*The Vietnam War and Korean Society: Forgotten War, Distant Present**

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This book attempts to reconstruct Korea's experience of the Vietnam War through the lens of individual actors. It is a vibrant narrative of what life was like in Vietnam for the soldiers and civilian contractors, whose first-hand encounters of the battlefront have remained largely neglected over the years. This "bottom-up" account of individual experiences sheds light on how memories of the Vietnam War are highly varied. Similarly, the meaning of the Vietnam War for Korea is also multi-faceted.

In the first chapter, the author provides a brief overview of existing studies on the Vietnam War, contending that these narratives tend to interpret the Vietnam War as either a Korean modernization program or a mechanism to strengthen the Korean authoritarian regime. The shortcoming of these approaches is that they rely heavily on the government's point of view and overlook the fact that private individuals were also important actors in the war. Thus, a "micro" approach is necessary, whereby a range of different experiences – and the kinds of memories generated by those experiences – that have hitherto gone

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* *Beteunam jeonjaeng-ui hangguk sahoesa: ichin jeonjaeng, oraedoen hyeonjae.*

unnoticed can be ascertained.

This does not mean that the author is indifferent to "macro-level" questions. In fact, in chapter two, he seeks to understand why there was no large-scale opposition to the Vietnam War in Korea. His answer is four-fold. To begin with, the general public's attention at the time was focused on the Korea-Japan normalization issue. Consequently, the Vietnam War did not sufficiently develop into a major issue to arouse mass reaction. Secondly, because the US was financing the Vietnam War, the Korean government was relatively free from monetary burden and taxpayer discontent.[1] Third, with the opposition party rather ineffective, there was no one big group strong enough to resist the government's Vietnam War effort. Finally, the bulk of the population framed the Vietnam War as an opportunity to escape unemployment and poverty, and thus was rather enthusiastic about the war.

Meanwhile, in chapter three, the author tries to formulate a general argument about the collective memory of the Korean participants as a whole. He recognizes that there clearly was an ideological element, as Korean combatants and civilian employees defined communism an evil that had to be defeated. However, there was a strong racial element as well. The Koreans made a clear distinction between themselves and the Vietnamese, the latter being "backward and needing guidance" while the former was "advanced and a model."[2] Meanwhile, there were economic dimensions as well; Vietnam was the land of opportunity, where people could earn money, which in turn could contribute to the development of Korea.

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[1] The author also acknowledges that the Vietnam War served as the first time South Korea gained a stronger bargaining position vis-à-vis the US; the "more flags" policy led the US to seek help from the Korean government.

[2] This point provides an interesting contrast with the US, which was careful not to make the Vietnam War appear as if it were a war between white people (former colonizing race) and Asians (former colonized). In fact, the US thought that having another group of Asians (Koreans) fighting the war would be helpful in this regard.

The following chapters focus on individual actors. Chapter four recounts the experiences of the combatants and demonstrates that people's attitudes toward the war and Vietnam were varied depending on the context and time, with economic impetus and sense of masculinity often dictating their actions.[3] The general public was initially loath to go to war, and elites would evade the draft through money and networks. Later, however, Vietnam became associated with all kinds of coveted material gains, and the number of applicants wishing to be assigned to Vietnam soared. Once in Vietnam, many combatants recollected how they simply wanted to quit and go home. Yet, as history attests, together as a group, they displayed both valor and cruelty. They had to fight, lest they be attacked and killed. They had to kill the Viet Cong as revenge for their fallen comrades. Meanwhile, the racial hierarchy – admiring the American wealth and might while looking down on Vietnam – was very much alive among Korean combatants.

Chapter five traces the mobilization of both human and material resources in Korea for the war. In the name of "crisis," "opportunity" and "honor," a task force was activated by the government to oversee the regular flow of letters and care packages to the Korean soldiers in Vietnam. College students made field visits to Vietnam to encourage their compatriots. At the same time, while soldiers were doing the fighting, people in Korea were tasked with developing the country with the remittances gained from the war. In turn, this "total mobilization," in which Koreans abroad and back home were intricately linked, had the effect of weakening mass opposition to the Vietnam War.

Chapter six examines the experiences of civilian employees, who have so far been missing in the scholarly discourse. These civilian employees were ideologically united as anti-communists and were

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[3] The limit of this chapter, as the author confesses, is that it treats all combatants as one uniform unit. Hence, it does not necessarily show how enlisted men's experiences might have been different from those of officers or high-level decision-makers in the military.

economically motivated to escape poverty. At the same time, similar to their combatant counterparts, there was a strict racial hierarchy, with Americans on top, followed by Koreans and Vietnamese. Meanwhile, their experiences also varied. Many were mobilized as semi-combatants at times. Many were sent by the Korean government and constantly wrestled with long working hours, unfair treatment and fear that their contracts might be annulled at any time. Many were recruited in Vietnam by Americans after retiring from the Korean military, and were relatively free from the concerns of contract annulment and being sent back to Korea; instead, they reminisced about how "life was good" with a considerable salary, welfare and leisure opportunities. Some civilian contractors recruited in Vietnam by Vinnell, which had no professional links in Korea, later chose to continue working for American military contractors in the Middle East. Each and every individual had one's own unique story to tell.

In chapter seven, the author examines the experience of Hanjin employees, a scenario in which Vietnam was not exactly the land of opportunity perceived by many others. Hanjin employees were also motivated economically, going to Vietnam in search of a better life. What they confronted in Vietnam were extremely long working hours, a less competitive salary than other civilian contractors in Vietnam (especially, those working for the American companies), unfair contracts and quasi-military duties. Some had experienced unjust contract annulment by Hanjin. Unsurprisingly, employees were unhappy. As frustration escalated, some workers later set fire to the Hanjin headquarters in Seoul. However, the government backed Hanjin, and the workers' discontent was silenced. Consequently, the story of the Hanjin employees remained in oblivion for many years.

Chapter eight deals with how the Vietnam War is generally remembered in Korea. The author points out that there is no widespread recognition that the Vietnam War was a mistake. There is hardly any sense of remorse or contriteness regarding what had happened in

Vietnam. Instead, the government, along with conservatives and war veterans, argue that the war was a just cause. Of course, there is a gap between how the government and individual veterans remember the war. Soldiers were united in the sense of manly camaraderie and a desire to escape poverty; the idea that Korea was engaged in a crusade against communism, as advocated by the government, was often far from their immediate concerns. Yet, this fragment of history has been disregarded.[4] What is left is the government wanting to believe that they made the right choice to enter the war to fend off communism and develop the country with the blood money gained in Vietnam. The veterans, meanwhile, believe they were faithfully answering the nation's call and fighting the war that they themselves had not decided on.

Chapter nine examines three different monuments that were built to commemorate the Vietnam War, all of which either exhibit noticeable public indifference to the past or sharply conflicting memories. Han-Viet Peace Park was constructed by civic organizations with generous donations from ordinary people, who learned about civilian atrocities in Vietnam through the newspaper three decades after the war. While this is a significant achievement with symbolic value, both the Korean and Vietnamese governments were rather silent about this project. What is more unfortunate is that less and less people are paying attention every year, which has led to poor maintenance of the park. The Ha My Memorial was erected by the Korean veterans to pay respect to those who lost their lives during the war. There was a noticeable gulf between how Korean veterans and victims (and families of those victims) wished to remember the past. When the stone monument was being built, the locals wanted to stipulate the mass killings by Korean soldiers; the Korean veterans were not very fond of this idea. Third, the Korean

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[4] At the same time, as was the case with Hanjin employees, veterans' concerns went unheard. For years, they received no proper compensation for the physical and psychological damages caused by the war.

government constructed a special commemorative site in Hwacheon to honor Vietnam War veterans. The government intended to develop this into a popular tourist spot accessible to the mass public. The problem is that the general public is not showing much interest; at the same time, this monument is ideologically charged, portraying the Vietnam War as a justified action against communist aggression.

The author concludes the book by raising a number of questions. To begin with, taking into account the fact that the Vietnam War was an international event, what were the roles of other participating countries, such as Australia and Taiwan? Are there other voices that have been silenced and ignored? What would the Vietnamese say about their encounters with the Koreans during the war? What can be done to rectify past transgressions, including unfair treatment of the Hanjin laborers, civilian massacres committed by Korean units and blithe disregard for veterans when they returned home?

The book's value is in its humanity, recounting the lives and experiences of real people. At the same time, it combines and seeks to balance between traditional archival research and oral history – however limited the resources – through which the author unveils those aspects of the past that had been largely forgotten. In this regard, it complements another book on the Vietnam War that came out the same year, which gave relatively more weight to rigorous archival analysis.[5] What is perhaps most notable about this book is the fact that it calls for greater social awareness of the past. By uncovering some very sensitive aspects of the Vietnam War, the author demands more effort to investigate what really happened back then to offer justice to all those who have been wrong done.

Of course, there are also some questions the book was not able to

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[5] Park Tae Gyun, *Beteunam jeonjaeng: icheojin jeonjaeng, banjjogui gioek* [The Vietnam War: Forgotten war, Untold Stories] (Seoul: Hangyeolle chulpan, 2015).

address. For example, could there have been any instances in which Koreans and Vietnamese could relate to one another, instead of Koreans constantly looking down on the Vietnamese? Also, did the Koreans only interact with the Americans and Vietnamese, or did they encounter anybody else? Regardless, it would be fair to acknowledge this book as a starting point for further intellectual undertakings and academic enrichment regarding the Vietnam War. Possibly, it might even lead to better policy-making and reconciliation.