance of the Vietnam War in South Korean history and society would inevitably come to involve a reconsideration of South Korean contemporary national identity.

In many ways, the Vietnam War is an atypical field of historical inquiry. The moral debates that often surround other contentious issues in Korean historiography are

undercut by the politics of suffering and there seems to be little to no dialogue or discussion possible between the realms of popular perception and professional inquiry. Instead, in most cases professional inquiry took its cues from popular perceptions. One striking example is furnished by the *Hangyŏre* newspaper (issued by the same publisher that supported *Hangyŏre 21*, which started the atonement initiative). On the same day the front page was dominated by a large and indignant article about the massacre of civilians committed at Nogŭn-ri by US troops in 1950 and the absence of US apologies, page three featured an interview with general Ch'ae Myŏngshin, former commander-in-chief of ROK troops in Vietnam, in which Ch'ae defended himself against Vietnamese accusations that his men massacred Vietnamese civilians. According to Ch'ae, the ROK soldiers were not to blame, since they could not tell the difference between Vietcong guerrillas and Vietnamese civilians. Ironically, this same argument was used by the US soldiers who committed the Nogŭn-ri massacre.

It needs to be stated unambiguously that the treatment that has befallen the Vietnam War in modern Korean history is certainly not without parallels. Many nations, in particular those with a colonial past, furnish similar examples in their national histories. An example close to home is the way in which the colonial past of the Netherlands has never been recognized in Dutch popular consciousness (and not nearly enough by its professional historians). In a manner that is reminiscent of how the suffering of the Koreans during the Korean War and ROK soldiers during and after the Vietnam War have drowned out the Vietnamese side of the story, the Dutch suffering in the Japanese internment camps during World War II<sup>97</sup> has made it virtually impossible to face the consequences of 350 years of colonial policy (exploitation, abuse, massacre) in Indonesia.<sup>98</sup> The suffering of Dutch veterans during what is still euphemistically called the ‘Dutch police actions’ (now widely regarded as attacks instigated by the former colonizer to quell Indonesia's struggle for independence) also contributes to the silencing of Indonesian voices in Dutch popular debate.<sup>99</sup> Like their Korean counterparts, the Dutch soldiers had experienced a long war at home

<sup>96</sup> Ch'oe Chŏnggi “Han'guk-kun-ŭi Pet'ŭnam ch'amjŏn, ōttŏk'e kiŏk toego innŭnga?” p. 86.

<sup>97</sup> Where ironically many of the guards were in fact Korean; the generation of forced soldiers Hwang Sok-yong alluded to.

<sup>98</sup> See for instance Marjan Bruinvels (ed.), *ZO is het gebeurd: 20 jaar historische visies op de tweede wereldoorlog in Z.O. Azië* (Stichting Gastdocenten Wereldoorlog II, werkgroep Z.O. Azië, 2008); Pieter Joost Drooglever and Marian Schouten (eds.), *De kolonie en dekolonisatie: Nederland, Nederlands-Indië en Indonesië: een bundel artikelen aangeboden b. het afscheid van het Instituut voor Nederlandse Geschiedenis* (Den Haag: Instituut voor Nederlandse Geschiedenis, 2006); Rudy Kousbroek, *Het Oostindisch kampsyndroom* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1995).

<sup>99</sup> As opposed to academic debate where Indonesian voices are heard.

before they were sent to the tropics. Their (incidentally very real) suffering, both during and after the independence war, still obstructs a more liberal view of colonial history, one in which self-interest is not paraded as altruism. The politics of suffering, the exploitation for political ends of human suffering, have no nationality. This story can be found virtually anywhere, in endless variations, shapes and forms, the only constant being the presence of human suffering and its manipulation.

The prevalence of the politics of suffering in remembering the Vietnam War (aided by government censorship) created a distorted picture of Vietnam in which it was remembered only as a site of possible profit and adventure and a place to show Korean superiority. The Vietnam boom in the nineties confirmed this notion *in extremis*, as a result of which South Korea is now Vietnam's largest investor. Korean movies about Vietnam reflect this attitude faithfully. Like popular writings on Vietnam, they are in general colonialist, orientaling and exoticist in nature. The Vietnamese are depicted (if they are depicted at all) as typical Southeast Asian people, easy to please and happy to forgive, their surroundings lush, tropical and mysteriously exotic. In this, these movies show a striking resemblance with exoticizing movies set against colonial backgrounds from all over the world. Earlier I referred to Hwang Sok-yong writing that there was in his estimation not much difference between his father's generation having to serve in the Japanese Imperial Army and his generation having to serve and die in Vietnam for the US. The author could have extended this comparison by remarking that the place held by Manchuria in the Korean colonial imagination during Japan's rule of Korea as a site of profit, adventure and possibility was taken over by Vietnam in the nineties. While Manchuria was the colony's colony (at least in the popular imagination) during the Japanese colonial period, Vietnam became the colony's colony during the period of US dependency in the late sixties and seventies.<sup>100</sup> Both spawned narratives of conquest (sexual and otherwise), profit and the promise of exotic adventure. The war, if mentioned at all, is merely a forgotten memory, a body lying in an unmarked grave. At times, though, its stench is noticeable.

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<sup>100</sup> This is part of my on-going research and as such still unfinished. A provisional conclusion based on research in colonial period films suggests that Manchuria was consistently depicted as a place where fortunes could be made by resourceful and courageous men. In these movies, Manchuria is portrayed as an uncivilized (despite the age of its civilization) and untamed country, ready for the taking. Gangsters (or freedom fighters, the distinction is blurred in Korean popular discourse) who made it in Manchuria were seen as being supremely powerful. Both imagined representations, (movies, literature and songs) and daily-life factors, such as large-scale immigration, independence fighters, and bandits, worked together to create Manchuria as the screen upon which the dreams, hopes and fears of the colonized could be projected.

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