

# Politics of Memory and Commemoration of the Vietnam War in Korea\*

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*This article centers around the three memorials of Korean participation in the Vietnam War. It contains an in-depth study of the various methods used to reproduce memories about the war, the conflicts surrounding the memorials and the characteristics of politics of memory. The three memorials – the Korea-Vietnam Peace Park in Phu Yen as a counter memory against the official memory, the monument donated by Korean veterans of the Vietnam War in the village of Ha My, and the meeting place for Vietnam War veterans constructed in Kangwŏn province as a symbol of official memory – do not only carry mere material and spatial significance, but they also represent the ways in which the Korean society confronts the memory and history of the Vietnam War. These memorials have acted as mirrors reflecting the past and present Korea-Vietnam relations and as criteria to determine how Korea should establish relations with Vietnam and the world based on the past history.*

*Keywords: Commemoration, Politics of Memory, Transitional Justice, Massacre of Civilians, Vietnam War, Meeting Place for Vietnam War Veterans, Korea-Vietnam Peace Park, Monument at Ha My village, Korea*

## I. FOREWORD: THE VIETNAM WAR AND ITS CONTRADICTING MEMORIES

Korea and Vietnam normalized formal diplomatic ties on December 22, 1992, overcoming the memories of the Vietnam War that had ended

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seventeen years earlier. Lee Sang Ok, the Korean Minister for Foreign Affairs who signed the joint statement, stated, “Although there have been unhappy moments in the history of the two countries, the task left for our people now is to overcome them and develop a future-oriented relationship of cooperation” (*Seoul Shinmun* December 23, 1992). This event brought the Vietnam War, also known as the “*Forgotten War*” in Korea, back into the spotlight. The Korea-Vietnam normalization of relations not only played a catalytic role in human and material exchange between the two countries, but also released the forgotten past experience and memories of war.

At the moment of normalization, both countries avoided the issue of war compensation; Vietnam stated that, “We do not need any apology or the like from Korea for we were the victors of the Vietnam War” (*Hankyoreh* October 13, 2009), showing little resentment about the past. However, does this solve the issue of past affairs? Even during the economically difficult post-war period of 1976, Vietnam constructed the My Lai Massacre Museum in Quang Ngai province and collected rice from the Phu Yen province to construct a “monument of hatred” to record their hatred for Korean soldiers (Koo, S. 2007: 272). Although this monument has been renamed “memorial monument” (Kim, H. 2002: 79) in the 1980s, in accordance with government’s official position of “closing the door to the past and working towards the future to this day, the Vietnamese” commemoration and mourning for past sacrifices serve to shape their collective memory about a war that cannot be easily forgotten.

In contrast, in Korea, the dominating post-war memory about the Vietnam War has come down to a justification for participating in the war, oblivion of war memories, and a very self-centric collective memory with no consideration for the Vietnamese perspective. Korean people remember little other than the official, standardized narrative of what the Vietnam War represented: an opportunity for economic development, a war against Communism to protect the free world, improved military power and an opportunity to boost national prestige. Nonetheless, this official narrative began to break down when the 273<sup>rd</sup> issue of *Hankyoreh* 21, published on September 2, 1999, extensively covered the Vietnamese civilian massacre. Continuous coverage of the civilian massacre and the efforts of civilian groups to seek the truth forced people to look back into the memories of a

hitherto “strange war” and “unfamiliar past” – as orchestrated by the official histories of the Vietnam War. This bottom-up attempt to reenact history revealed that the standardized and forgotten memory of the Vietnam War consisted of “contradicting memories” (Kang, I. 2000). Ironically, what was “newly” revealed in the process was the “cliché” that the Vietnam War was a “transnational memory” (Yeo, M. 2009) shared by Korea and Vietnam.

How has Korea’s memory of the Vietnam War been constructed after 1999? This investigation seeks to answer this question through the memorials of the Vietnam War. If commemoration is “the reenactment of collective memory about the past, the process through which history is brought back to the plane of the present to be restructured to become the future,” (Jung, G. 2006: 280), memorials are the shared ground on which memory meets space (Jeon, J. 2005: 54-59). Memorials, “as cultural symbols that represent the collective interpretation of the past history, reflect the historical awareness of a specific time-space framework” (Han, S. 2008: 39). For this reason, their construction and dismantling reveal the characteristics of the politics surrounding the commemorated event.

As an example, the memorials that are discussed in this article function as products of socio-political relations; they form part of the strategies used to create and maintain a sense of national and social identity (Jung, H. 2009: 501-502). In addition, war memorials can become a stage for conflict reflecting the socio-political issues that surround the memorials (Kim, Y. 2006: 262). The emergence of a counter memory as a response to the official memory, the expansion of the former as a result of the memory-struggle, and the ensuing socio-political change can lead to the representation of unofficial discussions and memories of war in the form of memorials (Jung, H. 2005). Thus, memorials are the material and spatial externalization of the politics of memory; they express how a state or a society perceives a particular event or experience. This investigation seeks to enlist the different socio-political meanings embedded in the recent memorials of the Korean participation in the Vietnam War in order to examine the struggle and the type of the memory related to this event, as well as their socio-historical significance.

## II. SUBJECT OF INVESTIGATION AND METHOD OF ANALYSIS

At the time of the Vietnam War, Korea sent a military force of over 320 thousand men to Vietnam. However, academic investigations about the Korean participation in the Vietnam War did not begin until after the 1990s, when access to primary sources became available (Yoon, C. 2009). Additionally, interest in the experience and memory of war did not emerge until after the year 2000.

The study of Korean participation in the Vietnam War and the current memory of it cover a diverse range of domains and topics. Nonetheless, when we classify them according to subject, that is from “whose” perspective the historic, social and individual significance and context of war is being conveyed, we can determine two major approaches: the Vietnam-centered approach and the Korea-centered approach.

Firstly, investigations with a Vietnam-centric approach includes those by Hyun, A. (2002; 2004),<sup>1</sup> who placed a focus on civilian Vietnamese victims of massacre by Korean soldiers; Kim, H. (2007) and Kwon, H. (2006) who dealt with the Vietnamese peoples’ memory and commemoration of war after the massacre. On the other hand, studies on the Korean experience and memory of the Vietnam War include the works of Shim, J. (2003) and his analyses on the participating soldiers’ politics of memory; Yoon, C. (2007; 2009) and Lee, T. (2008), who dealt with the experience and memory of Korean soldiers and the formation of collective identity; Kang, S. (2008), who investigated the historical change in the war memory shown in related films; and Kwan, J. et al. (2005), who tried to reconcile the Korean society’s memory-struggle and conflict about the Vietnam War, from the perspective of the official memory. One of the most recent studies is by Choi, J. (2009), which deals with the change in the way Korea remembers the Korean participation in the Vietnam War alongside the memory of the Vietnamese people about the Korean soldiers, demonstrating how the investigation of war memory is now

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<sup>1</sup> Koo, S. (2000) has provided an academic approach to the Vietnamese civilian massacre by the Korean troops during the Vietnam War.

expanding beyond a uni-national dimension.

Among recent studies, those on the politics of memory and of memorials related to the Korean participation in the Vietnam War are limited to Kim, H. (2007), Shim, J. (2003), Choi, J. (2009), and Kwon, H. (2006). Yet these studies are unable to provide a multilateral application and analysis of Korea's struggles and methods in remembering the history of the Vietnam War and their significance in relation to Vietnam. This investigation aims to overcome this problem and provide a more multilateral, multi-dimensional understanding of the politics surrounding the memory and commemoration of the Vietnam War. Thus this investigation will develop three related major points: the structure of the struggle and the objectives of the opposing agents surrounding war memory, war-memory and transitional justice, and the war-memory within a trans-national context,

Firstly, memory is a political phenomenon: "It is a social phenomenon that does not occur in the vacuum" (Hirsh 2009: 32-37). In order to understand the principal agents and explain the particularities of the politics of memory, one must first have an analytical understanding of the structure of the war-memory struggle and the objectives of the agents of memory.

Secondly, the transitional justice issue consists of a series of steps: revealing the truth, punishing persons in charge, recovering national honor, reparation/indemnification, commemoration, and education. The process begins with discovering the truth and ends with an awareness of responsibility. Events of the past that have not been morally legitimized tend to be avoided or suppressed and reactions including the "passing over of responsibility," "self-justification," "relativization," and "denial" are often visible.<sup>2</sup> In order to explain war-memory and the characteristics of politics of memory, we need to take into account the attitude towards uncovering the truth, and the follow-up measures.

Thirdly, as can be seen by the continuous problem between Korea and Japan on the historical narrative of the colonial period or the Nogŭn-ri

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<sup>2</sup> Here, "passing over of responsibility" refers to criticizing somebody else to acquit the victimizer of charges while turning the victim into the victimizer. "Self-justification" refers to trying to find a rational motive for an embarrassing action. "Relativization" is belittling one atrocity and comparing it to another atrocity, and "denial" is to carry out measures to deny the occurrence of the incident itself (Hirsch 2009: 61-63).

problem that was extensively covered by AP communications on September 29, 1999, Korea's historical and social memory has not been limited to its national boundaries. Rather, it has continuously been changed and challenged within its relationships with other countries. This shows that the politics of memory "is not limited to a nation or its citizens, it surpasses international borders to be carried out within the international context" (Jung, G. 2006: 304) and thus possesses a transnational nature. The politics of memory within this international context becomes extremely significant because Korea is now positioned as both victim and victimizer given its experiences with colonial rule, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. The question of whether Korea insists on an exclusive memory-culture, or whether Korea makes an attempt to establish memories that can add to the development of a "global memory-culture" (Choi, H. 2009) which can provide useful standards when classifying the characteristics of subjects related to the memory of the Vietnam War. However, it is also an important measure when estimating Korean memory-culture's capacity of introspection.

The subjects of the memory-struggle were classified into three parts. The first is the subject of counter memory whose goal is to reconstruct war memory against the tide of official memory. The second is the "war participant" subject who supports the dominating, official memory such as the association of war veterans, who seek "recovery of honor" by opposing the counter-memory. The third is the official subject that takes action against the counter-memory and reproduces the official war-memory.

The memorials that this investigation will analyze more specifically in extension to these three subjects are: firstly, the Korea-Vietnam Peace Park erected in Hoa Hiep Trung village, Tuy Hoa district, Phu Yen province, because of the campaign by *Hankyoreh 21*, one of the most important proponents of the counter-memory. Secondly, the memorial erected in the hamlet of Ha My, Dien Dung village, Dien Ban district, Quang Nam province, sponsored by the Association of Vietnam War Veterans. Finally, the Meeting Place for Vietnam War Veterans established in Oŭm-ri, Kandong-myŏn, Hwach'ŏn-gun, sponsored by Kangwŏn provincial office.

The memorials mentioned above not only hold special meaning for each of the subjects, but also for the entire Korean society. Firstly, the Korea-Vietnam Peace Park was the first war memorial that the subjects of counter-

**Table 1.** Memorials, Spatial Reproductions and Politics of Memory regarding Korean Participation in the Vietnam War.

	Subject	<i>Hankyoreh</i> 21/ Phu Yen province	Association of Vietnam War Veterans/ Ha My hamlet	Kangwŏn-do
Reconstruction of Memorial and Space	Object	Massacre of Vietnamese ci- vilians by Korean soldiers during the Vietnam War	Massacre of Vietnamese civilians by Korean soldiers during the Vietnam War	Participation of Korean soldiers in the Vietnam War
	Region	Phu Yen province	Ha My hamlet	Oŭm-ri
	Content	Space for peace and reconciliation	End of the past, Commemoration of reconciliation	Creation of space for war memorial
	Form of Reconstruction	Korea-Vietnam Peace Park	Ha My hamlet me- morial	Meeting Place for Vietnam War Veterans
War Memory and Politics of Memory	Struggle structure and objective	Struggle against official memory and reconstruc- tion of memory	Struggle over counter memory and standardiza- tion of dominant memory	Standardization of dominant memory and commercializa- tion of memory
	Transitional justice	Demand for tran- sitional justice	Negation and justi- fication of the past	Negation and justification of the past
	Transnational context	Transnational memory-culture/ Laid foundation for reconciliation	Exclusive memory-culture/ Attempt at recon- ciliation without self-examination	Exclusive memo- ry-culture/ Self- justification of reconciliation without self- examination

memory erected in opposition to the official memory. Secondly, the Ha My hamlet memorial that was erected with donations from the Association of Vietnam War Veterans was the first compensation made regarding the past. It demonstrates the form of politics of memory working between victim and victimizer. Finally, the Meeting Place that was established by Kangwŏn

provincial office holds a different significance from other memorials on Korean participation in the Vietnam War. There are 74 memorials (until August 7, 2007) throughout the country that mention or include participation in the Vietnam War in either the name or in epitaph (Choi, Y. 2007: 173-176). However, the Meeting Place for Vietnam War veterans is the first to exhibit the characteristics of the official memory related to the Korean participation in the Vietnam War in a single space and in a comprehensive manner.

Investigations on commemoration include object and subject, content and form, and social impact (Jung, G. 2006: 281). This study includes all these factors while simultaneously presenting the analysis in Table 1. The table classifies war-memory and the politics of memory according to characteristics dictated by the war-memory's objective, the struggle surrounding it, by its relationship with transitional justice, and finally, by its transnational context. All these will be discussed further in the main body of the investigation.

### III. RUPTURE IN STANDARDIZED MEMORY, MEMORY-STRUGGLE, AND THE CREATION OF A NEW MEMORY: KOREA-VIETNAM PEACE PARK

A war remembered by monuments in memorial halls, death-rolls, statistical figures – beneath this seemingly solid but extremely “superficial war-memory” there lies a “thick war-memory” made of diverse pieces of memory kept within the individual and society. Nonetheless, just like Ernest Renan's words: “Forgetting...is a crucial factor for a nation” (高橋哲哉 2008: 149). In other words, a state's official memory accompanies the suppression and forgetting of various memories that have not been incorporated into the official narrative. The massacre of the Vietnamese civilians by Korean soldiers during the Vietnam War exemplifies this.

After the war, the Vietnamese civilian massacre was forgotten by Korea and Vietnam. As the victimizer, Korea committed the “oblivion of violence,” while Vietnam, despite being the victim, committed the “violence of oblivion” about its people's sacrifices.<sup>3</sup> Within this context, that the Korean press and

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<sup>3</sup> Because the Vietnamese government gave greater importance to the commemoration

Civilian groups demanded that the issue of the Vietnamese civilian massacre by Korean soldiers be brought to light was perplexing, not only for the Korean government, but also for the Vietnamese.

Beginning with the May 6, 1999 issue of *Hankyoreh* 21 (Volume 256), which subsequently became the article named, “Remember the Soul of Vietnam,” issued in Volume 273 of September 2<sup>nd</sup> that same year, the investigative news coverage continued for 46 weeks, until September 2000. This caused a sensation in both Korean and Vietnamese societies. In the beginning of 2000, a civilian, solidarity organization, called the “Vietnam War Civilian Massacre Truth Committee”<sup>4</sup> was formed. As the committee began its activities, it eventually established a systematic network with the *Hankyoreh* campaign that worked under the slogan, “Let’s ask for forgiveness for our embarrassing past.”

The direction of the movement of that time can be seen through the following five characteristics: 1) anti-War Peace movement, 2) matching Korea’s view with that of the world, 3) a movement to accept truth, 4) a movement taking the honor of the Korean society into account, and 5) a movement to embrace the Vietnamese soldiers (*Hankyoreh* 21, Vol. 316, 7/3/2000). This reflects the actual identity of the counter-memory, which contrasts with the official memory of the Korean participation in the Vietnam War. It is an attempt to establish a new memory about the Vietnam War. What needs highlighting here is the justification used by the counter-argument, in which the protagonists of the movement emphasize the ambivalence of Korea within the historical-transnational context beyond the bilateral relationship of Korea and Vietnam: “If historical problems like Japan’s colonial rule and the problem of comfort women need to be revealed; if we are to demand the US for the truth and apology for the Nogŭn-ri massacre, we need to take responsibility for what we have done in Vietnam” (*Hankyoreh*, December

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of the war heroes and fallen soldiers, the commemoration of civilian victims was marginalized and individualized. The commemoration for these civilians did not genuinely begin until the 1990s, with socio-economic reforms in Vietnam following the collapse of the Cold War. Even then, the commemoration was not carried out on a national scale, but rather, remained localized between victims and their villages (Hyun, I. 2003; Kwon, H. 2006).

<sup>4</sup> The activities of this institute are explained in detail in Han, H. (2009).

1, 1999). In this way, they sought to justify and prove the appropriateness of their movement through the juxtaposition of Korea's history as a victim by other nations and its history with Vietnam as a victimizer. This meant reevaluating what had been anachronistically evaluated as the "Freedom Protection War" by "matching it to the world view." It was a twofold way of memory-struggle: by accepting the truth about Korean soldiers' Vietnamese civilian massacre, Korea would be able to provide grounds to demand recognition of truth and compensation for its own historical losses.

The soldiers that had participated in the war were the ones to react most vehemently against the *Hankyoreh* 21 campaign and civilian groups' movements. They repudiated any re-evaluation of the Vietnam War and called these activities "pro-Communist," "defamation of the national legitimacy," and "hatred toward President Park Chung Hee that was misdirected into hatred towards Vietnam veterans." They denied the massacre itself, evaluating "the massacre of innocent people as a biased judgment" (Choi, Y. 2003: 677, 779, 785). Furthermore, they resorted to counteraction on June 27, 2000 by breaking into the *Hankyoreh* newspaper building and thwarted the "Symposium on Vietnam War and the dispatching of Korean soldiers" that the truth committee of Vietnamese civilian massacre wanted to hold on October 13 that same year.

For its part, the Korean government maintained its silence about the entire situation. On August 23, 2001, President Kim Dae Jung told the Vietnamese Chief of State, Tran Duc Luong who had visited Korea, "I feel sorry and give my condolences for the fact that Korea fought in an unhappy war (Vietnam War) and inflicted pain on Vietnamese citizens, against our will" (*Hankyoreh* 21, August 28, 2001). Beyond this, there were no official investigations on a national scale about these past events. The government was, however, involved in constructing 40 schools in five provinces of the Central Vietnam, worth two million dollars beginning in March 2000.<sup>5</sup> In further talks with Trun Duc Luong, President Kim Dae Jung promised to donate 3 million dollars to build hospitals in the same area.

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<sup>5</sup> The five provinces in central Vietnam are: Quang Ngai, Binh Dinh, Phu Yen, Khanh Hoa. References to Lee, Y. (2003) about the primary school construction project related to the Vietnamese civilian massacre.

The Vietnamese government's approach has been more cautious, not wanting the problem to become widespread (Kwon, H. 2006: 144). When the media continuously covered the Vietnamese civilian massacre by the Korean soldiers, the Vietnamese government sent unofficial restraint orders to all press, and forbade onsite coverage by Reuters. For the Vietnamese government, investment and aid were more important (*Hankyoreh 21*, Vol. 293, January 27, 2000).

*Hankyoreh 21*'s memorial construction, in opposition to the official narrative, was thus carried out within this context of both national and international struggle. Next let's examine the process by which the memorials were constructed and the implications this holds for Korea's war narrative and the politics of memory.

Phu Yen province, where the Korean Vietnamese Peace Park was established through the *Hankyoreh21* campaign, was where three of the major Korean troops passed by or were stationed (the "Blue Dragon" troops in Tuy Hoa in 1966, the "Fierce Tiger" 26<sup>th</sup> Regiment in Dong Xuan, and the "White Horse" 28<sup>th</sup> Regiment in Tuy Hoa) (Yong, H. 2007: 63-79). The authorities of the Phu Yen Province confirmed that there were 22 incidences of civilian massacre in Phu Yen province, resulting in the sacrifice of 1,729 people (*Hankyoreh 21*, Vol. 405, May 2, 2002). This place was thus deemed appropriate as a memorial site representing atonement and reconciliation for past events and hope for a peaceful future.

Nonetheless, *Hankyoreh 21* did not plan for the establishment of the Peace Park from the beginning of its campaign. Rather, in the beginning, *Hankyoreh 21* announced that it would choose sites where there had been civilian massacres to build schools (*Hankyoreh 21*, Vol. 299, March 16, 2000), which later changed to building a hospital in May 2000. After, the Korean government presented its plans to sponsor the construction of hospitals in Vietnam, but when confronted with the problem of excessive construction costs, new plans for a peace park were announced in November 2001 (*Hankyoreh 21*, Vol. 386, January 27, 2001). The fact that the Korean-Vietnam Peace Park was a result of fundraising because of citizens' voluntary participation and support is of great significance. After the campaign began in October 1999, until it ended in February 2003, almost 153.65 million won was raised, and with this as seed money, the Korean-Vietnam Peace Park



Photo 1. Scene of the Symbolic Tower of the Korean-Vietnamese Peace Park (Taken July 20, 2006).



Photo 2. Scene of the Korean-Vietnamese Peace Park (Taken July 20, 2006).

began construction on April 24, 2002 and was completed on January 21, 2003.

The Korean-Vietnamese Peace Park contains no ostentatious memorial or construction, so common in other public memorial sites. Neither does the park have an explicit record of the pain or the events of the past. Rather, there is only a sculpture in the middle of the 8500 m<sup>2</sup> park, showing a globe held in two hands. In front there is the “Rock of Truth and Friendship” explaining the origins of the park. In addition, there is a pole representing the commiseration for past events and a small wall made of a mosaic tiles made by children wishing for peace. One can feel the desire for peace and friendship, against a backdrop of repentance over past events in this small, simple park.

Overall, the Korean-Vietnamese Peace Park is the spatial extension of the Korean counter-memory of the Korean participation in the Vietnam War, and it became a precedent in civilian society for issues of transitional justice between countries in East Asia. Furthermore, it was an opportunity to construe a transnational memory-culture, liberated from the exclusive nationalism and allowing the social introspection of “human rights.”<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, what can be concluded from the Korean-Vietnamese Peace Park is that the movement to reveal the truth about the Vietnam War was limited in terms of “the continuity of the movement,” “internal integration of the society,” and “maintenance and conservation of commemorative space.”

Firstly, the movement to reveal the truth, carried out under the joint effort of *Hankyoreh 21* and civilian society, was able to establish the basic foundation for the counter-memory but it faced much limitation in extending this into actual reckoning of past events. With the end of the *Hankyoreh 21* campaign, the movement weakened, social interest died out, and all the follow-up works related to transitional justice and revealing the truth of the past were discontinued.

Secondly, in his explanation of Japanese internal problems related to past events, Kimiya Tadashi argued that it was necessary to find a solution to the double problem of clarifying the responsibilities for the past events

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<sup>6</sup> Yamaguchi Yasisu explained this as part of the “theory of future responsibility” in relation to past wars (山口定 2000: 227).

while overcoming the arising struggles in order to produce national and international reconciliation (*Hankyoreh* 21, Vol. 302, April 6, 2000). The reaction of the veterans and the concentration of the conservatives to the *Hankyoreh* 21 campaign showed, in a similar manner, the structure of struggle within Korea about the Vietnam War (Yoon, C. 2007; Lee, T. 2008), and this became another task for the subjects of the counter-memory to solve in order to achieve transitional justice surrounding the Vietnam War.

Thirdly, the Korean-Vietnamese Peace Park that opened in 2003 is currently incapable of fulfilling its role as a park properly. The authorities of the Phu Yen province are facing difficulties in the maintenance and administration of the park, and Korea is not sending the support it should. In its decline, the Korean-Vietnamese Peace Park has become a space that represents the weakening of the counter-memory about the Vietnam War within the Korean society and the process of “secondary neglect” of the Vietnam War.

#### IV. SEALED MEMORY AND “RECONCILIATION” WITHOUT SELF-REFLECTION: MONUMENT OF HA MY HAMLET

“In our country, the only thing people would say if you say you’d been to Vietnam used to be, ‘Did you earn much money?’ Now even that has been forgotten” (An, J. 1989: 48). Just as this quote illustrates, in the Korean society, veterans barely have a presence, or if they do, they are seen as victims of a defoliant war or as the victimizers of the Vietnamese civilian massacres. The response of the veterans to this has been to either demand the revival of memory, or collective action in an attempt to keep their “honor.” The struggle against collective neglect has been carried out primarily through a demand for monuments and memorials for those who have served or fallen in the war. The struggle for “honor” has come down to 1) demands for national benefits for veterans, and 2) a conservative effort to reemphasize the official memory to oppose the invigoration of the counter-memory (Yoon, C. 2007).

In this context, the attempt of the Association of the Vietnam War Veterans to construct a war memorial in Vietnam could not have been but a controversial incident. The monument in Ha My hamlet was the first to be

erected by a civilian organization for the sake of reckoning the past, and it was particularly significant in that it was the first memorial for which a veterans' association was coming face-to-face with the victims. However, the Ha My hamlet memorial became a representative case of victimizers and victims trying to commemorate different memories, revealing how the struggle and confrontation about the past still holds true in the present.

The Association of Vietnam War Veterans was established in February 1998. In the beginning, it showed great initiative in the construction of war memorials, such that it applied for the patent of the Vietnam War commemorative monuments (May 13, 1990). It also upheld the movement of war memorial construction, as well as the movement to designate the day troops were dispatched to Vietnam as a national holiday as their main objectives.<sup>7</sup> The Association of Vietnam War Veterans placed a great importance on the national commemorative activity, and its initiative in the construction of Vietnam War memorials cannot be separated from the activities of the then chairman, Kim Mun Ku. Chairman Kim had held a Grand Sacrifice for those who had died in the Vietnam War in July 1996 and April 2000, including Korean soldiers who had fallen in battle, and local Vietnamese victims. It had also maintained continued ties with Vietnam. However, the actual construction of the memorials was sparked by the *Hankyoreh 21* campaign that began in the end of 1999. In an interview with *Hankyoreh 21*, Chairman Kim stated the following regarding the construction of the war memorials.

Regardless of the fact that the war was carried out for the order of the nation, the death of many civilians is wrong. I think that we have to finish the event within our life time without leaving it to the next generation...Let's accept what we did wrong. We hope many veterans can participate in the erection of memorials (*Hankyoreh 21*, vol. 300, March 23, 2000).

The Ha My hamlet where the Association of Vietnam War Veterans erected the memorial was a region known for “having been killed twice” when the

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<sup>7</sup> December 26, 2008 reference to interview with a representative and information of the history of the association can be found on the association's homepage ([http://kosvet.price.co.kr/kr\\_start.htm](http://kosvet.price.co.kr/kr_start.htm)) (Referenced on 12/10/2008).

Blue Dragon Regiment killed 135 civilians on February 22, 1968 (Lunar calendar: 24<sup>th</sup> of the first month) and then bulldozed the graves with tanks for which it was impossible to even find the corpses (Kim, H. 2002: 262-266; Yong, J. 2003: 95-102; Kwon, H. 2006: 28-59; 伊藤正子 2009). Because it was not a “heroic death,” but rather a “tragic death,” the deaths did not receive much attention from the nation. For the Ha My residents who had been unable to afford memorials for the fallen or to set up a proper cemetery, the construction of the memorials had been a long-awaited project. In the beginning, the People’s Committee of Dien Ban district rejected the memorial construction proposal, but were later moved by Chairman Kim’s words, “Let’s heal the wounds of war with forgiveness and reconciliation,” (*Hankyoreh* 21, April 26, 2000). Thus, on May 2, 2000, the groundbreaking ceremony for the memorial was held on a 1350 m<sup>2</sup> space in Ha My hamlet, and the veiling ceremony was planned for September 2 of that same year (*Kookmin Ilbo*, July 12, 2000).<sup>8</sup> The residents of Ha My gave up even their “siesta” (afternoon sleep) time and dedicated themselves to erecting the monument. A magnificent memorial was completed in November of that year (Kim, H. 2002: 267; 伊藤正子 2009). The names and dates of birth of all the victims were engraved onto the front of the monument, and, on the back, there was a commemorative epitaph. Furthermore, in the garden in front of the memorial, a collective cemetery for the victims’ remains was prepared. Thirty-two years after the incident, the victims were finally able to find rest and the residents were able to have a proper memorial.

However, neither the September 2 unveiling ceremony nor the completion ceremony was held. There were three reasons for this: 1) the memorial only took into account the Vietnamese perspective while ignoring the sacrifice by Korean soldiers, and thus was not appropriate as a reconciliatory memorial; 2) issues surrounding the epitaph; and 3) a question remained whether both the Korean and Vietnamese flags should be flown in front of the memorial. For our analysis, the most significant cause is the second. The epitaph was written by Nguyen Huu Dong, a Quang Nam newspaper journalist, and had

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<sup>8</sup> The Association of Vietnam War Veterans donated \$25,000; however, the real costs of building the memorial was \$40,000 and this became a burden for the already strained budget of the provincial government (Kim, H. 2007: 207).

had to pass censorship by the Dien Ban district (伊藤正子 2009). On it was the following:

In early spring of 1968, on January 24, the Blue Dragon Regiment suddenly slaughtered the civilians like madmen. 30 houses in Ha My village were burned down, and the 135 corpses were scattered and burned... What was more appalling was that a tank ran over the graves (Yong, J. 2003: 101-102).

The contents of the epitaph was discovered by Lee Yong Jun, an adviser for the Korean embassy, when he was searching for a site for Korea to build a primary school (Lee, Y. 2003: 95-102). The Korean embassy requested the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to change this, and adviser Lee Yong Jun also made personal demands to Dien Dung village (Lee, Y. 2003: 151; Kwon, H. 2006: 145). Furthermore, the Association of Vietnam War Veterans also maintained that the completion ceremony could only be held if the epitaph was corrected, and continuously demanded such changes.<sup>9</sup>

As a result of this dispute, the Ha My hamlet underwent significant conflict regarding past events. One was a problem with Korea over the content of the epitaph. However, there was a greater internal problem. In September 2000, in a meeting between the government authorities and the families of the victims, the government delegation officially requested that the memorial be changed. At first, the families of the victims and the villagers refused and adamantly resisted. Although the governmental authorities were surprised at the strong reaction, they were able to placate the residents and persuade Quang Nam province with the possible Korean civilian investments and aid in the province (伊藤正子 2009). As a result, the Ha My residents accepted the government's request. Nevertheless, the villagers found a solution that did not involve altering the epitaph itself. Koo Soo Jung, who had investigated the Ha My hamlet massacre and had mediated the groundbreaking ceremony of the memorial at the time of its construction, explained it in the following manner:

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<sup>9</sup> According to some internal documents of the association, they held 6 meetings with Vietnam in February, May, June, August, and September (twice) to demand the deletion of the epitaph on civilian massacre by Korean soldiers on the backside of memorial in the Quang Nam province.



Photo 3. View of the Ha My Hamlet War Memorial (Taken July 8, 2007).



Photo 4. The Ha My Hamlet Memorial with the Epitaph Covered by a Picture of a Lotus (Taken July 8, 2007).

In order to maintain the epitaph, they placed a marble slate covering the epitaph. What this means is: “We are not changing it... When the time comes, we will remove this and the epitaph will remain as it is.” Ha My chose a solution not to change the epitaph. “On the day that we like, we can remove this one little thing and the epitaph will be in there.” That was what happened (Koo Soo Jung interview, July 9, 2009).

The epitaph covered by a lotus, the Vietnamese national flower, is another way in which Vietnam is “closing the door on the past.”

The struggle surrounding the Ha My hamlet memorial shows how the association of the veterans and the Ha My residents each attempted to establish a different memory “through explicit records in writing, memory-spaces act as reminders” (Assmann 2003: 425). In this way, in this memory-space where the massacre had taken place, the Ha My residents wanted to record their memories and remember them. As the premier of Dien Dung village, Nyugen Van Hai said, “We are grateful that you have constructed the memorial for us. However, that you intervene in even the content of the epitaph is unacceptable. This is our history and our past, it is the truth” (*Hankyoreh* 21, Vol. 356, April 24, 2001). As such, the epitaph represented an indelible memory for the victims.

However, the project of the Association of Vietnam War Veterans of building the memorials itself could not avoid conflicting with the victims’ memories. First, in contrast to the apparent motivation for the memorial construction enterprise, the association’s actual perception of the past coincided with the established, conservative perspective. In an article written in a newspaper in February, the association said, “It is unbelievable that we are being made out to be heinous war criminals who slaughtered Vietnamese civilians, after we shed blood for our nation and world peace” (*Hankook Ilbo*, February 22, 2000). Additionally, in raising the problem of the epitaph, Chairman Kim Mun Ku said, “Would you like it if you erected a memorial to quiet the massacre incident, and the memorial had ‘massacre’ written over it?” (*Hankyoreh* 21, Vol. 356, April 24, 2001), revealing the real motivations behind the erection of the memorial. Thus, we can understand the memorial to have been planned as a unilateral “reconciliation memorial” from the beginning, and that it shows the intention of stitching up the past, rather than apologizing for it.

Secondly, the construction of the Ha My hamlet memorial was less for the memory of the victims as it was an external expression of an internal desire to build a memorial in honor of veterans. This intention of the association can be clearly seen on the pamphlet of the “Opening Ceremony for the Memorial for the Vietnam War victims” on December 10, 2001. From the beginning, the association was interested in making a memorial to “rest the heroic souls of all Vietnam War victims,” and to “commemorate all Vietnam War victims,” which includes Korean soldiers, as well as Vietnamese victims. Furthermore, what Chairman Kim Mun Ku said in his commemorative speech, “What is our dream? It is to erect memorials for the Vietnam War in both our countries,” clearly shows the basic motivation behind the Ha My hamlet memorial.

The Ha My hamlet war memorial became a space for memory-struggle surrounding memories of war, that were far from reckoning of the past or opening to the future through apology, forgiveness and reconciliation. The memorial became a space for the neglect of the national war-memory and for an indirect struggle against the counter-memory. In the process, the past was “justified” and “denied.” The egocentric and exclusive memory-culture and lack of self-reflection from part of the victimizer acted as a “second infliction” on the Ha My residents and, as the families of the victims said, a “second massacre, killing the memory of killing” (Kwon, H. 2006: 145). It is said that the memorial that had been well cared for in the beginning is no longer being well maintained since the incident and is now becoming run-down. The residents’ hearts have left the memorial (Koo Soo Jung interview, July 9, 2009). Although the Association of Vietnam War Veterans and the Ha My residents made a single memorial together, both attempted to build different memory-spaces and this has produced another hurtful memory for the Ha My residents.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> At the time of the incident, the Association of Vietnam War Veterans were trying to help war victims by establishing a sisterhood with Ha My hamlet, saying that the memorial should not become an obstacle (*Hankyoreh* 21, Vol. 356, April 24, 2001). However, after the chairman and the organizational structure of the association changed in 2003, the Vietnamese projects were discontinued.

## V. GOVERNMENT-LED WAR MEMORY AND MEMORY-COMMERCIALIZATION: MEETING PLACE FOR VIETNAM WAR VETERANS

A nation tries to justify its actions and unify its people by identifying the multi-level and diverse war-memories of its citizens under a single banner of a race, nation or a particular ideology. War memorials are the quintessential example for this, as they preserve and convey not the entire memory, but rather, a selective memory from a particular perspective (Kim, H. 2007: 194). Glory of war is emphasized over fear, just as combat and the significance of sacrifice is emphasized over pain or tragedy (高橋哲哉 2008: 168). Thus, the government-centered war memorials are not reflections of the “experienced memory,” but rather, they are “cultural memory-spaces,” (Assmann 2003: 533). They reflect the socio-political interests of that time. In other words, they are a means of communication for the government to convey the official memory it wants to establish. Nonetheless, in recent years, war memorials are not acting as mere communication mediums for the realization of national memory. As can we see from the case of security tourism, the combination of national security, the dominant ideology and the tourism industry push forward “the commercialization of the official memory,” (Kang, I. 2000: 355; Chung, H. 2009). In the process, war experience and memory combine with economic and material interests to be commercialized and consumed as such.<sup>11</sup>

The Meeting Place for Vietnam War Veterans that reproduces the Korean memory of the Vietnam War is a space that well illustrates the official memory of war and its commercialization. Talks for a memorial hall related to the Vietnam War had already begun in the times of Park Chung Hee,<sup>12</sup> the construction of a memorial hall as an independent space was only begun

<sup>11</sup> Although the content is different, the commercialization of war memory can be applied to Vietnam. Currently, one of the cores of Vietnamese tourist industry is the Vietnam-USA war (Choi, H. 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Although it was not carried out, on June 2, 1969, President Park Chung Hee had ordered the construction of the “Memorial Hall for Troops dispatched to Vietnam,” (*Choson Ilbo*, June 3, 1969)

in 1999. Kangwŏn-do put forward the motion for a memorial hall and the director of the Department of Tourism and Culture explained the motivation for the enterprise as follows:

Kangwŏn-do is the only training camp the Vietnam War soldiers passed through. We are pushing ahead with the enterprise for the purpose of capitalizing on the Oŭm-ri training camp. Of course we need to attribute part of the significance to the participating soldiers, but from our position, we can capitalize upon this (Congress of Kangwŏn-do, December 6, 1999).

The Param-Pŏdaengi-gol Oŭm-ri Kandong-myŏn Hwach'ŏn-gun Kangwŏn-do was where the training center for troops being dispatched to Vietnam was located during the Vietnam War. With the exception of the Blue Dragon Marines, who received separate training in Pohang, the rest of the soldiers trained at Oŭm-ri. Thus, it can be said that Oŭm-ri is a memory-space for the veterans. The Kangwŏn-do planned to build the "Meeting Place for Vietnam War Expeditionary Forces," (name used at the time of initial planning) on the site of the Kangwŏn-do old training camp and to develop a touristic course in liaison with DMZ unification security tourism (Congress of Kangwŏn-do, April 27, 1999). It was pushing ahead with "the portrayal as a high-security province and the touristic capitalization of unification security."<sup>13</sup>

The Meeting Place for Vietnam War Veterans established a development plan between 1998 and 2000; between 2001-2006, as a first stage, completed a war memorial hall, a memorial stone, a tower, a barracks experiencing park, restaurants, an outdoor exposition of military equipment, a tactical base, a training base, a picnic spot, a large and small sports field, the restoration of the cooking wing; and after setting up a reproduction of local life in Vietnam between February and October 2008, as a second stage, the entire enterprise finished after almost ten years since its commencement.<sup>14</sup> With a building site

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<sup>13</sup> This is the content of the first section of the official document Kangwŏn-do sent to the association of veterans explaining the purpose and the situation of the "Meeting Place for troops dispatched to the Vietnam War" (Meeting Place for troops dispatched to the Vietnam War, source from March 29, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> Hanguk Digital News, October 20, 2008 ([http://koreadigitalnews.com/board/view.php?bbs\\_id=sub\\_08i&doc\\_num=1343](http://koreadigitalnews.com/board/view.php?bbs_id=sub_08i&doc_num=1343)), Retrieved December 11, 2009.

of 139,788 m<sup>2</sup>, the construction itself being 53,296 m<sup>2</sup>, the Meeting Place for Vietnam War Veterans had initially begun with a budget of 7.5 billion won, increasing rapidly to 8.1 billion won and 16.2 billion won, until the entire construction cost 18 billion won (approximately 6.8 billion won of national expenditure / 4.4 billion won of provincial expenditure / 6.6 billion won of district expenditure) until completion. Despite that it was such a high-cost, long-term enterprise, there wasn't much controversy surrounding it, but it did not garner much attention either. One of the reasons for this was that it was an authority-led enterprise with Kangwon-do putting forward the motion for this enterprise and Hwach'ŏn-gun becoming the central operating body, but the greater reason lies in the social neglect and indifference towards the Vietnam War.<sup>15</sup>

What is the memory that the Meeting Place for Vietnam War Veterans reproduces and preserves? From the perspective of war-memory, the two noteworthy elements are the "Vietnam War Memorial Hall" and the reproduction of local Vietnam. The Vietnam War Memorial Hall is a structure 13 m high and 12 m wide, located in the upper area, behind a tower named "Peace-Keeping War Memorial Tower." The memorial hall, with the main exposition theme of "Understanding and Reconciliation," consists of three floors, of which the first and second floors showed contents related the participation of Korean soldiers in Vietnam War. The purpose of exposition of the Vietnam War memorial hall can be seen in Table 2.

Putting aside the fact that it possessed a single theme, the Korean Vietnam War, and that it emphasized Oŭm-ri's military characteristic, the overall objective and direction of the exposition was not much different from that of the Vietnam Expeditionary Forces Exposition in the War Memorial of Korea in Yongsan.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> The case for Korea is very different from the construction of the Vietnam War memorial in the United States. Six years after the war ended, the construction of the Vietnam War Memorial in the National Mall, that began with the donation of an individual caused much social controversy and struggle (Kim, Y. 2006: 274-278; Clark 2000: 119-122; Hagopian 1994: 284-363).

<sup>16</sup> In its planning stage, the Vietnam Expeditionary Forces Exposition's objective was "to display the unity of the free democratic allies and achievement of the dispatched troops in revealing the will of anti-communism as well as highlight the bravery of the

**Table 2.** Purpose of Vietnam War Memorial Hall Exposition

1. Commemoration of dispatched troops	-Meeting space for Vietnam War veterans -Space for empathy between veterans and older/younger generations
2. Basis for exchange with Vietnam	-Stage of reconciliation between Korea and Vietnam -Opening up to the future through a mutual understanding of the past
3. Education of the history of security	-Raising awareness of the importance of peace through war records -Raising awareness of the importance of nation and security.
4. Regional propaganda	-Emphasis on the militaristic nature of Oŭm-ri Hwachŏn-gun -Educative activities on new security program

The reproduction of local Vietnam can be largely divided into the Cu Chi tunnel and the traditional Vietnamese house. The Cu Chi tunnel has a total length of about 157 m and is a larger scale model of its counterpart in Vietnam. The traditional house actually consists of five buildings, and inside each, there is a reproduction of the daily life in Vietnam, with figure dolls of Vietnamese people. There is even a portrait of Ho Chi Minh on the wall.

The Vietnam War Memorial Hall and the reproduction of local Vietnam reflect one of the characteristics of authority-led memory-making. Firstly, the spatial distribution of these two show the contrast between the “sacred” and the “secular.”<sup>17</sup> The Vietnam War Memorial Hall, which is placed in the center of the highest place, represents “sacredness,” a space to commemorate

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Korean soldiers in Vietnam in the moment of action and the military assistance given to Vietnamese citizens’ and the direction of the exposition was to “first make people understand the background of Korean participation in the Vietnam War, and to emphasize the strategy and military assistance activities of the Korean soldiers and all the activities that raised the national prestige. Especially to show what we had earned by dispatching troops to Vietnam” (Committee for the War Memorial Enterprise 1997: 302).

<sup>17</sup> The classification of sacred and secular is arbitrary and relative. “The sacred is not sacred because of an innate quality, but rather, the difference from the secular, within the dichotomous classification system, is what makes it sacred” (Choi, J. 2007: 20).

the participation in the Vietnam War, and to honor the fallen soldiers whose names are recorded in the hall. On the other hand, the main purpose of the reproduction of local Vietnam, which is situated at the bottommost sector to the right of the Memorial Hall, is business and tourism, which projects a secular image. This contrast polarizes Korea and Vietnam into sacred and secular, and the alienation of Vietnam implies a perspective of imitative orientalism, uplifting Korea as the main subject.

Secondly, the theme of the Vietnam War Memorial Hall was “Understanding and Reconciliation” and as shown in Table 2, one of the most important purposes of the exposition was to prepare a space for a basis of exchange with Vietnam. However, in no part of the Vietnam War Memorial Hall can this be found. The Vietnam War Memorial in the American National Mall is “the acceptance of the Vietnam War as an indelible fault in American History” (Clark 2000: 122). A space to commemorate the loss of the individual, the Vietnam War Memorial Hall in Korea not only tries to justify the war, and prove its inevitability, it is the paragon of an occlusive nationalism that promotes national prestige. Here, “understanding and reconciliation” is not meant for the Korea-Vietnam relationship, but rather is used as rhetorical expression for reducing the difference in perception of the war of the state and its people. There is no mention of Korea’s history as victimizer and Vietnam’s as victim.

Thirdly, another problem of the Vietnam War Memorial Hall can be noted in the reproduction of local Vietnam, and the structure that is especially problematic is the Cu Chi tunnel. In the square at the entrance of the Cu Chi tunnel, the word “Vietnam” is written in English and there are life-sized figures of Korean soldiers shooting at what is assumed to be the Vietcong, and the Vietnamese people surrendering with their hands over their heads. This goes beyond a justification for war, to “violence through cultural reproduction,” and it brings the unhappy experience and memory of the past war back to the present. The violence of this reproduction may be easily understood if we recall Korea’s historical experience during colonial rule and the Korean War. What would have happened if this kind of replica were placed in a memorial hall in Japan or in the United States? Switching perspectives to consider the Vietnamese people’s reaction to this



Photo 5. The Vietnam War Memorial Hall as seen from the Peace-Keeping War Memorial Tower (Taken October 23, 2008).

reproduction, it is not difficult to understand the violence it carries.<sup>18</sup>

The Meeting Place for Vietnam War Veterans will become an important memory-space about the Vietnam War, not only for the war veterans, but also for the entire Korean society. However, at the moment, the memory that is recorded, restored and passed onto the next generations is justifying Korea's participation in the war, rationalizing and denying the violence the Korean soldiers inflicted upon the Vietnamese people, and reinforcing ideological polarization and commercializing the war.<sup>19</sup> With this kind of exclusive

<sup>18</sup> In March 2010, the Committee for the Construction of Peaceful Museums, a civilian organization, investigated the Meeting Place for Vietnam War Veterans, and reported that this exposition had been dismantled.

<sup>19</sup> The Meeting Place for Vietnam War Veterans required 4-5 administration staff and about 500 million won in budget to be operated properly (*Kangwŏn Ilbo*, March 11, 2008). This kind of financial burden only serves to further incite commercialization of



Photo 6. View of the Entrance of the Cu Chi Tunnel (Taken October 23, 2008).

memory culture, we can neither build a reflective war memory and culture, foster reconciliation between Korea and Vietnam, nor open the future through an understanding of the past.

## 6. CONCLUSION: POST-WAR RESPONSIBILITY, THE FUTURE AND SOLIDARITY OF SUFFERING

This paper investigated methods of reproducing memory about the Vietnam War and the struggles and characteristics of the politics of memory by examining three different memorials: the Korea-Vietnam Peace Park, the Ha My hamlet monument, and the Meeting Place for Vietnam War Veterans.

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this space centered on security tourism.

The most representative case of counter-memory in action is *Hankyoreh* 21 and the Civilian organizations that constructed the Korea-Vietnam Peace Park. The goal was, for the first time, to reveal the truth about the Vietnamese civilian massacre by Korean soldiers and to demand transitional justice. They tried to overturn the official and standardized memory of the war as the “war for protection of freedom” and “opportunity for development.” The movement placed a war that was being forgotten back into the social spotlight. It also triggered the unintentional consequence of strengthening the conservative memory. Nevertheless, this movement, limited to the Korea-Vietnam Peace Park, is still significant in that it provided a new perception of history and has taken a lead role in resolving past tensions between Korea and Vietnam.

The construction of the Ha My hamlet memorial, proposed by the veteran association, the Association of Vietnam War Veterans, had symbolic significance in that it presented the victimizer’s apology and the victim’s forgiveness in one place. Yet the struggles that arose during the construction of the memorial provided another example of unhealed war-wounds and polarized memory-making. The Association of the Vietnam War Veterans wanted to dilute the national force of counter-memory rather than attain real reconciliation through apology; in other words, they wanted to seal the past. Financial support with no real atonement was a secondary infliction of violence on the victims, and it led to a reconsideration of what the premises should be for true reconciliation.

Finally, the Meeting Place for Vietnam War Veterans reveals Korean society’s conservative perception of the Vietnam War. By standardizing the official war-memory, the Meeting Place for Vietnam War Veterans tried to justify the war and turn back time on the perception of the war. In addition, the commercialization of the war-memory led to its vulgarization. The reproduction of local life in Vietnam at the time of the war exemplifies this mode of remembering, which resulted in new struggles about Korea and Vietnam’s history.

Considering that “the way the past is formalized and symbolized shapes our understanding and our perspective of the present,” (Said 2005: 53), each of these cases goes beyond representing materialistic and spatial significance, towards revealing the most representative perceptions of Korean society vis-à-vis the memory of the Vietnam War and history. Furthermore, it provides

us with a touchstone to reconsider how Korea should relate to Vietnam, and the rest of the world, concerning war experience and memory.

When the experience of war extends beyond a single country, the problem of memory inevitably becomes a transnational one. What is important is to establish a universal memory that transcends national boundaries. The first step to achieving this is the national and social perception of “post-war responsibility.”<sup>20</sup> The awareness for post-war responsibility must be associated with a reckoning of a war-related past, which means that “the country that chooses to remember, and knows that it is impossible to forget, the past will be a step closer to establishing a stable future” (Hayner 2008: 424), i.e. it is through the past that one may aim for the future. Korea and Vietnam are two unique cases in the world of countries sharing a painful memory of colonial rule, division and war. The solidarity of suffering, achieved through transitional justice will become the cornerstone for true reconciliation of the two countries, and a peaceful future for East Asia.

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<sup>20</sup> This refers to not only the responsibility of the generation that actually lived the war, but also that of those living in the post-war period (山口定 2000: 223-225).

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